



ORACY CHAIR 'REASSURED' OVER CURRICULUM REVIEW



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- Redundancies loom as spring statement snubs schools
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- Pay showdown looms as average wages set to rise

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

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SCHOOLS
WEEK

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We know the spring statement was not, as far as the government is concerned, a full "fiscal event".

But that did not stop leaders hoping for a last-minute lifeline for school funding.

Last week we documented the funding storm approaching schools.

It includes a triple whammy of inadequate funding to cover future pay rises, insufficient funding for national insurance rises and pupil premium cash that isn't rising as fast as schools' costs.

This week, with confirmation that that last-minute injection is not coming, we move that story on by revealing how leaders are grappling with what this means for their schools.

They face making redundancies or not replacing departing staff. They will have to dip into scant reserves and cut back on extra-curricular activities or education provision.

This week's story about the latest savings identified by government cost-cutters demonstrates there isn't much

more meat left on the bone.

They may be ramping up their efficiency drive, but in reality schools can't realise most of what they recommend. Julia Harnden of ASCL is right to say that "no amount of savings advice" can compensate for inadequate funding.

That so many leaders were hoping for a last-minute reprieve speaks volumes about the way we fund our system, and the way we keep those running our schools informed.

Schools should not be receiving indicative grant funding allocations weeks before they are due to start paying increased national insurance, for example. The spending review in June presents a welcome opportunity for the government to give schools some stability.

But even if the spending review is more generous for future years, from what we're hearing from leaders, getting through the next one is going to be incredibly tough.

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NEWS: SCHOOL FUNDING

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Cost-cutters' savings 'won't compensate' for inadequate funding

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Government cost-cutters have ramped up their efficiency drive in schools, recommending more than £400 million of cuts last year.

And although schools are making more reductions based on their recommendations than ever, data shows they're still only implementing a fraction of the advice.

It comes as schools face a financial triple-whammy that could force them to slash budgets further.

Julia Harnden, a funding specialist at the leaders' union ASCL, said the rise in suggested and implemented cost savings 'illustrate the financial pressure that schools are under'.

But "no amount of savings advice" could compensate for inadequate school funding.

Schools cutting more

DfE figures, obtained through the freedom of information act, show school resource management advisers (SRMAs) identified more than £400 million of "three-year cumulative savings opportunities" across 416 visits in 2023-24.

This averages £964,000 per school.

That figure is 37 per cent higher than 2022-23 levels (£701,418.44) and more than the £696,000 of savings for each school identified by SRMAs between 2018 and 2022.

The DfE stressed the figures "present a range of options for schools and trusts to consider and we wouldn't expect the full amount to be realised".

But our analysis suggests leaders are enacting more of these cuts. In 2023-24, they made £27,000 of reductions, on average, in the six months after their SRMA visit.

This compares to just over £25,000 12 months earlier and £17,000 in the first four years of the scheme, which launched in 2018.

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of leaders' union NAHT, warned that the squeeze on school funding over the past decade has meant "many of the more obvious efficiencies and cost savings have already



Julia Harnden



been implemented".

Despite noting SRMAs could "provide helpful support", he stressed there "can be a thin line between savings and cuts that impact children's education".

'Give schools cash – or they'll cut'

Last week, ministers admitted there was not enough headroom in budgets to cover pay rises next year, leaving leaders having to make further cuts.

Concerns were also raised that the government's £1 billion package to cover increased national insurance contributions could fall short by as much as 35 per cent in some settings.

Meanwhile, pupil premium funding will rise by just 2.3 per cent next year, falling short of the 3.6 per cent expected rise in school costs.

Whiteman said the work of SRMAs was "no substitute for the government addressing schools' serious concerns over funding".

Harnden added that cash needed to be "made available...to help schools cover the increased costs they are facing". This would "avoid the need to make cuts that will have a negative impact on the learning and wellbeing of children".

SRMAs – normally school business leaders – started visiting schools in 2018 as part of an economy drive under then-academies minister Lord Agnew. At the time, the Institute of School Business Leaders (ISBL) was called in to support the programme.

However, previous government research found more than half of schools said

the advisers did not find them new ways to save money.

Rise in SRMA-style advice

Our figures show that, since 2022, schools planned to make on average £235,000 of savings in the three years following their assessments. That represents 27 per cent of the efficiencies proposed over the period.

Despite losing out on a £7 million contract to supply the advisers in December, ISBL chiefs have said "most, if not all, [SRMAs] are people we've trained over the last 10 years".

Bethan Cullen, the organisation's deputy chief executive, said SRMAs supported "peers and other school leaders to achieve the optimal use of their resources". They did this with "sustainably improving children's outcomes at the centre of any recommendation".

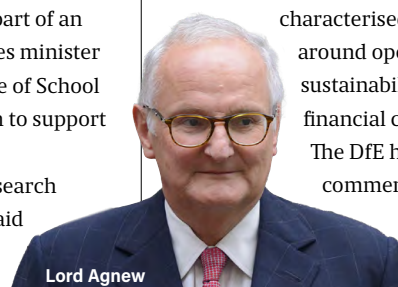
Since 2018, the advisers have broadened their reviews, sharing "knowledge gained through the over 2,000 deployments completed".

"This has meant in recent years more learnings have been able to be applied from similar organisations to support the identification of potential efficiencies," Cullen said.

"In addition, schools and trusts are independently seeking what could be

characterised as SRMA-style advice around operational and financial sustainability given the current financial challenges."

The DfE has been contacted for comment.



Lord Agnew

NEWS: SCHOOL FUNDING

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Schools warn of cuts as Reeves snubs sector

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Schools are being urged to save up to £750,000 through redundancies, curriculum squeezes and cuts to programmes supporting the poorest pupils.

Following this week's spring statement, academy trust bosses are also expecting to have to eat into shrinking reserves ahead of a funding storm in September – with one expecting to use more than £2 million in three years.

And chief executives in Sheffield are banding together to pool roles and services across their organisations, while worried council school heads have slashed theatre trips and swimming classes.

Daniel Kebede, the general secretary of the National Education Union, said austerity was “ended in deeds not words”.

“The spring statement will cause deep anger ... because it does not address the key issue preventing schools and colleges from supporting children and young people – a lack of funding.”

Eating into reserves

Despite mentioning schools in her Commons speech, during which she accused the Tories of leaving classroom roofs “literally crumbling”, chancellor Rachel Reeves failed to announce any extra cash.

This comes after *Schools Week* revealed earlier this month that school budgets will rise by about 0.5 per cent per pupil next year, with some saying they will lose money.

Ministers later admitted there is not enough headroom to cover staff pay rises next year, meaning the prospect of more cuts.

Leaders have also warned that grants to cover schools' increased national insurance contributions will fall short by up to 35 per cent – while pupil premium increases will also fall short of rising costs.

John Barneby, the chief executive of Oasis Community Learning – which runs 54 academies across England – said he “may need to



Rachel Reeves

‘It’s about how staffing can be tightened without any impact on pupils’

utilise our reserves to ensure our schools can fully support all of our students”.

£2.2 million hit to reserves

The trust, one of the largest in the country, continues “to reformulate our financial plans to address constraints”.

Barneby said more investment was needed as “limited funding, rising costs and the deepening SEN crisis are stretching schools beyond capacity”.

In the north east, Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Learning Trust expects to have to use about £300,000 of its £3.9 million reserves in 2024-25. Forecasts suggest it will eat up a further £1.9 million over the following two years.

Paul Rickeard, its chief executive, said budgets had been dented further by the discovery of an underground leak at one of

his primaries. The school will have to re-piped.

The latest report compiled by the Kreston group, a network of accountancy firms, warned earlier this year that trusts' financial buffers were already collapsing.

Thirty-one per cent of chains' reserves fell below level 5 per cent of total income – the level recommended by government – from 17 per cent two years ago.

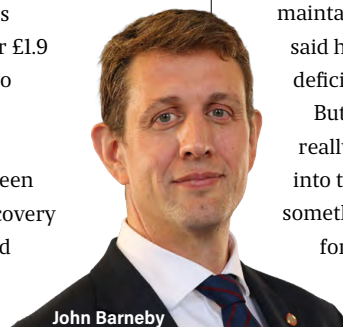
The Institute for Fiscal Studies has also warned school budgets will feel “very tight” next year, adding some may “struggle to cover their costs without making savings”.

Nigel Attwood, the head of a local authority-maintained junior school in Birmingham, said his school had slipped into a £70,000 deficit.

But he believed the “only way we’re really going to make a massive dent into those numbers will be staff. That’s something I’m not going to be doing in the foreseeable future.”



Daniel Kebede



John Barneby

Continued on next page

NEWS: SCHOOL FUNDING

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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Adrian Rogers, head of the Chiltern Learning Trust, said dipping into reserves was a short-term fix. Having used "several million last year to cushion the staffing bill", he expected to make "some large cuts" in September.

Chiltern has frozen recruitment for the next "two to three weeks" across his 18 Bedfordshire schools, with heads set to be called on "to look at the unimaginable".

His secondaries will be asked to find savings of up to £750,000, while primary leaders will be set savings targets of up to £250,000.

"The place to start is staffing because 75 to 80 per cent of your budget goes [there]. It's about how that staffing can be tightened without having any impact on pupils."

Another leader, who wanted to remain anonymous, said his MAT planned to reduce its central school improvement team, instead buying in support when needed.

The Confederation of School Trust's annual survey last year found 83 per cent of chief executives intended to focus their academy chain's efforts on balancing budgets in 2025-26.

Seventy-three per cent said they would also prioritise "cost reduction". Less than half felt confident about the sustainability of their trust.

'Nothing left to cut'

Meanwhile, secondaries in the Weydon MAT have been told to find £250,000 of savings on average. Its smallest primaries have a target of £25,000, although "there's nothing else to cut".

John Winter, its chief executive, said a range of choices were available in secondaries, such as not replacing outgoing staff and reducing the number of subjects covered at key stage 4.

A school costs analysis published by the DfE last week said schools would only be able to afford a staff pay rise of about 1.3 per cent next year. Ministers have recommended a 2.8 per cent rise for teachers.

Jack Worth, of the National Foundation for Educational Research, pointed out that the Office for Budget Responsibility had increased its forecast of average earnings growth for 2025-26 from 3 to 3.7 per cent.

"In light of this, it seems unimaginable that the DfE teacher pay proposal of 2.8 per cent for the next academic year could remain unchanged."

**Energy and MIS switchovers**

Winter warned that, having already budgeted for a 2.8 per cent increase, "a significant amount of money [would have to be found to balance the books] if the government opted for a higher rise.

In Sheffield, the Minerva Learning Trust is avoiding "drastic action", such as redundancies, and will instead dip into its £5 million reserves earmarked for building projects.

Schools are being asked to draw up blueprints outlining how they can "manage without staff should they leave".

Bev Matthews, its chief executive, has started working with other MAT leaders in the city to explore collaboration "so we're either sharing services or posts so more money can go back into schools.

"It might mean we start up a shared company that we run those services through."

'Unavoidable impact on pupils'

One trust expects to shave about £700,000 off its bills when its energy deal – agreed when prices shot up following Russia's invasion of Ukraine – renews later this year.

Leaders had hoped for a last-minute funding boost to help them with huge pressures in the next academic year.

Warren Carratt, of the

Nexus MAT in Sheffield, said he was "beyond disappointed that we're still stuck in a cycle of unrealistic financial planning, which smacks of deliberate denial.

He added that "many of us" believed things would be better under a Labour government.

Attwood, whose school is in a deprived part of Birmingham, is "cutting back on theatre trips", sports competitions and reducing swimming lessons by a third, among other things. He has saved about £50,000.

Child poverty crisis worsens

The head of a council-run secondary in west London has been running a uniform programme supplying clothing and equipment to pupils on free school meals, asylum-seekers and looked-after children.

"That fund doesn't exist for the next academic year, so we're going to have to review how we do it. Or do we review our uniform policy – are we going to be sticklers over what the uniform expectation is?

"Why am I going to punish a child and parent if they can't afford to buy uniform?"

Adding to the strain schools are under, impact assessments suggest the government's planned welfare cuts will plunge 50,000 more children into poverty over the next five years.

Kebede said that Labour's pledge to boost opportunities for working-class children "simply won't happen without investment in our schools and funding for the pay increases needed to value, recruit and retain the educators we need".



Warren Carratt

Oracy 'will be woven' into review's final report

RHI STORER

@RHISTORERWRITES

EXCLUSIVE

The chair of the Oracy Commission has said he is "reassured" the issue will be "woven into" the curriculum review's final report, after the interim document failed to mention it.

Labour announced in 2023 that its curriculum and assessment review would embed "digital, oracy and life skills" in children's learning.

But campaigners for a greater emphasis on oracy were surprised when the review's interim report, published last week, did not mention it.

Geoff Barton, the former leader of the leaders' union ASCL and chair of last year's commission, told an event this week he had spoken to review chair Professor Becky Francis on Monday.

He said he was "very reassured" that oracy would be "woven into the final report".

"What she reminds me is that this is an interim report.

"It's high level. So it's starting to say: 'Here are the things that we're now going to focus on', and it takes us into the more granular bits of what I think will be in the final report.

"Oracy is a priority. She believes in it, but also the government has articulated the belief in it. The question is, how does it show up in the report? And that's something which we would want to talk about."

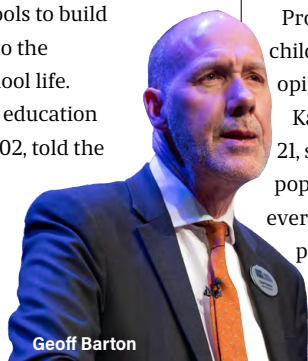
Barton, added that "even if you get the national curriculum to be referencing oracy in all kinds of places, the national curriculum isn't a working document for teachers.

"They aren't there planning their lessons from it. It's about saying if oracy matters, then let's get it into the bloodstream of the profession now, rather than waiting for the review."

His remarks were made at The Speaking Summit 2025, hosted by Voice 21, the national charity that supports schools to build speaking and listening into the curriculum and wider school life.

Baroness Estelle Morris, education secretary from 2001 to 2002, told the conference she remained "optimistic" the final review would include oracy.

"My reading of that



Geoff Barton



'Let's get oracy into teachers' bloodstream now'

situation is that it is almost like a document that said what wouldn't change. I think that was to give some stability to the future. The argument about what will change will hopefully come up in the final report."

The commission defines oracy as "articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication".

Last year it called for oracy to be the fourth 'R' in schools – as important as reading, writing and arithmetic.

It recommended better teacher training, reforms to GCSE English language and investment in expressive arts and extra-curricular activities.

Proponents of oracy say it is needed to set children up for a world of "diverging" political opinions.

Kate Paradine, the chief executive of Voice 21, said that in the "age of social media and populism, when society is more polarised than ever", there was worrying evidence that young people's political opinions and opinions were diverging according to whether they were boys or girls.

"The only way we will address this is if young people have the knowledge, the tools and the skills to speak to each other about their opinions, views of the world, feelings and experiences, dialogue, and feel like they belong."

Teacher Tapp polling suggests 44 per cent of teachers do not know if they have met statutory spoken language requirements. Only 35 per cent said they met the requirement.

The survey also found just 13 per cent of schools had a named oracy lead, a dedicated leader to promote the development of pupils' spoken language skills.

Baz Ramaiah, head of policy at the Centre for Education and Youth, said a localised approach to oracy in schools might be needed.

"There is a really rare opportunity here to turn our eyes away from Westminster and look at some of the other devolved powers in England.

"Metro mayors do have a surprising amount of power, thanks to the devolution deal. If we as a movement can make the economic case for how oracy can improve local areas, and their industrial strategy, I think that's a really exciting opportunity for us."

NEWS

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More pupils than places in secondary special schools

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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The education secretary has warned of “significant gaps” in specialist provision for pupils with SEND, as new government data suggests the number of pupils in secondary special schools outstrips their capacity by 8,000.

Special school capacity data was collected for the first time in 2023, with statistics described by the government as “in development”.

The latest figures shows there were 61,000 primary and about 92,000 secondary special school places reported by councils in May 2024.

The corresponding numbers on roll from the May 2024 school census for these special school places were about 60,000 in primary and 100,000 in secondary.

“This means that there are approximately 8,000 more secondary pupils on roll in special schools than reported capacity,” the DfE said.

“This is due to the number of schools at or over capacity (around two thirds), but also may be a result of the way capacity has been measured, which does not take account of type of need.

“The surplus of primary special places ... may be a result of how the total capacity of all-through schools has been apportioned between the primary and secondary phases.”

Last year's data found the number of pupils outstripped secondary capacity by about 6,000.

The DfE said its data showed the urgent need to reform the SEND system “to save families from a gap in support potentially stretching to tens of thousands of places”.



The government has re-announced £740 million in capital funding from last year's budget to create 10,000 specialist places in mainstream schools.

Bridget Phillipson said the investment was a “big step towards delivering not only enough school places, but the right school places.

“This investment will give children with SEND the support they need to thrive, marking the start of a turning point for families who have been fighting to improve their children's outcomes.”

Councils also reported on capacity in SEN units and resourced provision in mainstream schools, with the DfE pointing out fewer than one in 10 mainstream schools have such provision.

The data shows there were about 9,800 places in SEN units in mainstream schools – 6,600 primary places and 3,300 secondary places.

There were also 20,000 places in resourced provision in mainstream schools – 11,600 primary and 8,300 secondary places.

The DfE said the number of schools reported to have a SEN unit or resourced provision capacity and the places within that provision “have increased since the last survey, which represents increased coverage as well as added places”.

Analysis by FFT Education Datalab also suggests there is spare capacity in resourced provision and SEN units. Its analysis of school census data suggests there are 3,173 more places in resourced provision at primary than pupils. But this could be due to under-reporting.

The government has also announced it will spend an extra £1 billion creating 44,500 new mainstream school places between 2026 and 2028.

This “basic need” cash is handed to councils to help them create mainstream places either in existing or new schools.

The funding equates to £643 million in 2026-27 and £407 million in 2027-28.

Labour axes Tory EIA scheme

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

Ministers have axed education investment areas (EIAs), a Conservative levelling-up scheme that funnelled cash into left-behind parts of the country.

In 2022, the then government announced the programme to send funding for teacher incentives and other schemes to 55 towns and counties with the lowest results.

They were deemed the “the weakest [places in the country] based on sustained low performance” across key stages 2 and 4 between 2017 and 2019.

The Conservatives hoped the initiative would ensure 90 per cent of pupils met expected standards at key stage 2 and increased

average GCSE maths and English language grades from 4.5 to 5 by 2030.

But the DfE has revealed that EIAs will no longer be prioritised for government cash.

A spokesperson suggested its RISE school improvement teams would now tackle the “biggest challenges as we break down barriers to opportunity”.

Schools in the EIAs were prioritised through the trust capacity fund (TCaF), which Labour binned towards the end of last year.

Meanwhile, secondary teachers working in the investment areas could access larger targeted retention incentive payments, previously called levelling-up premiums.

The DfE confirmed the staff would still be in line for bigger amounts in 2025-26, but it would be reviewed ahead of the following round.

As part of the programme, 24 EIAs were later classified as priority education investment areas (PEIAs), places with high levels of deprivation as well as low achievement.

They were allocated a share of the £42 million local needs fund, used to pay for bespoke interventions to improve attainment in the PEIAs through to the end of March. But the funding will not be extended.

NEWS

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Education group deletes posts after 'hateful' online abuse

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

Schools could "opt out" of social media to avoid abuse, leaders say, after a charity was targeted with "upsetting and hateful comments" for promoting a government-backed scheme that used an illustration of a child wearing a headscarf.

Kindred Squared deleted posts about its new Starting Reception website this week after a wave of comments on Facebook.

Allana Gay, a co-founder of the BAMEd Network, said: "As we... seek to normalise the different identities that compose our rich society, [we] have to also prepare for the actions of a vocal few who will view only one stereotype of the UK as acceptable."

"The unintentional impact of campaigns based around identity hatred is that schools and organisations will opt out or extremely limit their use of social media, thereby narrowing communications around programmes for the wider social good."

Starting Reception was launched earlier this month by a group of education groups, including Kindred Squared, the Confederation of School Trusts, Parentkind and Reach2. It aims to define what being ready for school means.

There is "no official description" of readiness, so it provides a list of suggested skills and activities parents should practise with their children to prepare them for their first day of class.

With a link to the new website, Kindred Squared's posts stated: "We can make sure all children start school ready for their first day."

Some responses took issue with the illustration. Comments included "this is not English school dress", and that the image was "not indicative of our country".

One social media user added: "What has this to do with being British and going to school? In



Britain we speak English."

After removing the posts, Kindred Squared took to LinkedIn to say it "just wanted to stop the upsetting and hateful comments as quickly as possible". It returned to social media "because the response to hate should never be retreat".

"We and all the amazing organisations that have worked on developing this very useful website will not be diverted by

hateful comments."

It comes after Sir Hamid Patel, the chief executive of Star Academies, was recently subjected to abuse after he was appointed chair of Ofsted.

Gay said "a minority" held such views and "should not detract from the positive, inclusive work being done in schools... to ensure that all of the diverse members of UK society are valued and represented".

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NEWS

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Parents 'seem to like' our report cards - Oliver

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

The chief inspector of Ofsted has said parents "seem to support the broad approach that we have set out" in plans for report cards.

Sir Martyn Oliver also told an event run by Parentkind that Ofsted would report on a "much wider range of areas – things that matter to parents".

The watchdog is currently consulting on plans to replace the current system of four grades across up to six areas with five grades over up to 11.

The proposals have gone down badly among many leaders and unions, with ASCL this week urging Ofsted back to the drawing board.

But Ofsted said its own commissioned research "shows high parent support for Ofsted's report card proposals".

YouGov polled 1,090 parents. Ofsted said it found 67 per cent said they preferred the proposed new report cards to current reports.

Eighty-six per cent said the information was easy to understand, and 84 per cent "found the use of colour coding useful", Ofsted said.

Two thirds of parents (66 per cent) "said they support Ofsted continuing to grade schools on a scale". Just 15 per cent said they preferred the current reports.

Oliver said Ofsted will report on "a much wider range of areas – things that matter to parents.

"Things like behaviour, achievement, attendance, teaching and the curriculum, leadership and governance, and inclusion – really looking in detail at how schools make sure their pupils all have a sense of belonging, especially those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable, or have special educational needs."

Ofsted's proposed five grades range are exemplary, strong, secure, attention needed and causing concern.

ASCL this week floated the idea of keeping the secure, attention-needed and causing concern grades, but scrapping the other two.

The union said exemplary practice could then be noted as an optional "narrative description" in any area.

Oliver said on Wednesday that he welcomed "constructive feedback" and that he was due to



Sir Martyn Oliver

meet general secretary Pepe Di'lasio this week.

"I'm looking forward to really getting into the depths of that conversation with ASCL and their general secretary," he said. "What matters is we want this system to be fair."

In its formal consultation response, ASCL said it "broadly agree[s]" with Ofsted's proposals on the areas to be evaluated, and "support[s] the principle of report cards".

But it had "serious concerns" about the five-point grading system, which they fear risks intensifying the pressure on staff and will make it harder for inspectors to make reliable judgments.

It said its "preferred approach" would be that schools were "inspected against a binary model of whether they either meet or exceed, or don't meet, statutory standards".

But it recognised such a model was "not possible within the current legislative framework".

It would therefore "be comfortable with a model based on what we have called a '3+ point scale'".

Leaders have also expressed concerns that Ofsted hasn't built in enough time to properly respond to the consultation, and to go back to the drawing board if necessary.

Oliver insisted this week the proposals were "not set in stone".

"I'm sure there are things that could be better. Things we could refine. But we are encouraged that parents seem to support the broad approach that we have set out."

Oliver also used a speech to Parentkind, which represents parent and teacher associations

(PTAs), to address rising parental complaints against schools.

The world seemed to be "more antagonistic and adversarial", he said, adding he could "understand why a school leader might be wary of engaging with parents.

"But I always found that the way to defuse tensions, tackle rumours and build common purpose with parents is more communication, not less.

"So, I say: join the PTA, don't join the pile-on."

Tom Bennett, the government behaviour tsar, said there was "a strong tendency for negative voices to dominate", which could create a "toxic atmosphere" in PTAs and similar groups.

Zoe Enser, an academy trust school improvement lead, said Oliver's message "is not wrong" but added: "Would be interesting to know how many schools have a PTA still".

Parentkind's 2022 PTA impact report estimated just 57 per cent of schools in England had an active PTA.

Oliver also voiced his support for schools that ban phones, amid a national debate about whether a mandatory ban is necessary.

Ofsted "would certainly support headteachers who take the tough decision to ban phones".

He recalled visiting "an awful lot" of schools in special measures where phones were "rife", but "within days" of a ban came "an immediate sense of calmness".

"Developing brains don't need to be bombarded by non-human algorithms that might be preying upon them, trying to grab their attention," he said. "It's harmful and it's damaging."



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The schools working hard for the 'forgotten third'

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

Under-achievement in GCSE English and maths is well documented – and well discussed. But some schools are quietly turning things around for the “forgotten third” of year 11 pupils.

Every year, about a third of GCSE pupils across England finish year 11 without achieving a grade 4 in English and maths.

In 2019, a commission set up by ASCL, the leaders' union, dubbed these children the “forgotten third”.

It asked why “a third of 16-year-olds, after 12 years of compulsory schooling, cannot read or write English at what the Department for Education describes as standard pass level?”.

At its annual conference this year, Manny Botwe, the union's president, warned there had since been “plenty of talk, but not enough action” as he called on government to address the problem through its curriculum review.

Little may have changed nationally, but behind the scenes some schools are working hard to turn things around for this cohort.

The schools that defy their odds

FFT Education Datalab carried out nationwide analysis, giving every school an “estimated” percentage of pupils expected to pass English and maths. This was based on the attainment of schools with a comparative intake.

The analysis identified some schools that massively outstripped their predictions.

Top of the list is Red House Academy in Sunderland, where more than half (54 per cent) of pupils are eligible for free school meals.

Datalab's analysis suggests just 46 per cent of pupils would be expected to pass English and maths. Seventy-one per cent passed last year – far above the average of 62.2 per cent for the north east.

“We're really pleased with the progress that we've made in what are really quite deprived,



‘We talk to pupils about maths or English as they come in the gate’

tough circumstances,” says Andrew Jordon, the senior executive principal at Northern Education Trust, the school's sponsor.

Caretakers and canteen staff roped in

Every member of staff is involved in “intervention by interaction”. They are given cards with five maths or English questions they can ask pupils during lunch or gate duty.

“As the children come into school on the gate [we] talk to them about maths problems or English problems,” he says.

“Right away from when they get into school, whether it's the caretaker, the canteen staff, the executive principal, they're all talking to them about their maths and English.

“It's just a simple way of reminding them that we all think maths and English are important.”

Third best-performing compared to its predictions is Henley Bank High School in Gloucestershire.

Last year 76 per cent of pupils achieved grade 4 or above in maths and English – 22 percentage

points above the figure “expected” by Datalab.

“We see maths and English GCSE as an absolute game-changer for all children,” says Will Smith, the chief executive of its sponsor, the Greenshaw Learning Trust.

“Reading is probably, next to safeguarding, the single most important thing across our organisation.”

All pupils from year 7 are part of its tutor reading programme, which Smith says exposes them to “between four and five million words by the end of year 10”.

Four or five mornings a week, form tutors spend 20 to 25 minutes reading aloud to pupils, as they follow along in their own books.

Faye Bradbury, co-head of school at Henley Bank, said the school tries to introduce pupils to “great stories” to help foster a love for reading. “All of the research suggests that brilliant readers will do significantly better in their GCSEs,” she said. “For some of our absolute weakest readers, we have got other interventions that take place in the morning.”



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Drawing on MAT resources

The Northern Education Trust also uses its MAT network in a “highly effective” way to boost teacher and pupil learning, Jordon says.

“It’s almost like one school across 17 secondary sites that we see ourselves as, collegiately working together towards the same goal.”

And using one specially designed curriculum across all schools “means staff are in quite a big community, learning about how to teach that curriculum”.

“You can bring all of the maths staff, for example, in the trust together to learn about the best ways to teach that curriculum. There’s a real power to that.”

The trust also has 40 “directors of subject” who are parachuted-in to give certain pupils in need of help a “rocket boost”.

Close monitoring and fast interventions

Jordon says the trust also uses “fast-paced” interventions to help struggling pupils.

At weekly meetings, staff go through all year 11 students and their progress in English and maths “down to granular detail about what they’re struggling to do, or what they’ll doing well in”.

From that meeting individual pupils will get allocated one of around 15 interventions, which are rolled out “the next day”.

Prioritising teacher welfare

Peter Byrne is headteacher at St Oscar Romero Catholic School in Sussex, where 86 per cent of pupils achieved 4+ in maths and English last year – far more than the predicted 66 per cent.

He says disadvantaged pupils and those who might typically be at risk of falling into the forgotten third are “always the first students we look to”.

“We make sure they’re being taught by the right teachers. The most experienced teachers teach the students that need the most support. There is a huge amount of intervention that goes on to support them.”

Byrne says key to high academic performance is consistency, and key to that is prioritising teacher welfare.

“What we as a school have to do is compensate for any lack of parental aspiration, and that requires a staff who are completely committed,” he says, describing staff as his school’s ‘most precious resource.’



‘As a school we have to compensate for any lack of parental aspiration’

Letting teachers focus on teaching

St Oscar Romero has “very little turnover” and has not had a supply teacher for five years, Byrne says.

“I think the key to that is to really take care of your staff.”

He says he and his deputies are the only staff who deal with “rude, abusive parents. It’s the job of the leadership.”

The school has also changed its marking policy “to try and reduce unnecessary workload”.

It also runs a centralised detention system run by the senior leadership team so teachers “don’t have to get bogged down in doing all of that. Staff can focus on...producing great lessons.”

The school also seeks to be flexible on leave.

“If it’s a child’s nativity, sports day, a wedding, a graduation, my answer is always yes,” he says. “I know what you get back in goodwill is 10 times that.”

The school achieves consistency when staff are off by ensuring year 11 classes are not covered by a non-specialist where possible.

Greenshaw Learning Trust also strips away “all the unnecessary things that don’t need to happen...marking, attending endless meetings...hours of planning”.

Smith says this means teachers’ “sole focus” is on creating “brilliant” classes that explain subjects with “simplicity and clarity”.

Believing every pupil can achieve

Byrne says his school has “high expectations of every child”, including those who join the school “with very low starting points”.

“It’s making sure that every teacher believes in their gut, absolutely believes that every child can get at least a grade four.

“And then it’s just never giving up on them and never letting them not give their best, and being relentless about that.”

Firm approach to behaviour

Jordon also attributes some of Red House’s success to a firm approach to behaviour, meaning less time is “wasted” and “teachers can just get on with teaching”.

St Oscar Romero also has a strict approach and “very consistent” expectations.

“To let [pupils] off is to let them down. If so-and-so hasn’t done their homework, you can ignore that or you can say ‘do you know what? That’s an issue, and I’m not going to allow that, because ultimately that’s going to cause that child...to underachieve,’” says Byrne.

Graham Dakin, co-head of Henley Bank, says its behaviour policy is “the bedrock” of what the school does.

“We don’t ever compromise standards for year 11...particularly the sets that maybe are at risk of not achieving grade fours in English and maths.”

Smith says creating “disruption-free

Continued on next page



SOLUTIONS

classrooms” and making behaviour “a focus for the leadership team, not individual teachers creates classrooms in which everybody thrives, particularly those who are vulnerable, including children with SEND.

Who are the ‘forgotten third’?

In 2018-19, more than 191,000 GCSE pupils – 35.4 per cent of that year’s cohort – failed English and/or maths, according to DfE data analysed by FFT Education Datalab.

That fell slightly during the pandemic as teacher assessment replaced exams. But in 2022-23, the figure rose to more than 211,000. Last year it soared further, to more than 220,000 (35 per cent).

The demographics of the forgotten third have

‘Every teacher must believe that every child can get at least a grade four’

remained largely the same across the past six years.

Pupils with SEND are over-represented. In 2023-24, only 37.7 per cent of state-funded pupils receiving SEND support, and just 13 per cent of those with an EHCP, passed GCSE maths and English. This is compared with 72.2 per cent of those without SEND support.

Pupils’ socio-economic background also has an impact. Just 43.4 per cent of disadvantaged pupils passed both subjects last year, compared with 72.7 per cent of those not deemed disadvantaged.

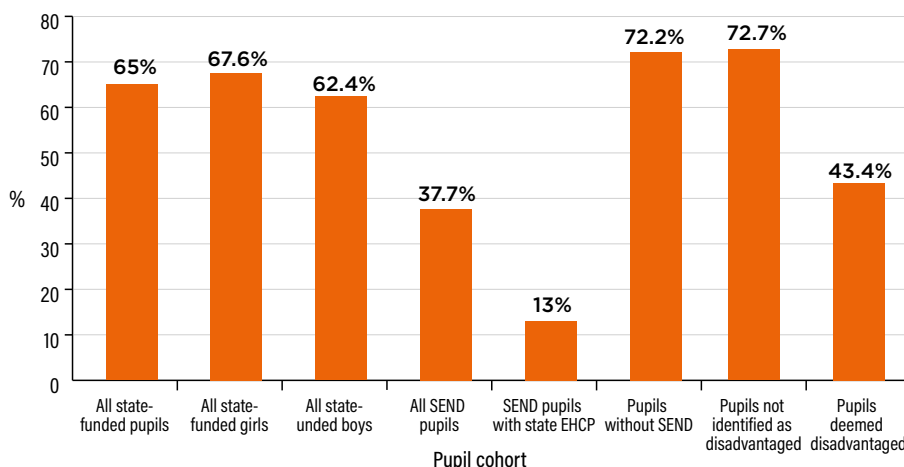
There is also a significant, persistent north-south divide.

In parts of the north and Midlands the “forgotten third” is nearer 40 per cent, while in London, it is nearer 30 per cent.

This geographical divide is also growing. In 2018-19, there was an 8.2 percentage point difference between the lowest performing area (the north east) and the highest (outer London).

Last year, the gap between the north west – now the worst-performing area – and outer London was 10.6 percentage points.

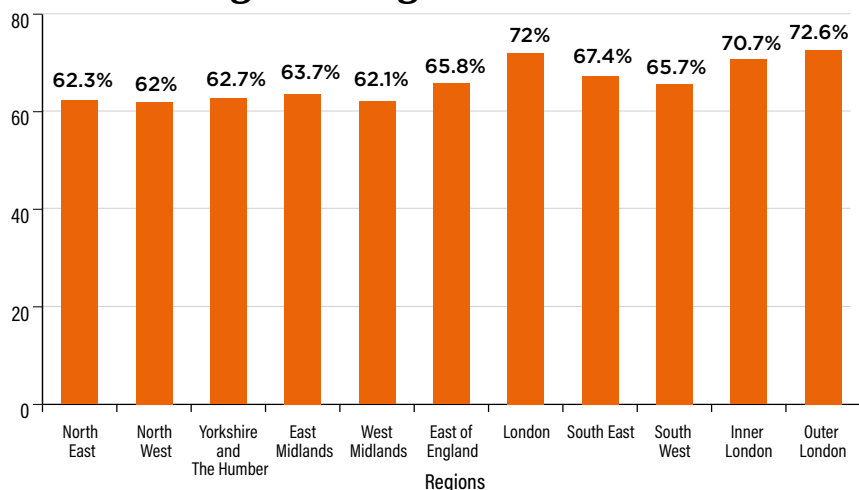
% achieving 4+ in English and maths (2023-24)



Source: DfE data, analysed by Datalab

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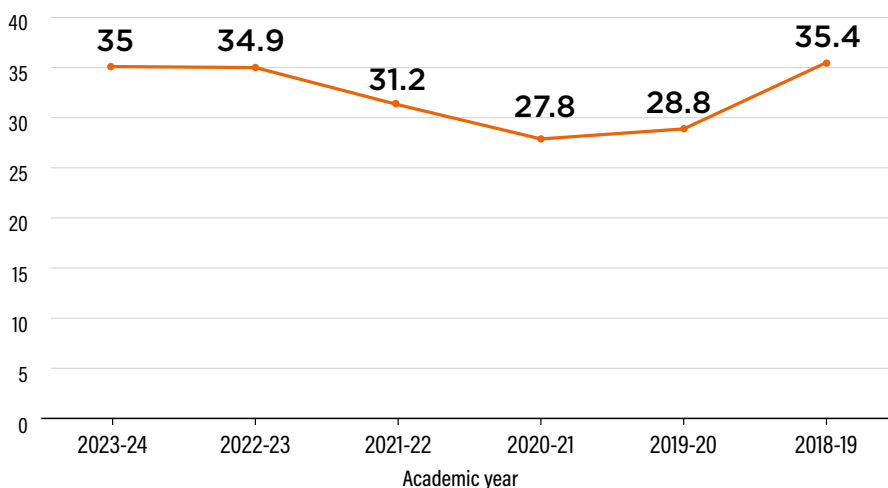
% achieving 4+ in English and maths (2023-24)



Source: DfE data, analysed by Datalab

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% of pupils not achieving 4+ in English and maths



Source: DfE data, analysed by Datalab

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Use TAs effectively – but not as teachers, says EEF

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Teaching assistants must “supplement – not replace – the teacher” and struggling pupils must “spend at least as much time with the teacher as other pupils, if not more”, the Education Endowment Foundation has said.

In guidance published this week, the EEF gave school leaders practical “recommendations to effectively deploy teaching assistants (TAs) in schools across the country”.

For its updated guide, the charity, which works to boost the attainment of poorer children, drew together findings from around 52 studies to “provide five clear and evidence-informed recommendations on how to best utilise TAs to support attainment outcomes”.

According to the most recent data, there are over 280,000 TAs in schools in England, an increase of 28 per cent since 2011.

Emily Yeomans, co-chief executive of the EEF, said TAs “play a vital role in our education system”.

She added: “Ensuring TAs are deployed strategically is crucial to making sure they have the biggest impact on learning, supporting teachers and ultimately helping pupils to reach their potential at school. Put simply, TAs are an invaluable part of our school workforce.”

Here are the EEFs five tips...

1. Deploy TAs in ways that enable all pupils to access high-quality teaching.

TAs should “supplement – not replace – the teacher”.

This means pupils who struggle most “should spend at least as much time with the teacher as other pupils, if not more”.

Schools should ensure working relationships between teachers and TAs “meet all pupils’ needs, with the teacher retaining responsibility for all pupils”.

And schools should support teachers and TAs to “identify practices which inhibit pupil learning and engage in effective alternatives”.

2. Deploy TAs to scaffold learning and to develop pupils’ independence.

TAs should be equipped with a “range of scaffolding strategies appropriate to the age,



subject, and specific individual needs of pupils they work with”.

According to the guidance, leaders should ensure TAs are “prepared to engage in scaffolding practices that support pupils’ learning and ability to learn independently”.

Supporting pupil independence “should be a key consideration of TA deployment”.

TAs should then remove scaffolds over time to “promote independent learning, with teachers supporting TAs to make those judgements”.

Schools should also ensure pupils have the “opportunity to attempt tasks independently before intervening appropriately when they can’t proceed”.

3. Deploy TAs to deliver well-chosen, evidence-based, structured interventions where appropriate.

The guidance states that evidence shows TAs “can support pupils effectively through structured interventions”.

But these “need to be carefully considered, monitored, and linked to the classroom to ensure positive outcomes for pupils”.

Schools should reflect on the “purpose of interventions and engage with the evidence base” before deploying TAs to deliver structured interventions.

They should also monitor progress “to be sure the benefit of the intervention outweighs time away from the classroom”.

And schools should support teachers and TAs

to “engage in bridging practices that connect learning between interventions and the classroom”.

4. Prepare and train staff around effective TA deployment.

According to the guidance, schools should provide “clarity on the role of the TA for all in the school”.

They should also enable TAs to be effective and teachers to work effectively with them through “effective professional development”.

Schools should develop “ongoing coordination and communication so teachers and TAs are prepared for their day-to-day roles”.

5. Engage all staff in the process of implementing effective TA deployment.

The document states effective TA deployment is “complex and dependent on a range of factors”.

School leaders “should focus on implementation as they look to embed effective practices”.

In doing so they should ensure TA development is “informed by both the underpinning evidence and the challenges of putting it into practice”.

They should “engage and align” the school community to “build a shared understanding of good TA practice”.

And they should be “deliberate about deployment decisions, which should be taken in the context of the school and its current priorities”.

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Struggling readers spotted by eye-tracking software trial

RHI STORER

@RHISTORERWRITES

EXCLUSIVE

Eye-tracking software to test children's reading ability has been trialled in schools to identify pupils needing extra support – and even eye tests.

Two academy trusts have piloted the software, developed by Swedish company Tobii. It uses sensors to measure eye movement using cameras mounted on laptop screens.

But privacy campaigners have raised concerns about how children's data may be used if passed on to third-party companies.

Schools taking part in the trials were able to track pupils' reading ability, including attention deficits, whether they were skipping lines, "fluency blocks" and whether they had differences in silent and aloud reading speeds.

They used the software alongside Lexplore, a Swedish reading development service.

The data captured was inputted into AI software askKira. Its website states that it "identifies student learning challenges and delivers real-time, personalised interventions".

Create Partnership Trust, which has four primary schools in the West Midlands, ran the exercise with 265 pupils. All parents were made aware of the study and consented, the trust said.

The trial identified 81 children with fluency block issues – where a child can decode words but has difficulty reading fluently – and 66 with differences in silent-verses-aloud reading speeds. It also helped identify 19 children who needed eye tests.

Mark Unwin, the trust's CEO, said he was "properly amazed" by the results, and added: "I have been impressed by how we can help our children improve their reading ability and score."

St Bart's Multi Academy Trust tested the reading ability of children in 20 of its schools.

It found that of 876 pupils who participated in Lexplore baseline testing, 226 had below-average or worse reading ability.

Eva Cerioni, the trust's school improvement officer, said the software and its use in the classroom "is beneficial for teachers as it further enhances their ability to identify specific areas for development to improve pupils' reading skills."



"It's a great technology that can help our children develop confidence and ability in their reading."

However, Jen Persson, director at privacy pressure group Defend Digital Me, raised concerns about askKira's data policy.

It states that "aggregated and anonymised data may be shared with industry leaders, policymakers and educational institutions to drive informed decision-making within the education sector".

The privacy policy previously stated that data "may be sold to" industry leaders, but was changed when Schools Week approached the organisation for comment.

It also has an opt-in which "allows us to process anonymised usage and behavioural analytics data for the purpose of generating insight and intelligence reports".

Persson said behavioural analytics "likely goes beyond what parents believe they are 'consenting' to".

"How can any company know if it is [GDPR] compliant or not?" she added. "Such policies can use lots of words around compliance but in essence we are looking for data processing beyond what parents and children have been told, or would reasonably expect."

Persson also questioned how the software dealt with neurodivergent children "whose eyes or attention span are perfectly healthy but statistically outside the 'norm'?"

An askKira spokesperson confirmed aggregated and anonymised data may be shared "solely to support informed decision-making

within the education sector, but that is it."

Unwin, who was one of the leaders who developed askKira, said: "The privacy of our pupils' data and their safety are our highest concerns. Our AI policy as a trust, which we are happy to share with other trusts and schools, is underpinned by a set of guiding principles."

The policy states that "no student within the trust will interact directly with AI assistants or chatbots".

And he added that "the fact that askKira was developed by individuals, schools and trusts currently working in the profession, along with the controls and transparency around data usage, gives us the confidence to innovate within the guiding principles of the policy."

A spokesperson for Lexplore said: "Based on the GDPR legislation Lexplore has been assessed and approved by many schools and municipalities over the years."

"We had the opportunity to design Lexplore with this regulation in mind from the start and we perform continuous risk assessments, and we assist schools to do the same when needed."

"By adhering to GDPR and now the new [EU] AI Act we feel confident that we live up to the expectations in how to protect the privacy of our pupils."

A spokesperson for Tobii said: "We are proud that our eye tracking technology can play a part in helping children with their reading development."

"We are very excited to see more and more companies bring these learnings into products that can really make a difference in the world."

NEWS IN BRIEF

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Pupil premium shortfall hampers support

Three in four schools say a lack of pupil premium funding is hampering support for vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils, a government survey suggests.

The Department for Education has published research into how schools use the pupil premium and Covid recovery premium schemes.

It surveyed 2,152 schools and 324 academy trusts.

Asked about the “challenges to planning and delivering support”, 74 per cent of schools cited an “insufficient level of pupil premium funding”.

In December 2013 the Institute for Fiscal Studies found the value of the pupil premium had fallen by 14 per cent in real terms since 2015. The DfE report acknowledged the “purchasing power of pupil premium has fallen in recent years”.

It comes after the government announced pupil premium funding would rise by 2.3 per cent next year, at a time when schools faced a 3.6 per cent increase in costs.

Despite delivery, the survey found schools had



a favourable opinion about the funding’s impact.

“Almost all schools felt the premia funding had a positive impact on pupils’ outcomes, particularly on overall wellbeing, attainment and attendance,” the report said.

Schools were asked how they planned to fill the gap after the recovery premium finished at the end of the last academic year.

Fifty-two per cent said they would stop providing some forms of support, and the same proportion said they would need to look for cost-savings elsewhere.

[Full story here](#)

NFER’s top tips to boost attendance



Schools should prioritise “encouraging” and “individualised” approaches to tackling absence in addition to “punitive sanctions”, says the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

Its new report comes as absence rates in state schools have soared from 4.5 per cent in 2016-17 to 6.9 per cent last academic year, while persistent absence rates have jumped from 10.7 per cent to 19.2 per cent.

DfE figures show absences are more acute in secondary schools, as well as among pupils from financially disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND.

The NFER report aimed to understand how schools with good or improving attendance figures supported pupils to return to school after absence.

It concluded that “schools should consider prioritising encouraging and individualised approaches in addition to punitive sanction”, said Matt Walker, a NFER senior research manager and co-author of the report.

Policymakers should increase funding for attendance and pastoral support and invest in external mental health and family support services, while schools should provide support “to help pupils reintegrate academically” after being absent.

The report said this could include “online lesson materials, teacher guidance, and structured sessions [such as] homework clubs or small-group support”.

It also stressed the importance of schools “working closely with pupils and their parents or carers to understand the barriers to attendance”.

[Full story here](#)

Trust to press on with alternative pension

England’s biggest academy trust is pressing ahead with plans to let teachers opt into a less generous pension scheme to boost their pay, despite what it calls “threats from government officials”.

The i Paper reported the Department for Education told United Learning Trust (ULT) that it opposed the move.

But Sir Jon Coles, the chain’s chief executive, said he remained “confident in our legal position”.

“Although we are not able to go ahead in April as planned, we do still plan to go ahead with the scheme, despite threats from government officials.”

The i reported that the DfE told the ULT that some of its funding would be at risk and that it could face a financial notice to improve.

The DfE confirmed it had requested a business case so it could be “appropriately considered in the context of teachers and the impact on public finances”.

Schools Week previously revealed that the ULT, which runs 90 schools, was planning to offer teachers an alternative pension scheme from 2025, alongside the TPS.

Currently, teachers have to pay between 7.4 and 11.7 per cent, with employers stumping up 28.6 per cent.

Under the plan, teachers opting out would contribute either 0, 5 or 10 per cent of their salary in a new defined contribution scheme.

The trust would contribute at least 10 or 20 per cent. The money saved would go towards bumping up pay for teachers on the alternative scheme.

[Full story here](#)

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Feature

ROSA FURNEAUX | @ROSAFURNEAUX

'What we see are wasted lives'



In a rare interview, Ofsted's unregistered school team speaks about the horrors they have witnessed, the risks they face and how they've found taxpayers' money funding some of the worst cases

A visit from Ofsted is enough to get any school leader's heart pounding. But inspectors arriving at schools usually don't wear body cameras, nor are they considering the phrase "establishing reasonable cause" as they shake your hand.

Unless, of course, you're surprised by a visit from Ofsted's unregistered schools team.

The watchdog's crack squad investigates illegal schools where children can be subject to corporal punishment and taught in squalid conditions by adults who may not have qualifications or criminal record checks.

The work is secretive. The inspectors don't want operators to know they're coming.

But in a rare interview, Victor Shafiee,

the deputy director for independent and unregistered schools, and team leader Sue Will, spoke exclusively to Schools Week.

What we see are wasted lives

Although the team has been established for almost a decade, Ofsted keeps much of its work under wraps.

Why? Well, the team doesn't want to give too much away. "These are criminal investigations," Shafiee says.

Ofsted's own data, though, tells its own story. According to the most recent figures, the team has investigated more than 1,200 schools since 2016.

Their inspections have resulted in 199 warning

letters, 34 closures and 19 convictions, with more than 125 schools registering or coming into compliance after a visit.

An "illegal school" is defined as any unregistered independent school providing full-time education to five or more pupils, or at least one pupil who is looked after by the local authority or who has an education, health and care plan.

There is no legal definition of what constitutes "full-time" education, although the Department for Education generally considers it to mean more than 18 hours a week.

Those found running an illegal school can face up to six months in prison, an unlimited fine, or both.

Feature: Ofsted

"Ofsted has always had the power to investigate illegal schools," Shafiee tells me, and inspectors have long been aware of the issue.

But it was in a Birmingham taxi in late 2015, so the story goes, that then-chief inspector Michael Wilshaw decided a dedicated team was needed.

"The taxi driver told him that he routinely took children to places that were not schools," Shafiee says.

Almost ten years on, Shafiee and Will head a team of six senior inspectors and four investigators, most of whom have policing backgrounds.

But this is not a gang of balaclava-clad, SWAT-style commandos.

"They're really caring, experienced inspectors," Willw says. "They're ex-police officers who've been involved in the safeguarding of children."

In fact, after particularly tough inspections, "there's often a tear shed", she says.

Rat traps and corporal punishment

There's no doubt Will and her inspectors have seen the worst of the worst.

She describes "Dickensian" schools with broken windows, exposed wires, no desks and rat traps on the floor.

Her team have found children "educated" in warehouses, above chip shops, and even in an open field.

But it's not just dangerous premises her team worries about: it's dangerous people.

"You can go into somewhere that doesn't look as bad as that, but the guy running it is currently under police investigation."

Her main concern, she says, is the danger that predators will "gravitate to somewhere that's unregulated. And then you're free in there to do as you please ... some of the most horrendous things."

Her inspectors will not see everything, but statements from children can form part of a case.

Pupils have described how they've been bullied and ridiculed. Some have endured corporal punishment, banned in all English schools since 1998.

And then there are disturbing details that leave



Schools Week Investigative Reporter Rosa Furneaux talks to Victor Shafiee and Sue Will

'Some charge an enormous amount for what is a chaotic, disorganised place'

inspectors with more questions than answers.

In one case, Will's team found a school's doors locked from the inside.

"You can't imagine, when there's so many things that protect children in school, that [these children] have none of that," she says.

Not all the schools are dirty and dangerous.

But "it doesn't matter that [inspectors saw] a worse one yesterday," she says. "For that child on that day at that place, that's the worst place."

Propped up by councils

All the schools visited by the team charge fees. But not all those fees are paid by parents.

Some are paid by councils, which are allowed to place children in unregistered alternative provision.

"We've come across settings that have charged a local authority an enormous amount of money for what is a chaotic, disorganised place," Shafiee says.

Not all unregistered AP is illegal. But the team is increasingly concerned that current safeguards designed to limit the number of children in an unregistered setting, and the amount of time they

spend there, are being ignored.

The government has yet to respond to proposals, put forward after the launch of a government consultation last May, which recommended requiring all AP settings comply with national standards and having councils maintain lists of "approved" provision.

The team's inspectors found one local authority in the north of England paying for nearly 100 children to attend a single unregistered AP.

Will believes some councils are essentially sending children into full-time education at unregistered providers by enrolling them at more than one setting over the week.

"They know that if that child was there [at a single unregistered setting] five days a week, then that would be classed as an illegal school," she says.

How much are councils spending on illegal schools? Recently, the team found a council paying just under £400 a day to an unregulated AP. Shafiee calculates the council's total bill could have been £40,000 per year.

In another case, that Will describes as one of her "worst", 60 children with EHCPs were found

Feature: Ofsted



attending an AP in an open field with just a polytunnel for shelter.

The local authority was paying the provider “over £40,000”.

Inspection day

In a previous life, the team's inspectors might have enjoyed a polite welcome as they arrived on site. But inspection day looks a little different for them now.

“We call it an inspection, but really it's an investigation,” Will says.

Long before the team shows up, it will have been making enquiries into its legal status.

What kind of enquiries? Shafiee takes us off-the-record, fearing operators could catch on.

The team is fitted with body cameras designed to play a dual role: capturing important evidence and dissuading, or recording, abuse.

“Some of the people that we come across aren't the nicest of characters,” Will says.

“No one has hit us, yet,” Shafiee says wryly. “But we did, with the help of the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, prosecute somebody who had racially and verbally assaulted two of our inspectors.”

Will says she has experienced misogynistic

abuse. And during one inspection she was pushed into the curb by a man who felt “he had the right to the pavement”.

“I've been called the devil's daughter,” she says. Many times, “men have refused to engage with me whatsoever”.

Misogynistic behaviour doesn't just happen at religious schools, Shafiee says. “We come across ‘macho men’ who think they can't be ruled.”

Once inside a suspected illegal school, the team will collect evidence that can be used in a criminal prosecution — should the case go that far.

‘We call it an inspection, but really it's an investigation’

After a visit, inspectors will conduct further enquiries, Will says, which might result in a warning notice.

When would it pursue prosecution? With apologies, Will says, Ofsted would rather that not be published either.

New powers

The team's caginess might come from the fact that there is plenty that can hamper their investigations.

The team isn't allowed to forcibly gain entry to a school and it can't take physical evidence away.

As a result, Shafiee says, “we're doing a criminal investigation with our hands tied behind our backs”.

But that may soon change. The children's wellbeing and schools bill would finally give the team new powers to “search and seize”.

“It brings us in line with other investigative bodies,” Will says. “It's the minimum we need to be able to do the job.”



But there's a snag. There's no promise of extra funding, and “unless we have the resources, we won't be able to do it”, Shafiee says.

With a team of just eight to cover the whole country, and with the bill widening the unit's scope to include additional types of school, the workload could increase substantially.

As it stands, Shafiee says, team members may be dealing with the “tip of an iceberg”.

It's impossible to say exactly how many unregistered schools there are in England – the team's limited data comes from referrals made by councils, agencies and the public.

Plus, those running unregistered schools are getting wise to the way the team works.

“A lot of settings are now taking down their big signs outside,” Shafiee says.

But the referrals keep coming. Will guesses she has “over 100 cases” on her desk today: “We've never, ever been in the situation where we haven't got any work to do.”

And if you think you might know about an illegal school? The team is clear — get in touch.

“What we see are wasted lives,” Shafiee says. “We see the hardest-to-help children getting a really raw deal. And it's just not fair.”

Curriculum
ConversationDO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UKDR JEFFERY
QUAYENational director of education
and standards, Aspirations
Academies TrustLike phonics, we need a
maths screening check

Phase two of the Francis review is underway, and Jeffery Quaye has some suggestions for making maths more effective and enjoyable from day one

Labor was right to identify early mathematics as one of the focus areas to improve educational standards. The change Bridget Phillipson conceives of has been appropriately described as 'phonics for maths', but what does that really mean?

The terms of reference for the curriculum and assessment review include delivering "an excellent foundation in core subjects of reading, writing, and maths" and ensuring that the assessment system accurately "captures the strength of every child and young person".

But the reality is that matching the phenomenal success of phonics under Nick Gibb will be very challenging. It will require significant changes across curriculum content, pedagogical implementation, and a culture of ambivalence about maths that impacts children's enjoyment of and progress in the subject.

Nevertheless, there is a real buzz about these important changes. So here is what I hope the Francis review will consider as it enters its second phase.

Curriculum content

There is an undeniable problem with the current ambition of the early

years and key stage 1 curriculum, and to a greater extent, the primary curriculum altogether.

The main issue relates to the narrowness of early years maths. A focus on numbers, numerical patterns and spatial reasoning is not sufficiently equipping children with strong number sense, which allows them to flexibly explore relationships between number and quantity.

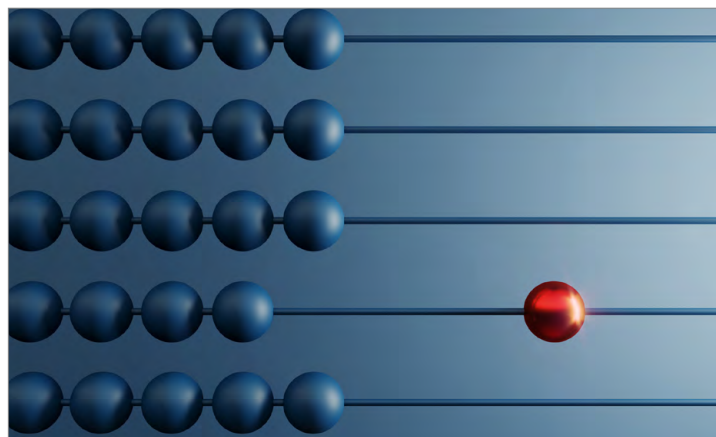
Shape, space and measure are not specifically covered in the assessment targets. As a result, these key components are often missing from children's experience and development of wider mathematical thinking, which is detrimental far beyond their immediate outcomes.

Curriculum scope

But at the same time as areas of the curriculum need to be enriched, the primary curriculum as a whole needs to be reduced to allow greater focus on quality and depth of learning in respect of the foundational components of knowledge.

It is clear to everyone, including parents, that maths is not given enough curriculum time in school when compared with reading. This means children are not securing the necessary foundational knowledge in the early years before moving on.

For example, children do not have enough playful learning opportunities, and teachers are sometimes moving quickly across



“ We must foster the love the subject deserves

the concrete-pictorial-abstract continuum.

In part, this is because some teachers lack the requisite skills to provide rich experiences when exploring numbers to deepen spatial reasoning in early years.

And in part, it is due to the curriculum's focus on contextual maths. Use of 'real-life' problems actually tends to distract from learning necessary mathematical concepts.

Learning to love maths

This is not the place to re-arbitrate the debate about 'anti-maths mindset'. However, maths does suffer from an intergenerational reputational problem, as well as gender stereotyping, both of which can lead to 'maths anxiety'.

Any change to the curriculum must therefore ensure that children have regular opportunities to enjoy the subject. By extension, the curriculum must also engage parents so that they can support children at home.

OECD research in 2020 reported that children whose parents engage in frequent maths-related activities at home have stronger outcomes, even when controlling for variables such as socio-economic status.

What about assessment?

Having said that, the role of early years teachers in children's conceptual development cannot be overlooked. Teachers need support to understand new pedagogy in enacting any new curriculum so that instead of focussing on cardinality and counting, there is greater emphasis on exploring patterns and rich play-based learning that explores concepts.

What will aid that beyond doubt is the replacement of the early years profile with more effective assessments. The current model is far too general and does not fully capture children's mathematical competence.

In short, if we are going to have an effective 'phonics for maths', then we will need a maths screening check.

Delivering this will require a collective effort from schools and parents, so any theory of change around the curriculum review will need to carefully consider workload implications.

But while developing an excellent foundation for all children in maths is a big challenge, doing so could foster the love and enjoyment the subject deserves.

And that's a huge prize for our schools, our society and our economy.

Opinion

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Five years on: Legacies of lockdown



JONNY UTTLEY

CEO, The Education Alliance

Remember 'build back better'? No wonder we're so divided

We met the moment in service of our children and families – only to be dragged back again. Is it any wonder we are so divided now? asks Jonny Uttley

The Education Alliance had been a multi-academy trust for five years when Covid hit, but the first lockdown was the real birth of #TeamTEAL. Until then, our identity had not really formed. During the strangely beautiful spring of 2020, it burst into life.

I stepped out of the house on the morning of March 20 this year to warm sunshine and that unmistakable smell of spring. It could not have been more evocative of that springtime five years before, when our lives changed forever.

My Schools Week lockdown diary was written three weeks into the so-called school closures, during an Easter break that wasn't one – the first of many such school 'holidays'.

We were open for key workers' children, and we were working harder than ever to support the NHS, local charities and each other. My team's sense of purpose and commitment to public service was palpable – at times I couldn't keep up with their creativity about what more we might do.

They were firing off emails and messages constantly, checking

on each other, developing online learning, organising supermarket vouchers, food parcels and toiletries and working out how to make PPE for the NHS.

It was amid that flurry of communication that the #TeamTEAL hashtag emerged. And today, many of us now wear #TeamTEAL lapel badges – not as a cheesy corporate thing, but as a reminder of how we come together in our most challenging moments.

The truth is that it was exhilarating at times. Leading without a blueprint, setting the course as the government struggled to catch up with the creativity and drive of a generation of school leaders whose strength was being forged in the furnace of a national emergency.

But it was terrifying too. The spiralling death toll, the empty streets and the very real fear. I asked myself almost every night for two years: "Have we done enough to keep our people safe?"

Of course, we had no clue we would be locked down so long. Becoming experts in contact tracing, setting up testing centres, teaching with masks as Omicron tore through the population and millions stayed home; all that lay ahead.

So did the devastating reality of being consistently let down by a



“Ofsted and the DfE just didn't get it

government that cared too little about children and school staff: the failure on food vouchers, the disaster of the laptop rollout, the exams fiasco, the refusal to fund catch-up and the secretary of state's suggestion in parliament that parents should report schools to Ofsted.

I look back now on everything we did with enormous sadness at a huge, missed opportunity to make things better post-pandemic. Remember "Build Back Better"? What happened to that?

In March 2020, we were told there would be no performance tables and no inspections for the foreseeable future. And what did school leaders do? We worked harder, collaborated more and solved problems in the most creative ways imaginable.

Yet when lockdowns ended, the Department for Education and Ofsted could barely wait to return to zero sum, competitive accountability and high-stakes inspection. We had moved so far beyond all that and become so much better as leaders, and they just

didn't get it.

And what of the children who came through it, the famous Gen Z, the kids that Gen X and Millennials love to bash as flaky and weak?

In my experience, they were incredible. They were asked to give up significant parts of their childhoods to save the lives of others, to not see their friends, to lose months of school, to miss first parties and proms, to swab their noses and to wear masks in stuffy classrooms and corridors.

And they did it all. Stoically, resiliently following all those rules that were there to protect others.

During the second lockdown, I drove my daughter to see her friend every Sunday. They were only allowed to meet outdoors. It was a freezing February, and they walked around a village clutching hot chocolates, sitting apart on a bench and shivering. They followed the rules to the letter.

Meanwhile in Whitehall...

#TeamTEAL has endured, but is it any wonder #TeamGB feels more divided than ever?

Opinion

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CEO salaries is the one area of education that accountability has not reached, writes Robin Bevan, but there is a ready-made way to get them under control

Irrational. Indefensible. Unregulated. Every year, as predictable as Easter eggs on shop shelves, the publication of trust CEO salaries elicits a spring tide surge of protestations. But there is a solution for a minister bold enough to wade in.

The objections are clear and valid.

It is hard to square the startling disparities in salaries between otherwise comparable roles, even allowing for context or performance-related flexibilities.

It is equally difficult to justify such exaggerated levels of pay for taxpayer-funded public servants at a time of fiscal constraint and redundancies.

There are important accountability issues too. In the absence of publicly accessible benchmarking, pay levels may be determined behind closed doors without due diligence.

The challenge is compounded by insufficient distinction between job titles, role definitions and scope of responsibility. A headteacher may fulfil all the roles of head of school and CEO, or very much less, and a CEO could be working in a single or a multi-academy trust (SAT or MAT).

This lack of clarity gives rise to another problem: the use of unsuitable proxy measures. Seeking an easy linear assumption, many revert to per-pupil or per-institution figures, both of which tell us little.

The per-institution measure is worse because schools vary highly in scope and size. The per-pupil measure, meanwhile, is a powerful tool to reveal disparities, but not a fair measure on which to award pay.

For all these reasons, we urgently need a national scale for executive pay. But what might that look like?



DR ROBIN BEVAN

Educational leadership coach and consultant

The solution to soaring CEO pay is there for the taking

An intelligent model would show a diminishing rate of salary increase with the scale of the provision, with an upper maximum limit.

Responsibility increases with 'scale', but so does the breadth of other senior staff taking on delegated responsibilities.

This model provides ample flexibility to adapt salary for context, improvement or sustained excellence through the selection of spine points. Employers also have a discretionary power to increase salary values by up to 25 per cent.

This approach could readily

“And all it needs is one bold minister

In other words, pay levels should not rise inexorably with scale. Increased scope of responsibility should carry an increased salary, but this ought to exhibit diminishing returns as against pupil numbers.

It is rarely highlighted in commentary on these issues that the leadership pay model in the school teachers' pay and conditions document already exhibits precisely this kind of flattened curve. (See figure 1)

be extended for executive roles, building in an appropriate margin for headroom over headteacher pay. It would be relatively easy to adopt for trust CEOs, for deputy CEO roles, for SAT CEO/headteachers and for those headteachers who have school-level responsibilities within a MAT or local authority.

Enhancing the maximum spine point values used by the School Teachers' Review Body by 25 per cent and extrapolating the emergent

curve, a model for executive salaries begins to emerge. The upper (asymptotic) limit for CEO pay then sits, theoretically, at around £175,000, extendable as required. (See figure 2)

There will be equally valid objections to this number, not least because the headteacher salary for the largest schools is already set at £138,000 (£165,000 including the potential uplift). At this level, maintaining an appropriate differential and internal relativities would be challenging.

One unpalatable solution would be to reposition headteachers in trust schools as 'heads of school', with lower salaries than headteachers in SATs or maintained schools.

Alternatively, a higher cap on executive pay could be justified where the CEO has an unusually broad remit, for example managing a 'hub' or a trading company selling central services.

Either way, there is certainly scope to develop a framework to sit alongside whatever salary progression methodology is chosen. It could even be standard across the sector and aligned to progress and performance in advancing the attributes of a strong trust.

The result would be an equitable, coherent, progressive and motivating approach to CEO pay that is also rational, defensible and amenable to open scrutiny.

And all it needs is one bold minister.

FIGURE 1

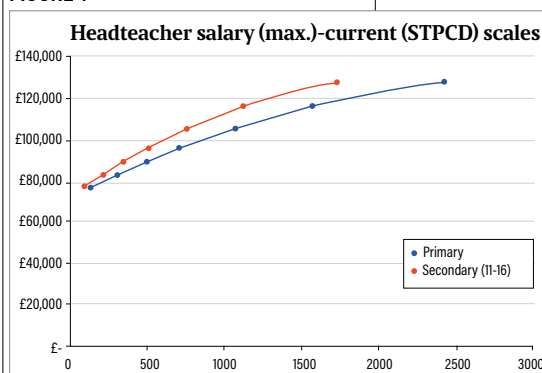
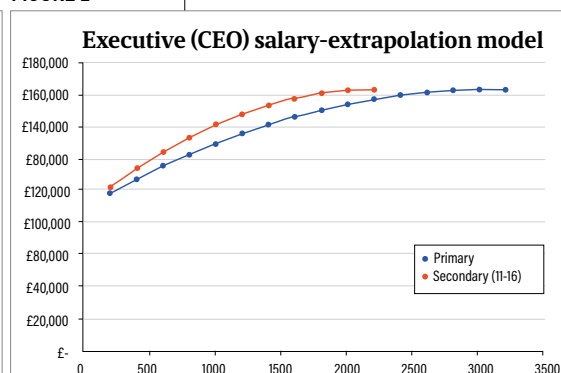


FIGURE 2



Opinion

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SILVANA RICHARDSON

Strategic education adviser,
The Bell Foundation

Why EAL is crucial to inclusion – and how Ofsted should respond

Accountability has not kept pace with the changing profile of our student population, writes Silvana Richardson. Report cards are a chance to put that right

Imagine what it must feel like to try to learn and make friends in a new school where everyone speaks a language you don't understand.

Over one in five schoolchildren (1.77 million pupils) speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), more than three times as many as in 2000, and rising. Many arrive in our schools unable to access the curriculum and integrate into school life.

But while multilingual classrooms are now the norm in most state-funded English schools, curriculum and accountability have not kept up.

Still too many EAL learners experience educational and social exclusion. They are subjected to ill-informed, discriminatory practices which can hamper their language development, progression and ultimately their educational achievement.

In this context, Ofsted's proposal to explicitly focus on inclusion and on the experiences and outcomes of disadvantaged learners in its new framework is crucial. Doing so must include EAL learners with limited or developing competency in English.

This is a hugely diverse group

of learners. Their competency in English will vary greatly from being completely new to being competent, fluent and able to fully access curriculum content.

Ofsted must recognise their diversity of learning and support needs in the new framework it plans to roll out. For Ofsted inspections and reports to be truly inclusive in practice, three key developments are needed.

Include disadvantaged EAL learners

Research shows that EAL pupils' proficiency in English has the strongest relationship with educational attainment, explaining four to six times as much variation as gender, free school meal status and ethnicity combined. Unsurprisingly, their likelihood of success is strongly influenced by their ability to use English competently.

Findings highlight attainment gaps for specific groups within this cohort, not just those who are new to English, but those who use certain languages or arrive later in the school system from another country being at particular risk of low attainment.

It is the needs of these groups that should be considered in the design of all proposed new Ofsted practices, from the definition of inclusion in the school inspection toolkit to report cards themselves.



“ Multilingual classrooms are now the norm

Better-trained inspectors

The educational exclusion that disadvantaged EAL pupils often experience takes many forms.

Extended withdrawal interventions (where pupils have reduced access to mainstream lessons) can adversely impact their language development, attainment and social integration. A lack of appropriate support can affect their ability to follow lessons, participate fully and successfully show what they have learned.

Sadly, feedback from The Bell Foundation's partner schools reveals variability in inspector expertise regarding EAL, sometimes leading to inaccurate judgments of the quality of provision. While some showed sound knowledge about EAL learners, others showed a lack of understanding about how to foster language development alongside curriculum learning.

High-quality in-depth training is required to enable inspectors to hold schools to account for ensuring inclusive education for disadvantaged EAL pupils.

Specific areas could include developing a nuanced understanding of the diversity of the EAL cohort and promoting evidence-informed, inclusive, multilingual pedagogies, amongst others.

Inclusive reporting

According to the 2021 Census data for England and Wales, over 1 million respondents reported that they could not speak English well or at all. Many of these people will be parents or carers of EAL pupils.

Initiatives to ensure that report cards inform parents and carers of the quality of local schools in an easy-to-understand way are welcome and essential, as the level of linguistic complexity of Ofsted inspection school reports poses unnecessary barriers for many EAL learners' parents and carers.

However, for those parents who cannot understand written English, Ofsted should go further and consider incorporating a translation tool to its reporting mechanisms.

For Ofsted's reforms to be truly inclusive of EAL pupils and their parents, a more nuanced and informed approach to recognising, inspecting and reporting on their needs is essential.

The proposed reforms are an important opportunity for Ofsted to promote equitable educational opportunities and foster a more inclusive school system. Multilingual learners and their families must be at their heart.

SEND Solutions

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ROB COLES

Deputy CEO,
Education South West



KELLIE KNOTT

SEND strategic
director, Devon
County Council



How we're decentralising to better meet need locally

Devon County Council's partnership with two trusts is setting out to ensure every child can access specialist provision locally, improving provision regionally and saving money

Responses to growing SEND demand have tended to fall into one of two categories: individual schools setting up internal alternative provisions, or the establishment of specialist settings that require children to attend separate schools. In Devon, we have taken a different approach.

For too long, SEND support in Devon has fallen short of expectations. Children, young people and their families have told us what needs to change, and we're acting to deliver meaningful system-wide improvements for them with our new local area partnership SEND strategy.

A vital part of that is building inclusive communities so all children feel welcome and have opportunities to thrive alongside their peers, with access to the right support in the right place and at the right time.

Like many other local authorities, Devon faces significant financial challenges in meeting growing needs. Following a safety valve agreement with the Department for Education, we have had to think carefully and creatively about building capacity.

For example, the consultation with schools to levy a charge for permanent exclusions stimulated an

important discussion with partners about working together on ways to reduce the high number of young people being permanently excluded.

The result is a substantial decentralisation of provision focused on embedding specialist SEND support directly within mainstream schools and growing expertise across the system.

Working in partnership with Devon County Council and the Special Partnership Trust, Education South West has been at the forefront of an initiative to reshape how inclusion is delivered.

At its heart is a model that ensures those with SEND can access the support they need without being removed from their local communities (often at great cost).

Mainstream capacity

Rather than relying on external placements, Devon has established a network of Area Resource Bases (ARBs) within mainstream schools. The establishment of these specialist units is not left to ad hoc initiatives from schools and trusts – instead we have taken a strategic approach to their deployment across the county.

Our ARBs act as hubs for developing and sharing best practices. Teachers across schools benefit from outreach and training, equipping them with the skills to better support SEND students in mainstream classrooms and growing capacity across the region.



“ Our focus is on developing sustainable local provision ”

Benefits of decentralisation

A key advantage of this approach is that it keeps children closer to home. Long travel times to specialist settings can be disruptive and isolating, whereas local provision builds continuity in education and community ties.

ARBs also reduce reliance on expensive independent placements, enabling a more sustainable use of public resources while maintaining high-quality provision.

Education South West has been demonstrating this model. The trust has shown that high-quality SEND provision can be embedded within mainstream settings, not diluting the educational experience for other students but enriching it.

Sustainable and scalable

One of the most innovative aspects of Devon's model is its long-term vision. Instead of short-term fixes, the focus is on developing sustainable local provision that evolves alongside community needs.

This ties into the county's wider transformation programme, which aims to create accessible, cohesive support networks for children and families. We genuinely believe that our decentralised approach can

work at scale and that collaborations like ours could be replicated elsewhere in the country.

A blueprint for the future

Devon's approach is not about creating a one-size-fits-all solution but about finding the right balance between local mainstream provision and specialist support. Unlike the typical responses to need we've read about in these pages, this model offers a more flexible and inclusive alternative.

While still in its early stages, the success of the ARB model suggests it could serve as a roadmap for other regions looking to enhance inclusion without increasing segregation.

It offers a pragmatic, cost-effective solution that prioritises keeping children in their communities while ensuring they receive the tailored support they need.

Devon has faced significant challenges to its provision in recent years. We are confident that our new model rises to those challenges.

Driven by strong partnerships and a commitment to inclusion, it provides a compelling example of how to build a more integrated, accessible and sustainable education system.

THE REVIEW

ADOLESCENCE

Director: Philip Barantini**Producer:** Netflix**Release date:** March 13, 2025**Reviewer:** Jim Bowyer, CEO, The Skylark Partnership

The new Netflix mini-series *Adolescence* is having a big impact. It is hard-hitting, and one every parent should watch with their teenager and discuss.

That's particularly true of episode one, which offers an accurate portrayal of what happens when police arrest and detain you: how your agency is extremely restricted; how alone you are in a cell; how you are spoken to by officers – the epitome of firm but fair; how little your parents will be able to do to help and how you will almost certainly cry.

For viewers working in education, episode two is less believable. It certainly doesn't reflect my experience of working in schools and pupil referral units where equally tragic incidents have occurred.

In my experience, the police kept a very low profile in school, interviewed pupils professionally and did their utmost to work with staff to minimise the impact of their presence. Local authority colleagues provided on-site psychological support to staff and students.

Most significantly, the pupils themselves almost universally understood the enormity of what had happened and cared for each other.

Jamie, the young person at the centre of this story, is not untypical. He goes to school where he does OK. Outside of school, he hangs out with a couple of friends and spends time on social media.

At home, his parents work long hours and provide a secure material home. But Jamie knows he is an embarrassment to his dad, who himself doesn't have a social network other than his nuclear family.

Young people carrying out serious violent acts is not a new phenomenon. The secure unit for young people where I taught was first

founded in 1852. Accordingly, murder, motive and investigation are not the main focus of *Adolescence's* four episodes.

Instead, the drama poses an altogether different but equally gripping question: what are we doing as a nation to help young people sail the tempestuous transition from childhood to adulthood?

There are truths and clear messages here, and it really challenges us to consider and address some big societal issues.

On the more prosaic side are some truths that should be universally acknowledged: that young people crave recognition and meaningful connections; that adolescents can be intentionally cruel and sometimes support their own egos by bullying others; and that being bullied hurts, irrespective of age.

Where *Adolescence* probes these more deeply is in being the first to explore social media's role in amplifying all of this. We all want others to understand and empathise with us, and the online world can be an easier option than being present and interacting with the people around us.

Not least among the show's clear implications is that a distinct lack of guided spaces for young people to learn how to form positive relationships leaves many adrift. More than ever, schools and institutions with staff who have high levels of emotional intelligence are essential.

The focus of the drama is on boys and men, and reviews elsewhere have criticised it for not including the victims' perspectives. Nevertheless, *Schools Week* readers will no doubt be grateful that creeping misogyny among boys is now the subject of national discussion.

For us educators, the messages apply to all

BOOK
TV
FILM
RADIO
EVENT
RESOURCE



of our pupils, and they are particularly pertinent now as the government carries out a curriculum review and Ofsted creates a new inspection framework.

We fail young people if they enter adulthood without the self-knowledge and emotional skills to form healthy relationships. Sadly, our current accountability measures fail to recognise this and often drive us to work against that aim.

But while curriculum and school environments are important, they can't help children navigate adolescence in isolation. Young people need safe havens to grow into emotionally intelligent adults.

As attention almost inevitably turns to social media regulation, we would do well to remember that these platforms provide that very safe haven for many.

What I took from *Adolescence* is that we don't value young people. And if we want to change that, then we ought to listen to them about what really makes them feel unsafe.

THE CONVERSATION

LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM



Frances Akinde
SEND adviser and
neurodiversity
champion

COMMONS PEOPLE

I've been a regular in parliament recently, lending my voice to the launch of Jamie Oliver's dyslexia campaign,

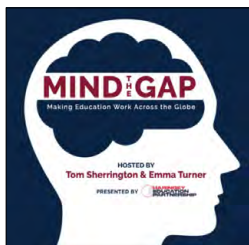
#FixTheSystemNotTheKids, and then again for the #TakeRacismSeriously campaign. This week, I'm off again for a discussion on 'race, education and social media'.

All of this advocacy work has had me reflecting on the fact that education is not just about academic achievement but just as importantly about preparing students to be active and engaged citizens.

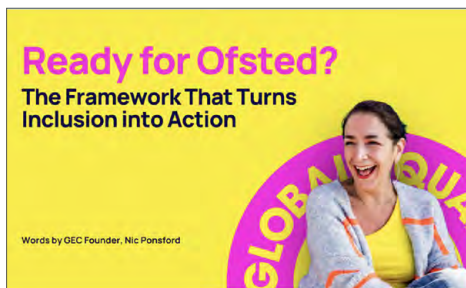
In that context, the latest episode of the *Mind The Gap* podcast really resonated. The topic is purpose, power and social action, and the guest is former social mobility commissioner Saaed Atcha MBE, who founded his first charity when he was 15.

The point that stuck out for me was how as educators, we can and should foster social action and entrepreneurship in our students.

Atcha emphasises the importance of empowering young people to take initiative and make a difference in their communities. And all we need to do is foster their critical skills and agency – and watch them fly.



ACTION STATIONS



Agency seems to be a running theme lately, perhaps thanks to the government's focus on promoting inclusion and ensuring everyone feels a strong sense of belonging. This theme seems to bridge education and social action, bringing interesting voices into the conversation.

One of these is Nic Ponsford, founder of the Global Equality Collective, whose latest blog picks up on this new direction with characteristic enthusiasm.

The blog focuses on Ofsted's developing emphasis on these areas, which Ponsford sees as a vital step towards ensuring every student has the benefits of a learning environment in which they are supported to succeed and thrive.

A NUMBERS GAME

That we are all finally talking about the same thing is certainly encouraging. And that so much collective effort is aligning with the government's broad vision of a truly inclusive, supportive and equitable system means it is slowly emerging on the horizon.

Even the EEF seems to be getting in on the game. Their blog is a great way to stay informed about the latest sector research and insights, and in the past three months alone there have been four posts just on the use of manipulatives in maths teaching.

Letting students use physical objects to help them explore and understand mathematical concepts more easily is a great way to make the subject more engaging and more accessible. The latest blog sets out how to use them purposefully and appropriately to maximise their impact.

HOME TRUTHS

But as we work towards greater inclusion, it would be wrong to assume that will be enough to reverse all the social trends that have emerged in recent years.

While I was in parliament last week, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill was progressing to the House of Lords, marking the final stage of parliamentary discussions. But opposition to some of its provisions within the sector pales in comparison to the anger of some home education groups.

We would do well to understand their concerns if we are going to do anything about stemming the flow of students out of our schools. To that end, the latest blog from non-profit parental support and guidance group Educational Freedom is an eye-opener.

The blog discusses various aspects of home education, including the challenges and opportunities it presents. It highlights the importance of community support and the need for home educators to stay informed about legislative changes that could impact their right to educate their children other than at school.

It also emphasises the growing acceptance of home education, while acknowledging the concerns and divisions that sometimes arise.



VERSE AND ADVERSE

Dr Lisa Cherry's insights are invaluable for anyone working with children and young people, particularly those who have experienced adversity. Her blog is a rich resource on trauma-informed practices, psychological safety and supporting vulnerable children and young people.

This week, instead, it hosts a simple, moving poem about belonging written by care-experienced poet Chrissy Kelly.

It's great to lend your voice, but sometimes it's just as useful to lend an ear.

Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts



The Knowledge

What we've learned about schools and their communities this week



Is a formal dyslexia diagnosis valuable?

Dr Angela Thompson, Visiting scholar in psychology, Nottingham Trent University
Professor Clare Wood, School of social sciences, Nottingham Trent University

Debate about the value of a dyslexia label has recently resurfaced as Jamie Oliver launched his campaign to "change the system, not the kids".

The campaign's slogan highlights a sense many children who struggle with literacy and their families have that they are written off too soon, not because they don't have potential, but because the education system is unable to accommodate and recognise diverse strengths and ways of learning.

But how fair is this perception? A recent study we undertook offers some important insights towards answering this question.

The long-term study asked parents of children experiencing literacy difficulties about their experiences of the education system, as well as those of their children.

We wanted to explore their perceptions because parents see the wider impact of literacy difficulties on their children – outside the classroom, over time and across settings.

We also asked school teachers from four local authority areas about how they supported children who had specific literacy difficulties, as well as how they understood inclusion.

We were interested to explore whether they saw literacy difficulties in the same way, and what role a formal diagnosis of dyslexia played (if any) in the management of literacy difficulties.

Our analysis of these accounts identified 40 factors that impacted whether a child with dyslexia had a positive or negative trajectory through school. We were able to group these into four broad aspects of provision:

- The ability to 'see' dyslexia and its impacts.
- The experience of having dyslexia and whether it was acknowledged by the setting.
- The importance of recognising dyslexia as multifaceted, with different areas of strengths and challenges for a child.
- The limits of the usefulness of a formal diagnosis.



Jamie Oliver

Where schools made good use of diagnostic reports, the accounts of parents and teachers suggested better outcomes. However, one of our key conclusions is that many schools fail in this respect.

In fact, our findings suggest that dyslexia is relatively invisible in schools and that there is confusion between accommodations that might allow immediate access to content and interventions that address underlying difficulties.

Among our respondents, teachers' knowledge of dyslexia and how to support the barriers arising from the profile was patchy and binary.

This leads to a second problem: between the ages of five and 16, children's access to education is variable year-on-year. As a result, learning and skills gaps open up that worsen over time.

Given these challenges, it is perhaps unsurprising that, while teachers in our cohort were invested in children's progress, they often reported having no plan B when that progress was slow or absent.

Where they might have found a plan B is in collaborating with parents. Indeed, we found that they held important information that could be mobilised not just to benefit their child but also others with SEND.

Sadly, parents often reported being ignored – a commonly missed opportunity to enhance teacher effectiveness.

Having said that, we also found that parents do not necessarily appreciate the extraordinary demands placed on teachers.

Together, these findings suggest that poor home-school communication can be a significant barrier to children's learning, compounding the limited use of diagnostic information.

Indeed, a key finding of our research is that the transfer of child-relevant information about needs and what works in meeting them is too often inadequate.

More positively, we also found strong evidence that good communication between teachers and parents noticeably improves planning and access. And where teachers' and parents' understanding of dyslexia itself align best, the account of progress and outcomes is also most positive.

Importantly, parents in our cohort did not see dyslexia as just a problem of reading, or even reading and writing for their children, but one of lost agency and exclusion from their peer group.

Our research concluded that diagnosis is less about labelling and much more about making these difficulties visible. Parents see it as a tool to ensure their children's needs are met in a holistic sense.

So is a dyslexia diagnosis valuable? What we can say for sure is that, in an imperfect system, it offers a common basis for communication and understanding. And that is undeniably useful.

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

FRIDAY

It seems the legacy of former education secretary Nadhim Zahawi – who left Parliament at the last election – is being erased from DfE documents.

Last week the government updated its guidance on political impartiality in schools...to remove a foreword he wrote.

Will it be doing the same for all documents and guidance?! Or was it something he said?

TUESDAY

Nigel Farage has vowed to “go to war” with teaching unions if his Reform party comes to power, blaming them for churning out left-wing activists.

Yes, you read that correctly.

The Guardian reports that the MP delivered his outburst after anti-racist campaigners disrupted a party event in Yorkshire.

He reportedly called protesters “saddoes” and “losers”, before blaming the education system for their actions.

“That’s what you get, folks, when teaching unions in this country are poisoning the minds of young people, not just against Reform, but against everything this country has ever stood for,” he reportedly said.

“I’ll make it clear, when we’re in a position of power, we will go to war with these left-wing teaching unions and make sure our kids are taught properly.”

Responding, NEU leader Daniel Kebede said it was “clear from the exchange in

Doncaster that Reform has nothing to say on education and instead seeks to attack teachers and their unions.

“An unhinged move, copied from the Trump playbook.”

WEDNESDAY

Sir Keir Starmer faced another grilling on education at prime minister’s questions this week. First it was mobile phone bans, then national insurance funding.

The PM insisted a national ban on phones in schools was “completely unnecessary”, and urged the Conservatives to “concentrate on what is really important here, which is getting to the content that children should not be accessing”.

Avid *Schools Week* readers will have seen the furore over the government’s funding for national insurance contribution increases, with some trusts reporting they will be short by as much as 35 per cent.

Tory leader Kemi Badenoch said the hike announced at last year’s budget “means that every state school in the country has to pay more for teachers.

“The education secretary promised to compensate schools in full for the jobs’ tax. Why has it not happened?”

Starmer did not answer the question, bizarrely talking about academies instead. He also did not reply when asked to guarantee no teacher would lose their job as a result of the funding shortfall.

A small win for Badenoch, but let’s not forget that under the Conservatives pay rises and associated costs were regularly under-funded. A DfE note reveals costs outstripped funding by 0.7 per cent last year, under the previous administration.

Many Labour MPs are clearly uncomfortable about the measures announced in the Spring Statement – particularly welfare cuts. And so they should be. The government’s own analysis predicts the policies will plunge another 50,000 children into poverty.

One image from the House of Commons photographer shows the entire government bench ashen-faced, watching Rachel Reeves deliver a speech they really didn’t want to hear.



Executive Headteacher



Are you ready to lead and inspire? Become the Executive Headteacher at Lotus Academy and be a catalyst for change in education. Join us in shaping the future!

We are thrilled to announce an exciting opportunity for an Executive Headteacher to lead Lotus Academy, starting in September 2025 or sooner. Lotus Academy is dedicated to supporting students aged 7 to 16 years with Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs, including ADHD, ASD, and Attachment Disorder. We are also launching a Lotus mainstream Hub in September 2025.

At Lotus Academy, we foster nurture, enjoyment, and self-belief as the foundations for learning. Our safe, stimulating environment helps students thrive, develop essential life strategies, and cultivate a lifelong love for learning. Our mission is to empower students with the confidence and skills needed to succeed in an ever-changing world.

We seek a visionary leader with a child-centred approach, resilience, and the ability to drive the next exciting phase of our academy's journey. The ideal candidate will possess highly effective leadership skills, inspiring and motivating teams to achieve excellence. They

will have experience in leading and managing change, demonstrating strategic thinking and a strong commitment to collaboration and partnership working.

A deep understanding of how children with additional needs learn and progress is essential, along with high expectations, ambition, and determination to ensure every student reaches their full potential. The successful candidate will also have a proactive approach to working positively with parents, carers, and a wide range of professionals, coupled with excellent management and organisational skills.

Given the Trust's priority for sustaining improvements at Lotus Academy, the Executive Headteacher will not be asked to lead another school until at least September 2026.

CLICK HERE TO APPLY



Portsmouth & Hastings Middle Leadership opportunity at Ark

Ark is a network of 39 schools, reaching 30,000 students in our primary, secondary and all-throughs in Birmingham, Hastings, London & Portsmouth. Our schools are fully comprehensive and we are proud of our diversity, with over 40% of our students eligible for FSMs. Our 2023 results saw our KS2 students achieve 16 percentage points above the national average and at GCSE, 64% of students achieved grades 9-4 in English and Maths.

As we continue to strengthen the Ark network at every level, we are interested in hearing from strong existing or aspiring Middle Leaders in Portsmouth & Hastings who want to learn more about our opportunities and organisation.

We understand the importance of developing and growing our leaders. We know that our schools are only as good as our teachers and leaders. Our Middle Leaders work with some of the best Principals and leaders nationally and have access to exceptional training, including nationally recognised qualifications such as NPQLTD, NPQLT and NPQLBC.

- By joining Ark, you can expect:
- Salaries 2.5% higher than main the pay scale & a generous pension scheme
 - Double the amount of training time and additional INSET days for bespoke training
 - Full access to an Employee Assistance Programme which provides free, confidential counselling, financial and legal advice
 - Gym discounts of up to 40% off
 - Access to Ark Rewards – a scheme offering savings from over 3,000 major retailers
 - Interest-free loans of up to £5,000 for season tickets or to buy a bicycle.

We are committed to building a diverse workforce where everyone can deliver their best work and achieve their full potential. We want our leadership team to reflect the diverse perspectives of our students because we know that in doing so, we will be stronger and more effective.

To find out more please contact recruitment advisor Jeffrey Monney (jeffrey.monney@arkonline.org).



Principal

Education Village Academy Trust

Are you excited by the prospect of becoming the next Principal of Haughton Academy, a popular and flourishing school within a high-quality trust? This post offers an excellent opportunity for an outstanding and ambitious candidate to lead the school and be part of the trust executive leadership team.

Following the retirement of the current Principal, we are looking for an exceptional professional who will provide dynamic and innovative strategic leadership and operational management of Haughton Academy within The Education Village Academy Trust (EVAT). EVAT is an expanding trust currently comprising four mainstream primary schools, two special schools and a mainstream secondary school, with further schools set to join the trust soon. The post holder will report to the Chief Executive and will be a member of EVAT's Executive Leadership Team, working closely with other executive and governance leaders.

The successful candidate will have an outstanding track record as a senior leader in secondary education and will be able to clearly demonstrate an ability to improve progress and attainment for all students. With headteacher responsibilities for Haughton Academy, you will be able to articulate a compelling future vision and demonstrate how your strategic and operational leadership skills will help us deliver on our mission to provide exceptional learning experiences and the very best life chances for all the children and young people we serve.

Should you wish to visit the school and/or have a confidential conversation with the Chief Executive, please contact Stephanie Blake, Executive Support Officer, by tel: 01325 248114 or by email: sblake@educationvillage.org.uk

Application packs are available from the People Team by email: PeopleTeam@educationvillage.org.uk.

Closing Date: 5pm Tuesday 8th April 2025
Shortlisted candidates will be contacted on Thursday 10th April 2025
Interviews will take place on Monday 28th and Tuesday 29th April 2025



Assistant Principal – Inclusion & SENDCo

Start date: September 2025
Contract: Full time, permanent
Location: Gunnersbury Lane, London, W3 8EY
Salary: £75,803 - £82,780 per annum

If you are passionate about, SEND education, inclusion and ensuring every child flourishes at school, then this is the role for you!

Help us build an inclusive school, provide an excellent education for high needs SEND pupils and ensure all pupils at Ark Acton fulfil our mission.

Alongside the Vice Principal for Culture and Ethos, you will develop our inclusion strategy so that every child feels a sense of belonging, is heard and their needs met, and achieves great outcomes. You will monitor and review the quality of interventions so that every child is given the tools to be successful in addition to leading the attendance team to ensure high quality and timely intervention addresses barriers to attendance meaningfully, ensuring great attendance across the school.

Ark Acton is a good school, and we are on a mission to make it a great school – be part of our growth. At Ark Acton we think teaching is the best job in the world, so we have stripped away anything we feel gets in the way of being a great teacher. We are heavily committed to staff welfare and development, and this includes:

- Weekly staff training and coaching for every teacher
- Subject-specific knowledge development
- No graded lesson observations
- No report writing
- Free use of our leisure centre
- Access to the school counsellor

We have high expectations for our pupils – and our staff – but we know that by working as a team and committing to our mission we can shape the future.

We warmly welcome conversations about the role and visits to our school. To schedule an informal and confidential conversation please contact hr@arkacton.org



HEAD OF INCLUSION

Full Time - All Year Round - Permanent

We are looking for an inspirational Head of Inclusion who will lead the development of a strong inclusive culture across the Trust, ensuring the highest standards of achievement, safety and pastoral care for all children. The postholder will be a member of the BDAT central team and their work will involve supporting and providing advice and guidance to each of the BDAT schools. The postholder will report to the CEO.

The successful candidate will be responsible for the strategic leadership of inclusion and will be particularly focussed on supporting and safeguarding those vulnerable children, children with SEND and additional needs and those who are disadvantaged or at risk of disadvantage or harm. The postholder will be expected to support our current academy leaders through a mix of coaching, mentoring, direction and at times rolling your sleeves up and role-modelling excellent practice. If you think you can be our exceptional candidate, we can't wait to meet you.

Hours of work are flexible to meet the needs of the Trust but will not routinely exceed 37 hours per week. Occasional evening work is expected and this role is office based.



Employer: Bradford Diocesan Academies Trust

Reporting to: Chief Executive Officer

Accountable to: Chief Executive Officer

Duration of Post:

Permanent (on successful completion of 6-month probation)

Hours of Work: Full time (37 hours per week) all year round

Place of Work: Office Based

Annual Leave: Annual Leave 30 days, plus 8 statutory days

Salary: BL7 - BL13 (£57,831 - £66,919)

Start date: 1st September 2025

Applications can be submitted online



BDAT (Bradford Diocesan Academies Trust) 2nd Floor, Jade Building, Albion Mills, Albion Road, Bradford, BD10 9TQ

[Click here for more info](#)

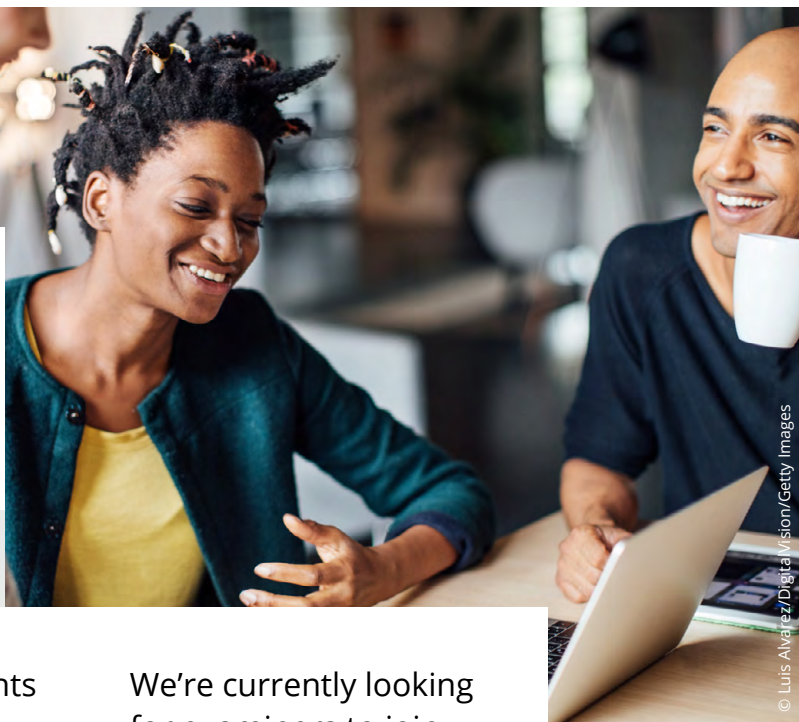


Become an examiner

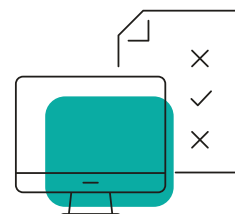
Join our team today.

Do you want to gain valuable insights into the assessment and marking process, deepen your subject expertise and expand your professional network? Become an examiner!

We're currently looking for examiners to join our marking teams for summer 2025. Don't miss out – apply today.



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CEO Vacancy

Archway Learning Trust are looking for our next dynamic, inspirational and committed Chief Executive Officer, as our current exceptional and founding CEO looks to pass the baton on and enjoy their well-earned retirement.

We are looking for someone with the passion, energy, drive and focus to lead the next part of Archway's journey. Someone who is motivated by further enhancing the life chances of the children and communities we serve; and harnessing the considerable energy, enthusiasm and commitment of the many wonderful, committed professionals who collaborate to make Archway a truly unique, engaging and amazing place to work.

Archway Learning Trust (ALT) is a multi-million-pound business with an annual turnover of £72m and an estates portfolio valued at £186m that comprises of a mixture of PFI, leased and owned properties. This is a fabulous role with so many opportunities to make a real difference.

As the Archway CEO you will be an exemplar role model of the

Trust's vision, mission and values. You will ensure that the outcomes, attainments and development of the character of the children that we serve stay central to all decision making. You will demonstrate consistently high standards of principled and professional conduct, always upholding and demonstrating The Principles of Public Life (Nolan Principles).

A passionate, engaging and respected leader, you will have an excellent understanding of the current educational landscape with a deep knowledge of Ofsted, DfE, and academy legislation. Working in the 'business of education' you will have a sound commercial acumen with the skills to oversee executive leaders in education, finance, operations, HR, and data.

Please visit CEO Vacancy - Archway Learning Trust for further information, our CEO brochure, Job description and People specification and to apply.

Applications for this role close at
Midnight 6th April 2025

JOIN US →



SHEREDES PRIMARY SCHOOL

HEADTEACHER

Pay range: L16 – L24 (£73,539 - £88,150) Fringe
Location: Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire
Start date: September 2025
Closing date: 14th April 2025

Sheredes Primary School is seeking an inspiring and passionate Headteacher to join our thriving community.

At Sheredes, children are encouraged to explore, learn, and grow in a supportive environment, surrounded by expansive grounds and superb facilities.

As Headteacher, you will lead a dedicated team, fostering high expectations, inclusion, and innovation, while ensuring a balanced and well-being focused school culture. You will drive school improvement, support staff and students, and build strong relationships with parents and the community.

If you are ready to lead a school that values excellence and personal development, we want to hear from you!

To discuss the role, please contact Natalie Knight-Wickens, Chair of Governors, at admin@sheredesprimary.herts.sch.uk.

Apply via the Teach in Herts website.
CVs will not be considered.



Click to apply →



The Greenfield and Hurst Drive Federation



Job title: Executive Headteacher
Location: Waltham Cross
Start date: September 2025
Salary: L18 – L27 Fringe (£77,051 - £94,758)
Closing date: Tuesday 15th April 2025

Join us at the Greenfield and Hurst Drive Federation, where leadership meets purpose. We seek an Executive Headteacher ready to elevate their career in a role that combines innovation, inspiration, and community focus.

Our federation, founded on collaboration and inclusivity, invites you to lead two esteemed schools deeply embedded in their local community. Championing excellence in education, you'll build on our strong foundations, fostering a culture of high aspirations and wellbeing.

Why choose us?

Benefit from a stable, dedicated team, a culture of innovation, and strategic governance. Join a growing community offering fresh opportunities in an evolving local area.

Who are we looking for?

An experienced Headteacher or Executive Headteacher passionate about early years and primary education, with the vision to inspire, lead confidently, and drive excellence.

For more information and to apply, visit www.teachinherts.com

