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Councils splurge £18m on private SEND schools with repeated failures

- Millions funnelled to settings that have failed independent school standards
- Local authorities charged as much as £110k per pupil per year

ROSA FURNEAUX | @ROSAFURNEAUX

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SCHOOLS
WEEK

Meet the news team

**John Dickens**
EDITOR@JOHNDICKENSSW
JOHN.DICKENS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Freddie Whittaker**
DEPUTY EDITOR@FCDWHITTAKER
FREDDIE.WHITTAKER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Samantha Booth**
CHIEF REPORTER@SAMANTHAJBOTH
SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Lydia Chantler-Hicks**
SENIOR REPORTER@LYDIACHSW
LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Jack Dyson**
SENIOR REPORTER@JACKYDYS
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Rhi Storer**
REPORTER@RHISTORERWRITES
RHI.STORER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Rosa Furneaux**
INVESTIGATIVE
REPORTER@ROSAFURNEAUX
ROSA.FURNEAUX@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**JL Dutaut**
COMMISSIONING
EDITOR@DUTAUT.BSKY.SOCIAL
JEAN-LOUISDUTAUT@EDUCATIONSCAPE.COM**Nicky Phillips**
HEAD DESIGNER@GELVETICA
NICKY.PHILLIPS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

THE TEAM

Shane Mann: Chief Executive | Senior Designer: Simon Kay | Classifieds Manager: Clare Halliday | Operations and Finance Director: Victoria Boyle | Event Manager: Frances Ogefere Dell | Senior Administrator: Evie Hayes | Finance Assistant and PA to CEO: Zoe Tuffin | Office Administrator: Zoe Belcher | Sales Administrator: Tyler Palmer

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As we reveal this week, Ofsted is taking a hard look at the proposed 'secure' school report card grade, amid concerns parents may struggle to place it on the new five-point sliding scale.

As one union leader told us this week, it's welcome the watchdog is willing to look again at things that it fears may not work.

But we doubt today's revelations will reassure those worried more widely about the massive changes that are coming down the line.

There are issues with the word 'secure', but that doesn't mean they will be resolved by swapping it for something that could be equally unclear.

The bigger concern is whether inspectors will be able to reach valid judgments across such a sprawling mass of grades and inspection areas.

It is also about how the inspection framework is applied in practice. That is why the pilots are so important.

But Ofsted has given itself very little room for manoeuvre if it does need to go back to the drawing board.

The SEND crisis continues to dominate the national education agenda as schools struggle daily and councils slide towards the precipice of bankruptcy.

Local authorities' reliance on pricey independent special schools, some of which have repeatedly failed to meet national standards, demonstrates the severe lack of state specialist provision – in and outside mainstream schools.

On the face of it, building more specialist provision is a no-brainer. It costs a fraction of private provision. But we know it takes years to get new special schools open.

Recent funding for new specialist places in mainstream schools is welcome. But it will not go far enough, fast enough, to stop many more millions spent on costly private provision.

The government must come up with a coherent plan to sort the problems at a system level, and fast.

Most read online this week:

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- Schools warn of staff cuts as Reeves snubs sector**
- NFER's 5 ways to cut school absence**
- 'What we see are wasted lives'**
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See story, page xx

NEWS: OFSTED

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Ofsted looks at renaming new 'secure' grade

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

EXCLUSIVE

Ofsted is considering renaming the 'secure' grade in proposed new report cards, amid concerns it won't be clear to families where it sits on the new scale, Schools Week understands.

The inspectorate proposes replacing its current four-point grading system with five grades across up to 11 judgment areas. The system is now being piloted and is open to consultation.

Schools would be given one of five colour-coded judgments for each area, ranging from dark green to red. Under current plans, those would be 'exemplary', 'strong', 'secure', 'attention needed' and 'causing concern'.

However, although it remains wedded to five grades, Ofsted is now understood to be considering replacing 'secure' with another word or phrase.

Schools Week understands the matter was discussed with inspectors by Sir Martyn Oliver, the chief inspector, and Lee Owston, the watchdog's director of education, at an internal conference last week.

It follows concerns raised with Ofsted that the meaning of 'secure' in the context of rating a school is not clear, and it is not obvious where it should sit on the sliding scale.

Pepe Di'Iasio, the general secretary of the ASCL leaders' union, welcomed Ofsted's willingness to rethink elements of its proposals, but said it needed "to go much further than simply a change in terminology".

Ofsted's plan for a five-point grading scale was "fundamentally flawed" and risked producing less reliable judgments while putting additional pressure on school and college leaders.

"The proposed toolkits are wildly open to interpretation, with the distinction between 'secure' and 'strong' in particular being exceptionally vague in several places," he said.

Frank Norris, a former senior inspector, said Ofsted was "trying to keep face when actually ... the criticism isn't with the word 'secure'.

"How sad that they're spending time on that word when it's not that word, it's the actual structure of the grading system."

It comes after Oliver told leaders at the ASCL



conference last month that Ofsted was looking at better "defining the differences between grades".

Schools Week ran a blind online survey asking readers to distinguish between the criteria for the "secure" and "strong" descriptors.

More than 3,000 respondents, primarily teachers and school leaders, on average got two of five wrong. One question proved particularly confusing, with just 36 per cent of respondents successfully choosing the higher grade descriptor.

Under its proposed new framework, Ofsted has published "inspection toolkits" that break down the requirements schools must meet for each of the five grades.

Oliver said the kits aimed to "remove any mystery or guesswork", helping leaders and teachers "understand each standard in exactly the same way as...inspectors".

Ofsted is testing the framework with about 240 "visits" to education settings.

Oliver said there had been positive feedback, "but we are also hearing that we have more to do on defining the differences between grades, particularly between secure and strong".

He told ASCL's conference that clarification work "has begun".

The inspectorate has come under fire from those who say its deadline does not leave enough time for the plans to be changed and repiloted, or consulted on

if needed.

Asked if it planned to change the 'secure' rating, Ofsted responded: "The consultation is still live. No decisions of this kind have been made."

The consultation ends on April 28. Ofsted then plans to publish a consultation report in summer, before implementing the new framework from November.

Final agreed reforms "will then be piloted again across all education remits".

The watchdog has insisted "nothing is set in stone" and that it will listen to consultation responses. But it has also said it has "clear plans to introduce changes in November".

Last week, ASCL urged Ofsted to reconsider its five-point system, arguing it would "introduce even greater anxiety" for school staff.

It instead put forward its own proposal for a three-point system – featuring just the 'secure', 'attention needed', and 'causing concern' grades.

But Oliver this week told a meeting of

education leaders at the Guildhall in

the City of London: "I know there are some who want us to stop there and to say, this school has met the required standard, and that's good enough. But I don't want to just say 'that's good enough'."

He said having two additional grades above 'secure' would help "drive higher standards".



Sir Martyn Oliver

NEWS

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Schools' repair bill 'much higher' than £13.8bn estimate

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

The true cost of bringing the school estate up to scratch is "almost certain" to be more than official estimates of £13.8 billion, warn senior civil servants.

One of Whitehall's highest-ranking mandarins was forced to make the concession after MPs voiced concerns about inflation and the crumbling concrete crisis.

It comes after the Department for Education increased the condition pot available to the smallest academy trusts by 4 per cent.

"There have been years and years of neglect," said Hilary Goldsmith, a school business leader.

"Schools are having to make do with tiny amounts of money to patch and fix things. The failure to invest in infrastructure now is only making bigger problems for the future."

According to the National Audit Office (NAO), the DfE requested £4 billion a year between 2021 and 2025, but was allocated £3.1 billion.

An NAO report, published in January, estimated that the maintenance backlog – the value of work that has been deferred or not carried out – in schools stood at £13.8 billion. This was calculated using condition data collected between 2017 and 2019.

But during a public accounts committee meeting this week, Labour MP Luke Charters noted the



Hilary Goldsmith



figure could now be "much higher" because of further deterioration, the discovery of RAAC and spiralling construction costs.

In response Cat Little, the Cabinet Office permanent secretary and civil service chief operating officer, said: "It is almost certain that that number is higher."

"That is why, if you go back to the budget in 2024, the Treasury put in significantly more money to top up the schools building programme as well as the maintenance programme."

The Association of School and College Leaders urged Chancellor Rachel Reeves to "restore this lost capital expenditure" in her spring statement. But she ignored the calls, ploughing ahead with previously agreed

packages for repairs.

Almost £470 million has been pledged for schools eligible for the condition improvement fund (CIF), a 4.4 per cent increase on last year's £450 million pot.

However, previous CIF application windows – which are only open to standalone academies or trusts with fewer than five schools – paid out more.

In 2020, more than £563 million was awarded, although the number of successful applications tumbled more than 60 per cent, from about 2,100 to just under 830.

Tim Warneford, an academy funding consultant, said this had left schools to vie for a "shrinking pot" amid "a sinking tide of dilapidation".

"Given the political capital Labour has made out of the previous administration's lack of investment, is this a figure that genuinely addresses this? Frankly, the answer is no."

Trusts with more than five schools automatically get capital funding through the school condition allocation. The government has allocated just under £1.4 billion to eligible councils and trusts, 19 per cent more than last year.



Cat Little

Warneford stressed the condition threats "do not stop at RAAC", adding there was a "significant risk around electrical infrastructure and boilers – things that can stop a school opening".

RHI STORER | @RHISTORERWRITES

Phillipson wants more male teachers in the classroom

Boys need to see more male teachers in their schools to act as role models and help counteract misogyny and "toxic" behaviours, says the education secretary.

Speaking at the first festival of children organised by the children's commissioner for England, Bridget Phillipson warned the fate of boys and young men growing up in Britain was a "defining issue of our time".

She referenced the hit Netflix drama *Adolescence*, which follows the aftermath of the stabbing of a teenage girl by a boy from her school that has prompted widespread debate about the harmful content children see online.

"We need to raise a generation of boys with the strength to reject that hatred – curiosity, compassion, kindness, resilience, hope, respect."

More male teachers must be recruited, she said.

"With toxic online influences on the rise, our boys need strong, positive male role models to look up to. At home, of course, and at school too."

"Schools can't solve these problems alone, and responsibility starts with parents. But only one in four of the teachers in our schools are men. Just one in seven in nursery and primary.

One in 33 in early years [education].

"And since 2010 the number of teachers in our schools has increased by 28,000 – but just 533 of those are men. That's extraordinary. So I want more male teachers – teaching, guiding, leading the boys in their classrooms."

Daniel Kebede, the general secretary of the National Education Union and a former teacher, said it was still a problem that jobs associated with women were paid less.

"Most people think teaching is family-friendly... it isn't ... no option for working from home and still really hard to obtain flexible working."

INVESTIGATION: SEND

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£18m on private SEND schools with failures

ROSA FURNEAUX

@ROSAFURNEAUX

Cash-strapped councils have in the past year paid £18.1 million to private special schools that have repeatedly failed standards inspections, a Schools Week investigation has found.

Nearly a third of English councils are sending children to such schools, some of which charge upwards of £100,000 a year.

The estimated cost of a SEND private school place nationally is £61,500, compared with £23,900 in state special schools.

Over the past year at least four councils each spent more than £1 million on schools that failed repeatedly to meet the independent school standards. Surrey County Council spent nearly £6 million.

But the true amount is likely much higher.

Ten local authorities admitted sending children to the schools, but refused to disclose how much they have paid in fees.

Eleven councils did not respond to a freedom of information request and refused to answer any questions.

"It is imperative that children with special educational needs are able to access high-quality provision," said Margaret Mulholland, SEND and inclusion specialist at the ASCL leaders' union.

"Evidence of this not happening is desperately worrying and another sign of a broken system."

Stephen Kingdom, of the Disabled Children's Partnership, said the situation was "an indictment of the failure by central and local government.

"Independent special schools play an important part in the range of provision available to support children with special educational needs and disabilities.

"But that should not include schools that are failing to meet required standards."

Millions for schools not meeting standards

A previous Schools Week investigation found hundreds of fee-paying schools failed to meet independent school standards in inspections carried out since September 2021.

Eleven were private special



'It's an indictment of the failure by central and local government'

schools that failed multiple inspections, including their most recent.

Six had received more than £1 million each from local councils for SEND provision since last March.

Wemms Education Centre received at least £4.2 million from five councils. More than £3 million came from Surrey.

The school failed to meet independent school standards in its last three inspections, and was rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted in 2023. Last year inspectors noted issues with the complaints procedure and the school's leadership.

The school did not respond to a request for comment.

Lewis Charlton Learning Centre in Leicestershire received at least £2 million.

Half of that came from Derbyshire County Council, which sends 18 children to the schools.

The school has failed to meet the standards in five of six inspections in recent years, and has twice been rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted.

Its most recent inspection in January found the quality of the school's education was still not up to scratch.

The school appointed a new headteacher, Vickie

Perkins, in January.

She said that "whilst one area of the inspection remains below the threshold, this is purely due to the time required for the full implementation of our initiatives."

SEND pupils now received tailored support, Perkins said, and changes in the school's leadership structure had "created a strong foundation for continued progress".

Derbyshire did not respond to a request for comment.

Dudley Port School in the Midlands was paid at least £1.9 million from seven local authorities, including £1 million from Sandwell Borough Council. Its fees reach £110,000 a year.

The school is owned by Horizon, a company backed by Graphite Capital, a private investment company.

Schools Week previously reported that Horizon made a £4.1 million profit in 2022.

The school did not meet independent school standards in two inspections last year, and received a 'requires improvement' rating from Ofsted.

Inspectors said staff did not adequately meet the needs of pupils with speech, language and communication requirements. Some pupils had significant gaps in their reading knowledge.

Dudley Port School and Horizon did not respond to a request for comment.



Margaret Mulholland

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: SEND

Councils shell out

Surrey County Council spent the most on fees to the schools included in Schools Week’s analysis, paying £5.96 million to two private special schools.

Clare Curran, a cabinet member, said the council had “a robust quality assurance process in place” for independent special schools, and it was keeping the progress of both schools “under close review.”

Placements at one school had initially been “paused” until quality and safeguarding reviews had been completed, and children who wished to leave the schools had been supported in finding new placements.

Curran noted that local authorities’ powers are limited. They cannot remove pupils from schools without going through a statutory process.

Sandwell, Medway and Derbyshire councils each paid between £1 million and £1.4 million.

A spokesperson for Sandwell said: “We recognise that keeping children in schools requiring improvement may raise concerns; however, sufficiency needs play a crucial role in ensuring that every child has access to local education.

“Our priority remains the well-being and educational outcomes of the children, and we continuously monitor the school’s progress and support them in addressing the areas identified for improvement.”

A Medway spokesperson said it had originally planned to remove children from the schools listed in this investigation.

“However, we were then informed that new proprietors were taking over,” they said.

“We worked with the new provider to ensure the transfer was completed as quickly as possible, and we have since maintained regular contact and carried out visits to ensure the quality is improving. We are confident that future inspections will evidence this improvement.”

£10m for school where Ofsted found safety issues

Pontville School, a private special school in Lancashire, failed its most recent inspection in December. It had previously received consecutive ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ grades, so is not included in the analysis above. But the latest Ofsted report raised serious issues about pupils’ welfare and safety.

At least 13 councils have more than 130 children between them at the school.

The councils that paid the most

Name of council	Fees paid 2024-25
Surrey	£5,967,672.00
Medway	£1,475,289.00
Derbyshire	£1,162,032.77
Sandwell	£1,019,091.00
Kent	£919,189.00

Source: Schools Week
freedom of information request



‘There will always be a need for independent provision’

This is despite the report finding that “bullying, prejudiced behaviour, threats of violence and physical aggression” are common.

Pontville pupils have suffered “serious physical harm” during fights with other pupils, Ofsted reported. In some cases this led to “multiple and ongoing surgery”, while staff were said to be “responding to violence from pupils with further violence”.

The school has taken at least £10.8 million from councils since last March.

Four local authorities spent more than £1 million on Pontville fees. Of those, St Helens spent more than £2 million, and Sefton spent £4.1 million.

Pontville is owned by the Witherslack Group, which runs 28 private special schools.

The group is owned by Mubadala Capital, a subsidiary of Abu Dhabi’s second-largest sovereign wealth fund.

Witherslack made a £34.8 million profit in 2022-23, its most recent accounts show.

A spokesperson said the safety and care of pupils was its “utmost priority”. It worked “constantly to ensure our schools meet the highest standards of education, safeguarding and care”.

The company noted that each of its schools is rated as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted.

That included Pontville as its last inspection

was not graded, so it was still rated ‘good’.

“Witherslack Group acknowledges the findings of Ofsted’s recent inspection at Pontville School and has taken immediate action to address the inspection’s findings,” the spokesperson said.

“We will continue to provide additional support to the school and ensure that our action plan is quickly and fully implemented.”

A St Helens Borough Council spokesperson said that in response to the December inspection it had “ceased new placements while we seek assurance from the school that the issues highlighted by Ofsted have been fully addressed”.

It is working to expand the “size and range” of its own provision.

“In addition, the authority has made unannounced visits to the site to reassure us as to the welfare of our pupils,” they said.

Sefton council did not respond to a request for comment.

‘Systemic failure’

Marijke Miles, a leader in a maintained specialist provision, said she was “saddened and frustrated” by the findings.

But she said the issue should not become “a convenient smokescreen”.

“There will always be a need for independent provision, much of which is very high-quality and has a high cost rightly associated with supporting pupils with the most complex of needs.

“Making parts of the independent sector into some sort of boogie man is far too convenient for a government who have had the opportunity to invest and still haven’t.

“The sums involved still represent a very small proportion of the billions required to enable a system that does the job it should.”

Claire Dorer, the chief executive of the National Association of Special Schools, said there had been “systematic failure” by successive governments to address the SEND crisis.

As a result, “placements in struggling schools of all types may have to be maintained through a lack of viable alternatives.

“Unequivocally, we want to see all children being well educated in schools where they feel safe and are safe.”

But she noted there was no evidence to suggest that the problems identified at the small number of schools were problems common to independent special schools.

NEWS

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Parents to get more of their money back from sQuid

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

A payment provider that has ceased operating in the UK will now hand parents back more of their money following a Schools Week investigation.

We revealed last month how sQuid, which provided parents with online accounts for funds for school meals and trips, had said it would only refund parents for balances over £10 – and those wanting to withdraw their cash must pay a £10 “administration fee”.

While parents tend to keep small amounts on sQuid accounts, schools said it can add up. One trust claimed sQuid holds about £43,000 deposited by parents at its schools. Others said the company was holding between £5,000 and £8,000.

But after Schools Week’s story was picked up by *The Guardian*, BBC and consumer champion Martin Lewis, the company said it would change tack.

A spokesperson said: “The company understands



why some schools and parents are upset that there has been a charge applied for refunds, even though there is a real cost to administer this service.

“Having listened carefully to schools and parents the company has reviewed its refund policy.”

They said refunds would “take a little time, so we ask parents to be patient while we put these amended arrangements in place”.

“We apologise for any confusion we may have caused and will work with all the schools involved to minimise any further inconvenience for parents.”

sQuid said it would aim in the first instance to work with schools to arrange a full refund with no charge.

The child’s school would contact parents directly, which meant they would not need to apply for a refund through sQuid’s website.

Where a school could not manage the refund, the £10 charge would be reduced to a maximum of £2.50, with parents able to request a refund through sQuid’s online portal.

The charge would vary between 20p and £2.50, depending on the refund amount. They would be refunded automatically if they had already paid the higher £10 fee.

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Fears Catholic school heads 'coerced' into mega-MATs

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

A Catholic archdiocese has been accused of subjecting leaders to “inappropriate pressure” and threatening to force out obstructive governors in its bid for “universal academisation”.

In a letter seen by *Schools Week*, the NAHT leaders' union revealed members in the Archdiocese of Southwark say they have been “met with hostility” and fear “negative repercussions” for questioning the conversion plans.

They have also claimed the body representing the Catholic bishops' national education policy has hinted that those fighting proposals to join one of five religious multi-academy trusts could be downgraded during Catholic inspections.

Leaders 'facing coercion'

The Archdiocese of Southwark wants to place all its schools into five MATs of between 30 and 40 academies. It expects all schools to join them “over the coming two to three years”.

But Rob Kelsall, the NAHT's assistant general secretary, told the archdiocese the union had received reports that “leaders and governors are being subjected to undue and inappropriate pressure from your office to convert to academy status”.

Schools refusing to make the switch are “facing coercion to proceed with academisation, irrespective of whether such a move aligns with the best interests of the school”.

The NAHT has also received “multiple reports” that foundation governors – appointed by the diocese – are “being informed that they have a duty to pursue academisation” as it is the “bishop's preference”.

Kelsall noted that if this was the case, “such actions would represent a gross abuse of power”.

One head, who did not want to be named, said they chose not to join one of the MATs because they weren't satisfied with the diocese's answer to the question: “What do my kids get out of it?”

There's “nothing wrong in insisting schools in trouble should join a multi-academy trust”, they added. But to “treat all your schools the same way, especially the high-performing ones, makes no sense – especially for the children in



our care”.

Guidance produced by the National Governance Association (NGA) states the “decision on when to convert and who to join with remains with the governing board”.

For those in schools with a religious character it was “worth taking the time to consider” whether conversion “is the right decision” even if the religious authority wanted them to move into a specific MAT that it ran.

Archdiocese told: 'Cease hostility'

Kelsall argued such “external pressure...that seeks to override this legal position” was “entirely inappropriate” and raised “serious ethical and legal concerns”.

“If foundation governors are being coerced into advancing academisation, this would be in direct conflict with their statutory duty to act in the best interests of the school.

“Any attempt to replace foundation governors solely on the basis that they do not support academisation would be a fundamental subversion of democratic governance structures and would call into question the integrity of the entire process.”

An email sent to union members last week said the NAHT was working with the NGA to draw up a motion for governors to use for formal votes “to strengthen your position when dealing with any attempt to force you to academise”.

An archdiocese spokesperson did not dispute the claims in the letter, but said its “priority is providing schools that deliver high-quality Catholic education for our pupils”.

Schools Week revealed in December that all but one of the 19 English Catholic dioceses were pursuing trust growth plans, with one planning to split almost 200 schools between three super-sized trusts.

Latest government figures show there are more than 1,900 Catholic state schools in England. Of these more than 1,000 are academies. In Southwark, just over half of Catholic 152 primaries and secondaries are in a trust.

Fears schools could be marked down

The NAHT's letter went on to state that it had heard reports the Catholic Education Service (CES) had suggested those resisting conversions “may receive less favourable judgments from the Catholic Schools Inspectorate”.

The inspectorate, launched in 2019 with CES's help, gives schools an overall grade after assessing their “Catholic life and mission”, religious education and collective worship.

Kelsall noted that if this was the case, “such actions would represent a gross abuse of power” and might breach the education and employment acts.

A CES spokesperson stressed there was “nothing within the inspection process requiring academisation”.

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the NAHT, said legislation was clear that decisions on governance structure and whether or not to pursue academisation rested with the governing board, as the school's strategic decision-making body.

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Outsourced contracts hit school budgets


RHI STORER
@RHISTORERWRITES

Hard-pressed schools are warning of extra pressures from the rising cost of outsourced contracts as companies grapple with national insurance hikes, minimum wages and food costs.

Caterers say they may have to stop serving smaller schools or make redundancies, and that a return to the school meal standards of the 1990s is on the cards if funding for free meal is not increased.

Food prices rose by 3.3 per cent in the year to February and could reach 5 per cent by the end of the year. At the same time, the national living wage has increased by at least 6.7 per cent, and national insurance contributions by 9 per cent.

Trusts and schools say they face possible redundancies to balance their budgets this year, with overall funding only rising by 0.5 per cent nationally once other pressures are taken into account.

Leaders say the rising costs of

'It's been weeks and weeks of going through every budget line'

external contracts are making things even harder.

Lucia Glynn, an academy trust funding consultant, says trusts will be "really hammered" with any people-heavy contracts such as IT, catering, or cleaning.

She works with Newham Community Learning Trust in east London, which faces a £50,000 increase in its catering contract.

She points to the living wage rise and hiked NICs contributions. "Academy trusts are having to make sure they stay compliant with that. Costs are going up, but the funding equivalent isn't, which is making it very, very difficult."



Tim Monelle, the director of trust services at the Lighthouse Schools Partnership, says his catering costs have increased by £200,000 this year to service 13,000 pupils across 33 schools in the west of England.

Most pupils are not on free school meals and his trust has been forced to raise charges 10p a meal to mitigate the costs.

A grant to cover the rise in national insurance contributions fell "short", "and that's even before we take into consideration the increases to our key outsource partner contracts, such as catering and cleaning".

He says while the caterers have been "very good" in absorbing some of the rising costs, budgeting has been "incredibly challenging".

"We haven't gone through it yet, but we will have to look at menu rationalisation, and some schools where a school kitchen is not viable may have to have it delivered from a bigger school.

"It's been weeks and weeks of going through every budget line for every school, every single cost reviewed. What can we do differently? We need to make sure that pupils are fed a healthy and nutritious meal."

Continued on next page

LONG READ: CATERING

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Trish Abbott, the chief operating officer at Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust in the north east, says she is short £32,400 to fund her catering staff.

Overall costs for all support staff at the trust, which has 30 primaries and five secondaries, has increased by an average of 11 per cent since 2023 – with a further shortfall of £111,500 for the NI increase.

“This feels like a hidden tax on schools.”

“Our catering staff are valued members of our school community who love cooking and serving meals for our pupils, and they deserve their pay rises.

“But, like most trusts, we are struggling to fund these pay awards ... and the shortfall in funding to cover next month's NI increase only makes this more difficult.”

She says the trust has worked hard to keep school meal costs down, “but not only is the cost of our catering team increasing, food inflation of more than 20 per cent over the last three years has made our ingredients significantly more expensive”.

Free school meal funding has also failed to keep pace with inflation: in 2023 the Institute for Fiscal Studies found it had lost 16 per cent of its value in real terms since 2014.

Glynn says the quality of food is “really important, because in areas like Newham, it might be the child's only meal of the day”.

Caterers say stagnating funding for free school meals could compromise the quality of food.

Julie Belford, who runs Kingswood Catering Limited, says her company is considering telling smaller schools it can no longer provide a catering service based on the £2.58 per meal set by the DfE.

A former teacher for 15 years, she says pupils know the difference between good and cheaper food.

“They know the difference between a decent fish finger and one that hasn't got any fish in it.

“The bottom line is this is going to affect smaller schools. They will either have to pay more per meal or pay a management fee to ensure a financially viable service.”

Belford says she takes the situation “really personally...I feel dreadful about it. I think a lot of caterers will take this personally too”.

She also warns a return to 1990s-style school catering if funding is not increased.

“If you start to compromise on quality,



‘We don't want school food standards to slip back to those of the early 1990’

children won't eat their lunch. Parents will be unhappy about food quality and more parents will send packed lunches from home instead of ordering a hot school meal.

“We don't want school food standards to slip back to those of the early 1990s. Funding for school meals needs to be increased to ensure this doesn't happen.”

Glenn Campbell, the founder of Cohesion Consulting, which helps schools with their catering contracts, claims some schools are already cutting back on food standards.

“It's literally catering versus teaching at conversations we're having, and at procurement stage that's heartbreaking. This is the reality of the situation where schools are facing increasing pressures.”

“There's a lot of menu engineering, like replacing chicken breast with diced chicken or diced chicken thigh. The pressure is getting much worse.”

Labour has so far resisted calls to increase funding for free school meals or extend them to more pupils, instead focusing on its breakfast clubs programme.

LACA, the professional body representing

caterers, says free meals funding needs to rise to £3.16 to meet costs.

Judith Gregory, LACA's chair, says caterers are “struggling to squeeze rising costs into an already overstuffed envelope. The added pressure of national insurance increases may be the tipping point.

“Members have reported that, in some cases, the cost of providing each meal will rise by more than 9p this year, exacerbated by suppliers passing on their own cost increases.”

Catering is highly price-sensitive, which leaves “little room to raise the cost of paid meals to subsidise free school meals.

“This puts families in a difficult position, often leading them to forego a nutritious, hot meal for their children.

“We are increasingly concerned that these financial pressures will impact staff hours and could even result in redundancies. This, in turn, creates a vicious cycle, pushing more people on to benefits as they fall below the low-income threshold.”



Glenn Campbell

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Trust mulls 'action short of merger'

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

A prominent trust chief executive is considering "action short of a merger" in a bid to boost collaboration between her 26-school MAT and others.

Rowena Hackwood, the chief executive of Astrea, revealed her academy chain was "exploring growth", including "innovative" routes that did not involve joining forces with another trust.

Speaking at a Confederation of School Trusts conference on Thursday, she suggested this could be done by launching a community interest company offering back-office services to local schools.

"One thing that we're looking at is action short of a merger," she said.

"Could we become more coherent as a trust in terms of our geographic footprint, if we were to align with other trusts in the locality?"

Hackwood stressed this would not involve "trading services". She was "not very keen" on



Rowena Hackwood

such models as no one should "make money out of anyone else within our system".

"It's about us creating, for instance, a wholly owned community interest company in one of our localities, which serves all of the schools that want to buy into those back-office services in that area with shares owned equally

between all of the people that buy into it.

"I do think that there are models for doing things differently. I'm expecting more trusts to start to explore [this]."

It comes after a group of 20 school leaders, largely based in the north east, banded together to launch Education Mutual, which offers an alternative staff absence insurance. It was created to help schools pay lower fees for cover.

It is run as a mutual, so is owned by members, with all money not paid out in claims returned to them through benefits such as lower fees or enhanced packages.

Schools Week revealed earlier this year that Education Mutual will branch out into covering the legal costs for staff who want to sue social media trolls. This includes a template cease-and-desist letter to abusive parents.

Nick Hurn, the chief executive of the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust and chair of Education Mutual, has launched a second company that provides substitute staff at short notice.

RHI STORER | @RHISTORERWRITES

'Steep drop' in number of girls who feel safe

Girls feel "significantly less safe" than they did in 2019, according to a new study that suggests English teenagers have some of the lowest engagement with school in the world.

UCL's Social Research Institute analysed data from the Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) about how pupils felt about school. The data compared statistics from 2023 and 2019.

It found that while all girls in year 9 in the 32 participating countries felt significantly less safe in 2023 than in 2019, England had a "steep drop"

In 2023, girls in England were 22 per cent less likely to strongly agree they felt safe in school compared with 2019. Boys in year 9 experienced a 10 per cent decline. The international average was 13 per cent.

The study also looked at emotional

engagement – children's enjoyment of school, their relationships with their peers and teachers and the extent to which they felt safe and that they belonged in school.

When asked if they liked being in school, just 11 per cent of year 9 pupils strongly agreed in 2023, compared with 19 per cent in 2019. On feeling a sense of belonging, 37 per cent strongly agreed in 2019, falling to 24 per cent in 2023.

Researchers said emotional engagement with school was likely to be a "key driver" of pupil absences, which remain stubbornly high following the pandemic.

The report recommended more interventions to boost secondary pupils' emotional engagement with school, with a focus on girls and issues around safety and strength of relationships.



Professor John Jerrim

Professor John Jerrim, of the UCL's Institute of Education, said the significance of the pandemic "shouldn't be underestimated".

"Our research points towards something happening – quite possibly school closures – that has particularly impacted teenage girls.

"What is really worrying is that there are signs ... that this may well be feeding into greater school absence rates amongst girls and on to their educational achievement."

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300 schools get funds to expand nursery provision

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

The government has named 300 schools that will receive a share of £37 million in capital funding for new or expanded nursery provision.

The Department for Education said it had “more than doubled” its investment from the £15 million previously announced.

It has not explained why, but did say every school would get “the amount they bid for”, suggesting schools applied for more than expected.

Ministers announced last June they would repurpose empty primary school classrooms to create 100,000 childcare places in 3,334 settings.

Last autumn, Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, announced the first nurseries would open this September. The DfE said today it received applications from more than 600 schools.

Of the 300 successful schools, 174 already have some form of nursery provision. The government previously announced those wanting to expand



provision would be eligible.

The nurseries will offer an average of 20 places and up to 6,000 new places in total, with “up to” 4,000 set to be available by the end of September, the DfE said.

Phillipson said: “Delivering on our promise of a better early years’ system is my top priority, which is why we’ve more than doubled our investment in this first phase so thousands more children can benefit from a high-quality early education from this September.”

Bloemfontein Primary in Co Durham will use its allocated funding to open a new baby room.

Alex Armstrong, the school’s head, said it “wanted to address the shortage of nursery places in our local area and to provide the community with high-quality early education.

“There are so many benefits to school-based nursery provision, including continuity for children and their families and the opportunity to develop expert-led learning that will provide our children with strong foundations for lifelong success.”

Schools were asked to bid for up to £150,000 to “repurpose or extend existing spaces and deliver high-quality provision”, the DfE said.

Successful schools “are now being contacted with next steps to implement their projects”.

Bids were assessed against a range of criteria, including value for money, local demand, and internal DfE data sources such as school performance.

Schools have until May 9 to “formally confirm their intention to proceed with delivery”.

You can find a full list of the schools [here](#).



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DfE bans former head of 'holistic' AP school

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

The former head of a private alternative provision where Ofsted found pupils could access nearby train tracks and industrial units has been banned from running schools.

Victoria Poole-Birrell was proprietor and headteacher of Colours Academy in Ivybridge, Devon, which closed on the government's orders in January 2022, two years after opening.

The school aimed to provide an "holistic, nurturing approach to learning" for pupils who struggled in mainstream settings.

The closure order followed a damning Ofsted inspection in September 2021, which warned pupils were able to access dangerous areas. It also said the school's curriculum was "poor".

Poole-Birrell hit back, saying the inspection left her experiencing "panic attacks and physical illness" and contemplating suicide. She also said she had not been given a chance to prove the school had improved.

Announcing the ban last week, the Department for Education said her conduct "demonstrates that [she] poses a risk to children".

It accused her of "failure to take reasonable steps to ensure the health and safety of children and staff is adequately maintained" and to enforce mandatory safeguarding measures.

The DfE accused her of "a pattern...of behaviours that individually do not amount to serious misconduct, but when considered together, highlight [her] unsuitability" to manage independent schools".

The 50-pupil Colours Academy "aim[ed] to provide unique, alternative education for children aged 11-18".

But inspectors rated it 'inadequate' for leadership and management and quality of education, and 'requires improvement' for behaviour and attitudes and personal development.

They found it did not meet the independent school standards.

"Leaders have failed to create an effective culture of safeguarding," said the 2021 report. "As a result, some pupils do not disclose serious concerns about their safety to staff."

It added that the school site was "unsafe".

"Pupils can gain access to the neighbouring



industrial units through an unlocked door where electrical wiring is exposed...[they] can access the high-speed mainline railway line through a broken fence."

"Scalding water" was also accessible, and "dangerous chemicals" were left unlocked in the staff kitchen, while fire prevention arrangements were "not fit for purpose".

It rated the quality of education as "poor", with a curriculum "not designed to meet the needs of all pupils".

The report said some parents had a "positive view" of the school.

But leaders did not provide staff with the training needed "to meet the social, emotional and academic needs of the pupils attending".

Poole-Birrell is banned from managing an independent school, and from being a trustee or governor at a local authority-maintained school.

She defended her record, telling *Schools Week* "nobody came to harm at Colours Academy".

The school "worked tirelessly for four months" to meet Ofsted's recommendations. It created a "detailed" action plan, but this was rejected.

Poole-Birrell said the school's closure meant "50 families had lost the provision that was there for them when nobody else was".

"Why was Colours not given the opportunity of a re-inspection? They were given all the evidence ... showing anything that was disputed during the visit had been amended.

"I was stamped on for trying to make a difference in a system that is falling apart at the seams, my reputation and children's welfare crippled in the process."

Colours catered for children who struggled in the mainstream, but did not meet the criteria for specialist provision, Poole-Birrell said.

"We were their in-between place."

The school had begun as "a flexible provision offering small-group tuition for home-educated children".

But when families "flocked" to the organisation "for its holistic, nurturing approach to learning", wanting their children to attend full-time, Poole-Birrell registered it as an independent school.

"This would later become my greatest regret."

Poole-Birrell also criticised the inspectors' conduct, saying they "stormed in ... with an agenda".

"They were rude, sarcastic, often refused to make eye contact, slammed doors, and spoke down to younger members of staff."

She said the word Ofsted "has not only caused me panic attacks and physical illness, but pushed me to contemplate the need for me to be on this planet".

She complained about the conduct of inspectors, but her concerns were "shrugged off".

Ofsted said it did not comment on individual complaints, and that it stood by its report.

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AI marking could 'decimate' teacher workload

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Using AI to judge pupil writing "has the potential to revolutionise assessment and decimate workload", according to the findings of a trial of the approach.

No More Marking (NMM), an organisation that pioneers comparative judgment as an alternative to marking written work, recently ran an AI assessment project, CJ Lightning. Comparative judgment involves deciding which is better out of two pieces of writing.

In a blog post, Daisy Christodoulou, the organisation's director, and Chris Wheadon, its founder, said the results showed AI "is very good at judging student writing and is a viable and time-saving alternative for many forms of school assessment".

It comes as the government is pushing to use AI and other technology to cut teacher workload.

Another study last year suggested teachers who turned to ChatGPT alongside a guide on using it effectively could reduce lesson planning time by 31 per cent.

The CJ Lightning project assessed the writing of 5,251 year 7 pupils from 44 secondary schools.

They wrote a non-fiction response to a short text prompt about improving the environment.

Teachers uploaded their writing to the No More Marking website and then used comparative judgment to assess it.

The process "typically delivers very high levels of inter-rater reliability, and is the gold standard of human judgment".

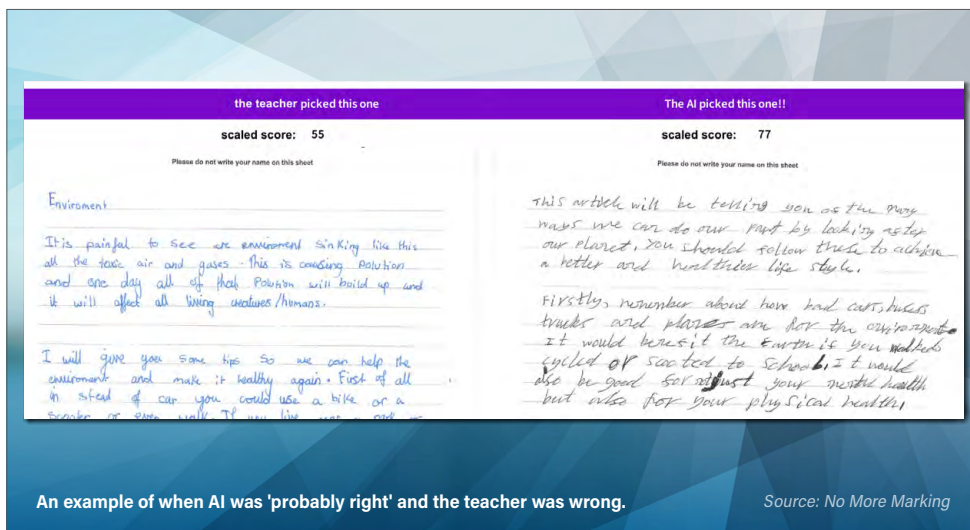
AI agreed with 81 per cent of human decisions

In this project, No More Marking asked AI to make judgments to see if they agreed with those made by humans. AI agreed with 81 per cent of the 3,640 decisions made by humans.

During NMM's most recent year 7 assessment judged solely by teachers, the staff agreed with each other 87 per cent of the time, which is "fairly typical".

But total levels of disagreement were "not conclusive" and the "type of error matters."

"The overall agreement can be good, but if the 20 per cent of disagreements is full of absolute howlers, that's still a huge problem."



An example of when AI was 'probably right' and the teacher was wrong.

Source: No More Marking

Disagreements sometimes down to human error

NMM scrutinised a sample of the biggest disagreements.

"They are not cases where the AI is wrong and the human is right. In fact, some of the biggest disagreements involved teachers being biased by handwriting, and accepting on review that the AI was probably right and they were wrong."

Other examples "involved teachers making a manual error and clicking the wrong button".

NMM also compared the tests of 2,297 of the pupils who took part in a similar assessment in September last year and in this project.

The correlation of scores between the two sessions was 0.65. NMM said there was a correlation of 0.58 between human tests in May and September last year.

"The high correlation reassures us that the AI is not judging on some strange dimension of writing ability, but is actually providing us with a similar dimension to the one we value," wrote Christodoulou and Wheadon.

Not just 'asking AI for a mark'

They added that their approach to AI assessment was "very different to the 'ask an AI for a mark'", and offered far more assurances that getting the right grade.

"This is because AI, like humans, is better at comparative judgments than absolute ones. AI also made every decision twice to eliminate its tendency to position bias."

Christodoulou and Wheadon

said backed a 100 per cent AI judged assessment.

"However, we would not recommend that you routinely do this. You would always want to run some human-AI hybrids to a) keep validating the AI model and b) make sure that teachers are engaging with student writing."

In this assessment, they recommend a split of 10 per cent human judgment and 90 per cent AI.

Teachers could save time

In one school with 269 year 7s, a head of department spent an hour and 12 minutes on the assessment.

That was "enough to validate all the other AI decisions and provide robust and meaningful scores for every student".

"In other schools, they shared the decisions out amongst lots of teachers, resulting in 5-10 minutes of judging per teacher."

Christodoulou and Wheadon concluded that they "still think [AI technologies] have flaws and are prone to hallucinations".

"But we think the process we've developed here has the potential to revolutionise assessment and decimate workload (quite literally decimate if you follow our recommended 10 per cent human judging approach)."

NMM will run free projects in the summer term for any primary or secondary school wanting to trial the approach.

It will then have a "more comprehensive plan available in academic year 2025-26".



Daisy Christodoulou

NEWS

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Union flooded by calls from teachers facing redundancy

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

A teacher union leader has reported a “surge” in requests for support from members facing redundancy, while warning that funding cuts will prompt more ballots on industrial action.

Dr Patrick Roach, the general secretary of the NASUWT, also said his union would wait to see the government's response to the School Teachers' Review Body's (STRB) recommendation before deciding whether to ballot its members for potential national strikes.

Schools Week revealed last week how schools are being urged to save up to £750,000 through redundancies, curriculum squeezes and cuts to programmes supporting the poorest pupils.

It comes after we also revealed last month that school budgets will rise by about 0.5 per cent per pupil next year, with leaders finding they will receive less than expected when they receive their funding letters.

Speaking in a press briefing ahead of the union's conference later this month, Roach said there had been “an uptick, in fact, a bit of a surge, actually, in members coming for support around restructure and redundancy”.

He said the NASUWT had raised a “serious concern” about the issue with Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, in December and in January.

“We warned the secretary of state of the



prospect of industrial dispute within the sector unless the government was prepared to take action in this particular, particular regard.”

The situation was “not helped” by the government's insistence that schools fund part of the proposed 2.8 per cent pay rise next year from their existing budgets.

“That did not help. But we are seeing a rising number of restructures and redundancies. Many are being driven by financial pressures, schools' financial pressures.”

“The government needs a plan to address some of this, because at the moment, schools are not being offered any alternative in many respects other than to consider cutting their cloth...”

It also emerged last week that the government has revised its forecast of wage growth across the economy next year from 3 to 3.7 per cent,

prompting warnings that a 2.8 per cent pay rise for teachers will not be competitive.

The National Education Union is holding an indicative ballot on the proposal, which was made by the government in its evidence to the STRB.

Asked by Schools Week if he envisaged the NASUWT holding a ballot if the pay offer stood at 2.8 per cent, Roach said: “We'll have to see what those recommendations are and how the government intends to respond.”

He said the union wanted an above-inflation offer for teachers for this year, “and for that to be fully funded”.

“But – we also make no bones about it – we want to see real terms pay restoration. Teachers' pay has been seriously attacked over the course of the 14 years of the Conservative government.”

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

Headteachers' groups oppose peerage for former chief inspector

A peerage for the former Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman would be “inappropriate and insensitive”, a group of school leaders has said.

Spielman led the watchdog when Ruth Perry, the headteacher of a Reading primary, took her own life in 2023. A coroner ruled later that year that an Ofsted inspection contributed to her suicide.

It was reported over the weekend that Spielman is set to join the House of Lords following a nomination from the Conservatives.

In a letter published on Monday, the Headteachers' Roundtable and Headrest said Spielman should not receive a peerage.

They accused her of being “responsible for creating, introducing and implementing a flawed inspection framework”, which led to “unacceptably high levels of anxiety and stress”.

The letter, addressed to Baroness Deech, chair of the Lords appointments' commission, and senior politicians – including the prime minister and education secretary – said that under Spielman's leadership Ofsted “lost the trust of many involved in education”.

“We thus believe the awarding of a peerage to Amanda Spielman would be inappropriate and insensitive.”

Professor Julia Waters, Perry's sister,

called the decision “a disgrace and an insult to my sister's memory”.

But Michael Gove, a former education secretary, described Spielman on X as “an outstanding public servant who has fought for higher standards in education and was unfairly attacked by teaching union figures for her commitment to professionalism”.

Michael Gosling, the founding chief executive of the Trinity multi-academy trust, said on X he believed “someone who led Ofsted for six years – including during a pandemic – and made such a contribution to driving up educational standards, should be recognised for it”.

Spielman declined to comment.

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Profile

JL DUTAUT | @DUTAUT.BSKY.SOCIAL

Chalke it up to experience

Steve Chalke tells how his tough school life and a romantic knock-back sparked his 'school, house and hospital' mantra that ultimately built the Oasis multi-academy trust and charity group

In this age of mission-led government, ministers could learn a thing or two from Steve Chalke. They talk to him, but are they asking the right questions?

Chalke was a close friend of the last Labour administration, helping Tony Blair and then-schools minister Andrew Adonis hash out the academies policy.

Today, with 53 schools, Oasis Community Learning is one of the largest multi-academy trusts in the country.

But the MAT is just one arm of the globe-spanning Oasis Charitable Trust, which Chalke and his wife set up 40 years ago following his childhood vision.

Born in 1955 in Croydon to an English mother (Ada) and an Indian father (Victor), Chalke's childhood was marred by racism.

"People would literally cross the road" when Victor walked him home from school.

Victor had come to England in the late 1940s "to help rebuild Britain, in the same way as the Windrush generation" but "the invitation was bigger than the welcome".

Even members of his mother's family made life difficult for them because "they didn't take to this dark-skinned brown guy". Chalke went through his school years with the nickname "half-caste".

His childhood was defined by poverty too, "in a house with no heating, no hot water. We never went on holiday. I never went in a restaurant".

That childhood fed into what Oasis has become, he says. "There's a passion to include people."

With poverty came low aspirations. Having failed the 11+ (which everyone in the local authority sat at that time), he was sent to the local

secondary modern.

"On the first day, we were told in an assembly we'd never do O-levels because we weren't worth educating academically."

The predictable outcomes resonate with today's attendance and mental health crises. "A load of kids would never come," he says. "A lot of my friends struggled altogether."

Chalke kept on with school, but stopped going to church, only going back to its youth club again because a girl he liked was attending.

A few Fridays later, she rejected him. On the way home, mortified, Chalke's life mission came to him, as "a gift".

Mission statement

He was mulling never attending the church again when "I had this thought: At school they tell us we

Profile: Steve Chalke

won't amount to much, and at the youth club they tell us our lives have purpose."

He decided two things: he was "going to believe the church's story" and he was going to be "a Christian and a church leader".

In that moment he set himself three further goals: to start a school "worth going to, because my school wasn't", to start a house for "kids who no one cares about", like his friends, and to start a hospital. His local one in Croydon – May Day – was known as "May Die".

When he got home, he told his mum about his revelation. "Very nice," she said. "And that's the only piece of careers advice I ever got."

It's a mantra for Chalke: "a school, a house and a hospital". As he tells me his story, I'm gripped by this example of the power of a moment to shape a life.

And if there's a mantra that sustains the education system, it is surely this. Every education minister and every teaching ad relies on it to an extent: the teachers that inspired them, the fulfilment of the profession.

But perennial crises of workload, recruitment and retention attest to the challenge of aligning vision with reality.

So if mission-led government is the solution, then what does delivering the "opportunity mission" entail?

Mission launch

Set on his mission, Chalke took the opportunities that presented themselves. First of these was to run a youth group at a church on the rough Stanhope estate in Ashford, Kent.

"People called it Stanhope, no hope," he recalls. "So that's what I did. At the age of 18, I went to live in Kent. I got a job as a factory sweeper and I used the money I got to run the youth group."

Around the hard, unionised labour of the day job, he set up a theatre company called Shout, putting on productions with and for the kids on the estate.

At 20, deemed "too young and naïve" to study to be a minister, he was sent to work at another



In Bulgaria with Cliff Richard whilst working on *Songs of Praise*



Early 90s - Community Action was the name of one of Oasis' departments



One year old, with dad Victor

'They didn't take to this dark-skinned brown guy'

church in Gravesend for a year. "I actually got to work as a youth worker there, which was great."

At 21, he began training to become a Baptist minister at Spurgeon's College, working as a youth worker in Tonbridge as he went. He was ordained four years later.

"But then I said: I've got to leave, because I've got to set up a school and a hospital and a house."

For the next three years, he persuaded estate agents to give him disused shops for a few weeks at a time and set up pop-up restaurants in them with youth groups.

"We used to call them 'eat less, pay more' restaurants.

"The first projects in Oasis were to do that kind of thing. We ran hundreds of these restaurants, because I gave people the template to do it. We raised about £7 million and gave it all to a development agency, Tearfund."

Mission control

Oasis got its name from Chalke's wife, Cornelia, a Hungarian child refugee who'd lived just up the road from him.

She fully bought into her husband's vision and

worked with him on the plan. Establishing the house would be the easiest of the three aims, so that was first.

At 29, with "no money, no contacts and no credibility", that's what they set out to do.

"It was a painful experience," he reveals, but "eventually, through a miracle" they were able to buy a house in Peckham, "which is where I wanted the first one to be".

The miracle came in the form of Edna Scroggie (daughter of Baptist author and Spurgeon's alumnus, W. Graham Scroggie). She and her husband had heard Chalke give a talk, during which he'd mentioned his vision of "a house and a school and a hospital".

One evening, Edna called. "We've got a house and £10,000 in a bank account and we'd like to give you both," they told him.

"But the problem was the house was in a leafy part of Croydon." Not Peckham, where he was determined the house should be. Without even seeing it, he politely turned her down.

A couple of weeks later, Edna called back. Declining their offer made Chalke all the more worthy of it in their eyes, she explained, so they

Profile: Steve Chalke



sold the house and gave his nascent charity the money to make his vision a reality.

As they worked towards the opening, Cornelia said one day: "It's like we're creating an oasis for these girls." The charity had found its name.

Opened in 1987, Oasis still runs Number 3 in Peckham, which houses homeless young women. "In fact, we're responsible for all the supported housing for over-16s across the borough of Southwark."

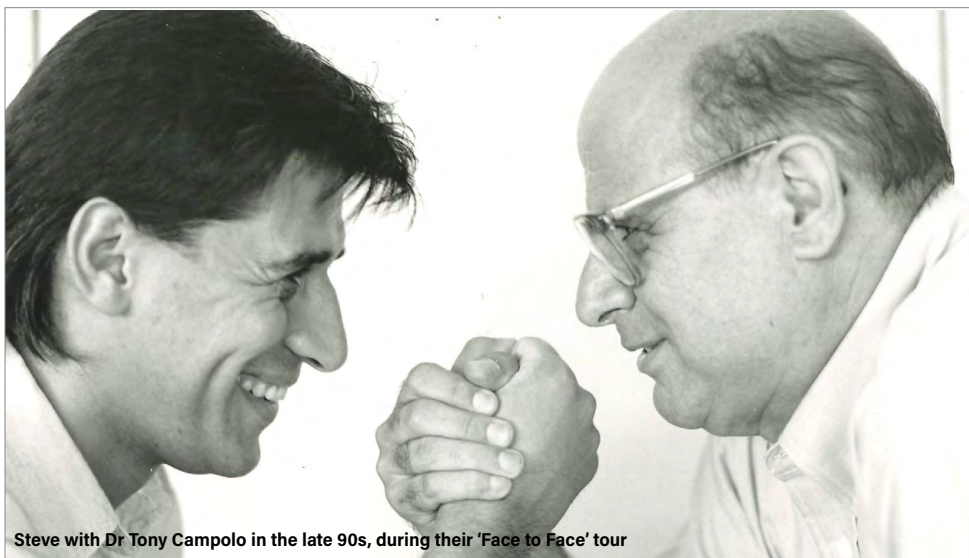
Faith in the mission

Now with a name for himself in youth work, Chalke was invited to India to give lectures for the YMCA. Raised on his dad's account of "a place of absolute beauty", the poverty he encountered, "watching people die on the streets... blew all my theology away".

He had "a giant crisis of faith", but came back determined that Oasis would work in India.

Chalke's first schools quickly followed, in Indian slums. "It's easy to do when the DfE isn't involved," he laughs. "You hire a shack, put up a sign saying 'School. Starts Monday. Free.' And boom, you're full. That's your admissions process."

Today, there are Oasis schools all over India and Africa as well as England. And jokes aside, there's an important lesson for Labour's school



'We called them 'eat less, pay more' restaurants'

improvement drive here.

"We work in Dheravee (the slum made famous by *Slumdog Millionaire*). Nothing works in Dheravee, so the thought that you might run a school that produces perfection on its own doesn't even enter their head.

"Sometimes it feels like we've not learned that lesson in this country."

Mission: Possible

In 1993, GMTV "decided to do an outside broadcast". Near their studios was an Oasis project providing support for the homeless, so they went to visit and interviewed Chalke.

"I got a call the next day because they wanted to offer me a job."

Chalke was propelled to TV stardom as the show's in-house vicar, "doing all the social stuff" alongside Anthea Turner and Mr Motivator.

When a devastating earthquake hit the Indian region of Maharashtra that year, Chalke persuaded the show's producers to let him run a telethon. Grudgingly given a daily five-minute slot for a week, he raised over £1 million.

"That goes a long way in India, and it was enough to build a hospital." Oasis delivers a lot

of healthcare in a lot of hospitals, "but the only hospital we've ever built is that one in India".

A church leader. A house. A school. A hospital.

Mission accomplished. But Chalke was far from done.

Waterloo perhaps best typifies his vision. In 2003, the charity became responsible for Christ Church and Upton Chapel, now Oasis Church Waterloo.

In the 22 years since, the area around it has become a vast complex of community organisations – schools, a children's centre, adult community learning and much more.

In short, the opportunity mission can't be delivered by schools alone. Mission-led government implies an ethical heart to policymaking – a vision.

Sadly for Labour, Chalke advises that "vision and frustration are the same thing". Each is founded on a sense of "longing for, hoping for, praying for what has not happened yet".

A little under a year into the Labour government, the opportunity mission has certainly brought a fair few frustrations.

And the best measure of its progress may be how many still have faith in it. Do you?



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LAWRENCE
FOLEY

CEO, Future Academies



GEORGINA
CHARLES

Senior trust lead
for English, Future
Academies



How to ensure English doesn't mandate mediocrity

The Francis review must find a 'Goldilocks' solution to the English curriculum's weaknesses. The stakes are high, but here's how it can be done

The curriculum review presents a significant opportunity: to finally replace the vague framework of the current national curriculum for English with a more codified, meaningful map of the discipline.

For years, the existing curriculum's lack of substance – its failure to clearly articulate essential knowledge or to sequence its acquisition – has hampered coherence and depth across key stages.

The review, guided by ambitions outlined in its interim report for a 'rigorous', 'knowledge-rich' and 'sequenced' approach, could potentially rectify this long-standing weakness.

However, the opportunity is not without risk. To genuinely elevate the subject, it must avoid pitfalls like mandating a curriculum that is weaker than established best practice, or failing to achieve the delicate balance required for genuine improvement.

This risk is sharpened by the context of significant curriculum innovation already taking place within academy trusts.

Many, exercising their soon-to-be-outlawed autonomy, have developed precisely the kind of coherent,

knowledge-led English programmes the current national curriculum fails to mandate, often investing heavily in disciplinary expertise and resource development.

The fact that we know the review's eventual outcome – the new national curriculum – will be required for all schools, including academies, places a significant burden of proof upon the review.

To justify replacing bespoke excellence, potentially built over years, with central direction, the forthcoming curriculum must demonstrably surpass not only its inadequate predecessor but also the best of current practice in the academy sector.

Anything less risks the opposite of high and rising standards. Addressing the weaknesses of the current national curriculum is therefore paramount for the review.

The homogenising 'pre-19th century' requirement, for example, fails to build structured understanding of literary history or cultural context. It impedes the 'effective transitions' the review targets and directly contributes to the 'huge variance' in provision.

The new curriculum must rectify these shortcomings if it is to provide a genuine national entitlement. But how?

A promising route lies in structuring key stage 3 chronologically – exploring literature's unfolding dialogue across time.



“ The task demands careful calibration

This approach inherently fosters the deep, contextualised understanding lacking in the current system. It systematically builds students' cultural capital and critical awareness by showing how literary traditions evolve and why certain texts resonate through history.

This directly tackles the challenging 'balance between breadth and depth' highlighted in the interim report, prioritising meaningful connection over superficial coverage.

By tracing intertextual links – analysing Pope's engagement with Milton or Shelley's response to Wordsworth – students gain the foundational knowledge and analytical skills the current vague requirements obscure.

Crucially, such a framework allows for a more sophisticated engagement with diversity and representation, moving beyond simplistic binaries often seen in curriculum debates.

An intertextual approach – a concept introduced by Julia Kristeva to describe how texts inherently absorb and transform one another – permits the study of canonical works alongside contemporary responses, illuminating both tradition and adaptation.

Consider Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* alongside Chaucer: students can analyse enduring archetypes reimagined for modern Britain, engaging the canon's legacy and its vibrant reinterpretations

simultaneously.

This method fosters genuine comparative analysis and demonstrates how diverse voices actively engage with and reshape literary heritage, and does so in a way that is true to the core impetus of storytelling.

An intertextual, chronological core would facilitate the deeper analysis and more meaningful key stage 3 assessment the current system often precludes, moving beyond superficial coverage towards genuine mastery. If a pupil does not understand the ways in which texts speak to each other, we can never expect those texts to speak to her.

The review process holds the potential to replace the flawed current curriculum with something genuinely powerful.

Embracing structure, chronology and intertextuality offers a path towards achieving its ambitions. But the task demands careful calibration. The review must navigate the complex interplay between knowledge and skills, consistency and innovation, stakeholder demands and disciplinary integrity.

This requires a 'Goldilocks' solution – neither too timid nor too radical – that truly elevates the subject for all students, justifies its place as a national requirement, and crucially, learns from, rather than ignores, the best practice already established in the sector.

Opinion

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Five years on: Legacies of lockdown



JO SOUTHBY
CEO, Illuminate
Minds Academy Trust

The 'new normal': Like the old normal but so much worse

The phrase 'new normal' was quickly adopted and changed meaning as we went along – but today's realities can't be what anyone ever imagined, writes Jo Southby

Reading back through my Schools Week lockdown diary of 2020 feels like opening a time capsule from a world that had been abruptly altered and is now unrecognisably distant.

The practicalities of managing our schools during that period are fascinating, but it is the lasting impacts of the pandemic that make those early diary entries resonate with deeper significance.

At the time, the phrase 'new normal' was being used to describe the pandemic experience. Soon, that phrase would come to symbolise the potential for transformative action to right the system's foundations. Today, it is a bleak reminder of a lack of visionary leadership.

Life was so different in the spring of 2020. Amid the chaos, I remember clearly there being almost a 'pause in time' during which, like many others, I experienced a substantial shift in how I perceived my personal and professional purpose.

Relationships have always been key in the AP and SEND sector, but they are frequently fraught with difficulties. Suddenly, the pandemic experience began to break down those barriers.

Initially born out of necessity, our actions blossomed into something far more meaningful: a genuine connection and a shared understanding of the challenges families were facing.

Daily phone calls home and the delivery of work packs gave staff new insights. Meanwhile, our willingness to act proved our resilience and creativity to our communities.

Socially distanced doorstep interactions stood as a testament to our commitment to them – a powerful reminder of the fundamental importance of connection.

The key lesson, surely, was that a thriving school or trust isn't defined by its size or its results alone but, crucially, by the strength of its relationships and its commitment to a culture of belonging.

This wasn't a new revelation, but the pandemic stripped away the noise and amplified this truth.

We were facing weighty moral and practical quandaries, not least balancing the need to keep schools open for vulnerable pupils against our duty of care to our staff.

These were not abstract policy debates; they were real human dilemmas with tangible consequences. It forced a deep introspection about the values that guided our decisions, pushing beyond metrics and targets to the wellbeing and safety of our entire



“ Briefly, a truly 'new normal' seemed within grasp

community.

This wasn't just a period of 'disruption'; it had the potential to be a catalyst for profound change.

How would we ensure the genuine connections forged during lockdown weren't lost? How would we create sustainable structures that prioritised wellbeing and managed workload effectively?

And most importantly, how would we address the persistent inequalities that the pandemic laid bare, particularly for our most vulnerable students and those with SEND, within a challenging funding landscape?

Briefly, a truly 'new normal' seemed within grasp when Covid recovery tsar Sir Kevan Collins called for £15 billion to build it. But the government committed just £1.5 billion, and here we are.

Five years on, the ongoing impact of Covid is undeniable: pupil wellbeing at an ebb, a widening disadvantage gap, a "seismic shift in parental attitudes to school attendance" and growing deficits in communication and language – the tip of the iceberg that is the SEND crisis.

My lockdown diary serves as a reminder of the transformative potential of crisis. It documents not just the challenges we faced and how our priorities shifted, but our unwavering belief in an education system where everyone belongs.

For me, lockdowns put into sharp focus the importance of living my 'why'. I committed to the purpose of helping more of our most vulnerable learners find *their* place of safety and *their* 'why', taking my learning from the AP and SEND sector into leading a mainstream trust.

I'm far from alone in wanting to shape a fully inclusive approach to mainstream where everyone belongs. Because when time stood still, we were forced to confront what truly mattered.

So far, policymakers don't seem to have understood that experience. Because the 'new normal' seems remarkably like a failed attempt to return to the old one.

But perhaps change is still possible

Five years after the first school 'closures', sector leaders revisit their *Schools Week Lockdown Diaries*. Read them all [here](#)

Opinion

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NATALIE
NEZHATI

Director, Edtech Mark

The battle for today's youth is becoming a war on edtech

In the aftermath of *Adolescence*, genuine concerns about phones are being co-opted into a battle against edtech, explains Natalie Nezhati. Government must resist the onslaught

The Netflix series *Adolescence* has sparked a wave of moral panic over children's use of technology. This surge of concern could lead policymakers to address the wrong issues in the ongoing debate over edtech.

When Jonathan Haidt published *The Anxious Generation* this time last year, it inspired innumerable hot takes on the issues facing children. These include online bullying, TikTok toxicity, Instagram predators, addictive gaming and hardcore porn.

This week, Sir Keir Starmer convened a roundtable with *Adolescence*'s creators, charities and young people because he is 'worried' about social media influencers. Meanwhile, a growing number of parents have been joining the *Smartphone Free Childhood* movement since the show's release.

Actress Sophie Winkleman is a leading voice in the campaign against technology. In a speech in February, she described edtech as 'neurological junk food', citing distracted children, a lack of human connection and profiteering companies as reasons tech has no place in schools.

Haidt went on to amplify this speech. Then, last week, he published his own essay, *An Edtech Tragedy*, arguing that digital learning during the pandemic was 'largely a disaster'.

As *Schools Week*'s 'lockdown legacies' series shows, the ongoing impacts of school closures are clear. And Haidt raises valid points about our over-reliance on screens.

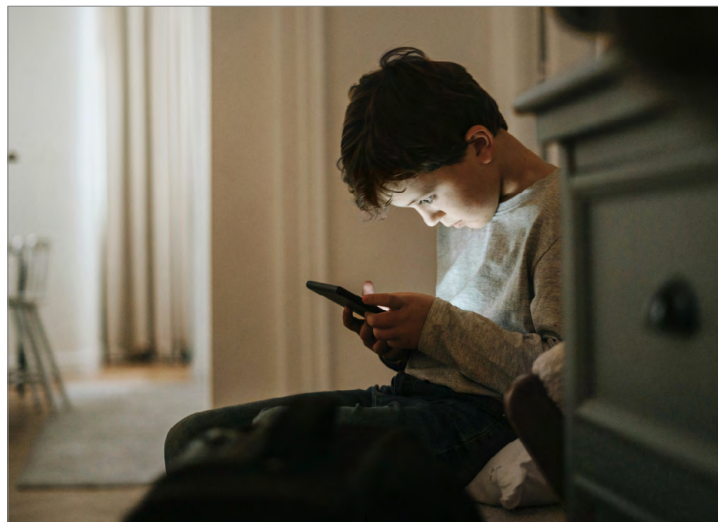
Blaming edtech, however, overlooks the reality of digital poverty facing many students, for whom phones were the only means of accessing education at that time.

It's for equally valid reasons that many schools are now banning mobile phones. We know, for example, that they can distract students even when they are not being used.

But conflating smartphone use in schools with thoughtfully deployed edtech is a fear-driven mistake. And this is turning legitimate concerns about phones into blanket opposition to technology in education.

Recently, our local school's *Smartphone Free Childhood* group sent parents a message referring to edtech as 'the next battle'. The tone was alarmist and failed to mention any benefit of technology.

Campaigners like Winkleman nostalgically recall a childhood of landline phones and screen-free classrooms. But like any modern workplace, schools rely on digital infrastructure for everything



“ Conflating smartphones and edtech is a fear-driven mistake

from shared planning and parent communications to trips and timetables.

Let's not pretend that bad lessons didn't exist before edtech either. Death by worksheet, 'chalk and talk' and mindless copying off the board were not unusual. The only difference is that students passed paper notes rather than IMs.

Now teachers have access to shared, real-time data and analytics to support each child's progress, while digital tools open new possibilities for interactive learning experiences. The issue, as ever, is not the tech but how it's used.

Winkleman asks if 'cutting and pasting from Google into a PowerPoint' is 'superior to reading a passage in a textbook and handwriting a response'. Either, of course, can be passive and low value. Poor pedagogy is the problem, not a failure of edtech.

In 2025, it makes no sense for a teacher to spend an hour manually marking and recording 35 sets of multiple-choice answers when any number of edtech tools can do this

in seconds. Students get instant, targeted feedback while their teacher can easily see strengths and development areas.

And while unrestricted YouTube access is inadvisable, sometimes a carefully chosen, two-minute video (like an excerpt from *Adolescence*, which was made free to all UK schools this week) can break down a concept more effectively than pages of text.

Really, there's no debate about whether technology belongs in schools. There are only choices about how to use it strategically to support learning and minimise distraction.

There's a solid argument for drastically reducing children's screen time overall, and for banning phones from the classroom, but the real problem is the unregulated, unsupervised time spent on screens outside school.

The danger is that the current wave of moral panic may lead the prime minister to focus on the soft target of schools rather than addressing the wider challenges posed by technology.

Opinion

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HARRY PAGET-WALL COLLINS

Deputy CEO, Gallery Trust

How SEND training is bridging over a troubled mainstream

A new teacher training programme specifically supporting teaching in specialist settings is exactly what the sector ordered – and it's helping mainstream too

A lack of specialist teacher training routes is a situation the sector can no longer tolerate. Not only does it mean special schools can't get enough teachers, but far too few in mainstream schools have the skills to deal with rising and increasingly complex needs in their settings. So we're putting that right.

I've had plenty of conversations with people desperately keen to teach with us. Many had a deep yearning to work in a specialist setting from the start of their careers, but all faced professional obstacles they couldn't easily surmount without going down a mainstream ITT route first.

Those interactions encapsulated a long-time problem for special schools: too many people who would be enormous assets for the sector are deflected from their path by having to first train and gain professional experience in a mainstream environment.

My own background was in mainstream education, so I'm familiar with these challenges. The traditional training route hadn't equipped me to meet the needs of

SEND children in my classroom. In fact, it hadn't really addressed SEND at all, so I was driven to develop my knowledge and expertise myself.

Having done so, I was determined to address the lack of teacher development specifically for the specialist sector. I wanted to give ITT recruits a bridge over the mainstream so their SEND career could begin straightaway.

I started talking to Best Practice Network and they recognised the issues immediately. So together we began developing a bespoke SEND ITT course. Less than two years on, the first trainees on our SEND ITT programme are well on their way to qualifying this summer.

We've created this programme from the ground up as a SEND ITT course. SEND specialism here is built in, not a bolt-on.

Uniquely, it's an apprenticeship, which means our trainees can get onto the course with a degree in, say, youth work. They learn, train and earn on the job as they work towards qualification.

The programme is being delivered by experts and experienced teachers in the sector through our trust. It is equipping trainees with skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes around the four main areas of SEND.

As well as skilling up a new generation of SEND teachers, the programme is making a difference to



“SEND specialism here is built in, not a bolt-on”

mainstream ITT trainees.

We now have learners from Best Practice Network's mainstream ITT programmes opting into webinars delivered by our coaches and facilitators. These 'SEND surgeries' help trainees and mentors from both specialist and mainstream programmes improve their SEND knowledge in a range of areas, including ADHD, SEMH and cognition.

One school leader told us they were relieved the programme was available because they couldn't risk losing their current staff on a mainstream training route. A senior trust leader was similarly reassured, saying the programme meant staff could remain in their SEND school for much of their training.

We've also had positive feedback from our student teachers. There are currently 73 of them working towards QTS and a level 6 teacher apprenticeship qualification by the summer – including six from our trust.

And with a waiting list that already stands at over 60, we're expecting

a bigger cohort when September comes.

In the longer term, the Gallery Trust and Best Practice Network plan to expand our programme. But right now, we're focused on consolidating what we have achieved so that our trainees can really make a difference to SEND children early on in their careers.

Our ambition was to help passionate, committed people from a range of graduate routes become SEND teachers without first having to shoehorn themselves into a mainstream model and risking never making it to a specialist setting.

We think we've made a good start, and the bridge we've built over the mainstream is already allowing expertise to travel both ways between the sectors.

The programme's positive impact on the recruitment and retention of SEND teachers is assured – and the flow of knowledge back to mainstream schools has already begun.

It's a wonder ITT for SEND was neglected for so long.

Solutions

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PETER HOUGH

School governor and
education programme
manager, Grenke UK

Unlocking the budget potential of finance leasing

Amid a continued squeeze on finances, too many schools are still missing out on an obvious way to invest in assets and protect their staffing, writes Peter Hough

Following last week's spring statement, the reality is sinking in that we face more years of Treasury restraint and escalating costs. But the sector is missing a trick – one I brought to my school, and that I hope many more will learn to make use of.

I work in asset management. I know my way around a budget. So when my local primary school was hit by extreme financial difficulties in 2020, I joined them as a governor in the finance committee. I'm now chair of governors in a financially stable school, and leasing was a key factor.

My aim was to work with the school's leadership to turn their financial challenges around and to make best use of the financial solutions available to them. I wanted to lend my expertise to developing a planned approach that would upgrade resources and safeguard staffing ratios.

What surprised me from the outset in this endeavour was the general lack of understanding about leasing – here and in many other schools I went on to speak to.

Though there isn't a photocopier

in a school that isn't on a lease, this form of finance is an area shrouded in mystery for the sector. I'd go so far as to say my school leader colleagues approached the idea with deep scepticism.

So my first job was to convince them of its full potential as a robust funding method that would allow them to overcome critical constraints and access essential resources – without substantial upfront costs.

Over time, I was able to show my headteacher and business manager how a planned approach to leasing and working with trusted partners can make school assets more affordable and accessible. This applies to everything from computers and whiteboards through to CCTV and door entry systems.

Ultimately, the key was encouraging my colleagues to treat the school like a business. In this, Grenke's recent *New Lease of Life* is revealing about the state of play for education compared to the nation generally:

- 55 per cent of education respondents say they are operating suboptimal equipment, above the national figure of 53 per cent.
- But the uptake of leasing as a finance option in schools (39 per cent) is lower than the national average (44 per cent for SMEs).



“ This form of finance is shrouded in mystery ”

- When asked to identify the areas of their organisation that have suffered or stagnated over the past 12 months because of a lack of investment due to financing, 33 per cent of SMEs cite hiring staff. For education, this figure is 46 per cent.

For me as a school governor, this final point is the key message and opportunity for the sector: leasing unlocks budgets to be directed back where they're needed most – people.

Indeed, my school had had to make staff redundancies. And all the while, they were trying to release capital to fund photocopiers, IT and a new door access system.

Finance leasing meant freeing up budget capacity for teaching salaries, ensuring we could still give our pupils the best in teaching.

In short, asset finance means better cost-management; lease payments are distributed over the asset's useful life. This aids budget planning and cash flow because you spread costs across a number of years (in our case, across three budgets).

I was able to work with the school leadership team to find the best deal available to them in a transparent and ethical way. The result was that they could access these assets and sustain their staffing despite budget restraints and increasing financial pressures.

Being able to spread the costs against very challenging fiscal budget windows was key for our school.

And, because of the end-of-lease options available to them, once the lease terms are up, we have the option to renew the lease, return the asset, or upgrade to newer technology.

This means the school can get the most value from the technology and equipment they've leased, ensuring resources stay refreshed and up to date.

Our school was able to meet evolving educational demands while adhering to budgetary constraints and, vitally, protecting teachers' salaries.

Repeated sector-wide, it could be an important cushion against continuing financial pressures.

THE CONVERSATION

LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM



Sarah Gallagher

Headteacher,
Snape Primary
School and PGCE
tutor, University of
Cambridge

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

Whatever your union allegiances, this interview on the ASCL podcast with the organisation's senior director of strategy, policy and professional development Julie McCulloch, gives a useful snapshot of the interim report from the curriculum and assessment review.

The conversation is, of course, set in the context of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill which will see all schools required to follow the national curriculum.

I hope these two developments add up to all children being entitled to a broad and balanced offer. What I hope they don't add up to is children who move from school to school receiving exactly the same diet.

I lead a small village school. It is very important to us that we reflect our heritage and immerse children in their local area. The national curriculum currently requires schools to do this, and I wouldn't want to see that jettisoned in favour of content that isn't relevant for our particular setting.

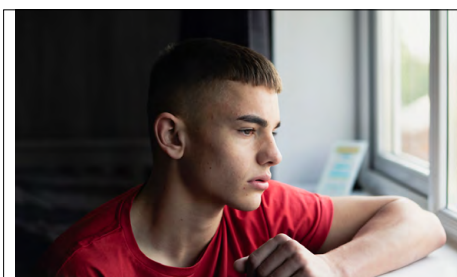
I hope for flexibility. And one way to provide that flexibility is to remove the effective straitjacket of too much content. The podcast sadly doesn't cover that, but many primary practitioners feel this robs children of depth and flow.

So it can't just be a matter of 'one in, one

out' for the curriculum review, but of finding a better balance between the national curriculum and the school curriculum – a Venn diagram that was never meant to be a perfect circle!

MEN AND BOYS

I confess to not having the headspace to watch *Adolescence* yet; I am waiting until the Easter break. However, I was interested in Matt Pinkett and Tommy Michael discussing some of the themes arising from it on the latest episode of Tom Rogers' podcast, *The Late Show*.



One of the overriding messages is our role in supporting boys and challenging social media rhetoric. This pertinently coincides with a recent article in *The Guardian* by Matthew Quinn, the CEO of Exit Australia, who works to disengage violent extremists.

Like the podcast, he suggests it's about seeking out their underlying vulnerabilities and providing support where the less scrupulous would exploit. All agree on the absolute 'given' that we shouldn't define young people by the behaviours they display.

For my part, I can't help but think that involving women and girls in the conversation would also have an impact. If part of the problem is that boys are left isolated in a dehumanized virtual world, then more face-to-face with the reality of how words and actions make others feel could be a useful counter.

A GLASS HALF FULL

Something else I'm holding for Easter is reading *The Friction Project* by Huggy Rao and Robert Sutton. It wasn't on my radar, but the latest episode of the PiXL leadership book club has propelled it to the top of my reading

list.

Hearing other leaders discuss their takeaways is a really interesting format, and PiXL

CEO Rachel

Johnson's discussion with Mariam Rizvi and Deneen Kenchington is full of useful nuggets. In particular, I liked the idea of celebrating our successes with a 'ta dah' list.

Kenchington talks about being an optimistic leader and how 'black hat' thinkers are often given more airtime in meetings. But is the pessimist really the most intelligent person in the room? Just because they see the 'stoppers' doesn't mean they've given an issue more thought.

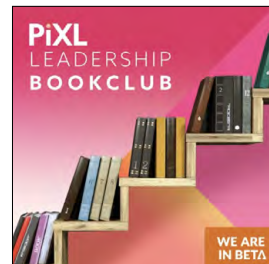
The irony isn't lost on me that you can lack belief in your optimism, but it was a relief to hear I'm not alone and that I can change that mindset. So take heart, optimists... and read the book!

BOLD BEGINNINGS

This isn't a blog or podcast, but the link was too strong not to share it with you. Where do we get our ideas about who's more intelligent and worthy of attention anyway?

In this interview, Sébastien Goudeau reveals his research showing that pre-schoolers judge the intelligence of group members by who contributes the most – including by interrupting.

Perhaps the route to inclusion and belonging goes by way of giving the quiet optimists more opportunities to share. Here's hoping!



Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts



The Knowledge

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



Is a mobile phone ban in schools the right policy aim?

Antony Bainbridge, Clinical director and psychologist, ICIS

The Netflix series *Adolescence* has created a new wave of political pressure for a national ban on smartphones in schools. So what does the research say?

As with most complex societal issues, the answer isn't a simple one. In truth, smartphone usage in school affects student engagement in positive as well as negative ways.

While devices can lead to distractions, reduced participation and lower academic performance, they can also serve as effective educational tools. What we need, as an evidence-based profession, is to understand the research in order to devise effective strategies.

First, we must be clear about what we mean by engagement. This single word actually stands in for attention, participation, and motivation, each of which has its own drivers and its own relationship with mobile technology.

Second, smartphones themselves can't be easily dismissed as distractions. Students increasingly rely on them not just for entertainment but also for communication and information.

Rightly, pure entertainment has little value in classrooms, but removing phones altogether comes with a trade-off; we also lose their other two valuable uses.

The question then becomes one about those trade-offs, and whether the benefits outweigh the costs of managing responsible use in schools.

In terms of the benefits, several studies suggest that mobile phones can in fact enhance classroom engagement.

For example, the interactive learning tools they enable can increase student interest and participation. One recent study found that 40 per cent of students find educational apps helpful in engaging with subjects like maths and science.

Instant access to information also allows students to conduct quick research (sustaining attention) and supports inquiry-based learning (promoting participation).

Meanwhile, communication tools can enhance collaboration, peer support and teacher feedback within and beyond the classroom, boosting all



aspects of engagement. Another benefit is quick personalisation, which supports teachers and helps students stay motivated.

Having said all of that, several studies also point to the technology's drawbacks.

Notifications, social media and gaming can all divert students' attention from classroom activities. Indeed, studies indicate that multitasking with mobile devices reduces cognitive focus and memory retention.

Students who are preoccupied with their phones are obviously also less likely to engage in discussions, ask questions, or actively participate in learning tasks.

In addition, excessive phone use can lead to social isolation and increased anxiety related to on and offline communication.

Small wonder then that research shows a correlation between high mobile phone usage during school hours and lower academic achievement. In fact, students who frequently used mobile phones for non-academic purposes scored lower in assessments compared to those who limited their usage.

Teachers agree. In a recent poll, 72 per cent reported that mobile phones significantly distract students, reducing participation in discussions.

And students themselves are dubious. Asked to use phones for collaborative learning, 65 per cent went on to admit that social media and messaging apps often disrupted their focus.

On balance then, it is not mobile phones themselves that reduce attention, participation and motivation but their misuse. Schools can offset this by setting clear guidelines, incorporating the technology in structured ways and educating students about responsible digital habits.

But this comes at a cost. These practices can take a long time to embed, and must be renewed with each new cohort.

A ban is obviously easier, but this misses the opportunity to teach students about responsible mobile phone use and to support them to develop important self-regulation skills.

This can't all be the responsibility of schools. Parents must be partners in reinforcing responsible habits at home.

And here we come to the crux of the matter: The first major study of its kind, published last month in *The Lancet*, found that smartphone use was linked with poorer outcomes, but that school bans alone were ineffective in reducing this effect.

Interestingly, the curriculum and assessment review's interim report, published last week, clearly states that technological developments "demand heightened media literacy".

If the biggest challenge for schools is time, then creating that time in the curriculum is likely to be far more beneficial for all concerned than the one-and-done 'solution' of a ban.



Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

MONDAY

Regular readers of this column will know the DfE has form when it comes to bungling school funding figures. Who remembers when it over-promised schools hundreds of millions and then corrected the record, leaving budgets in chaos?

Now it has made a hash of early years' funding and given providers too much in dedicated schools grant (DSG), which will now need rectifying in future payments. Not ideal news for cash-strapped providers counting every penny.

The DfE said on Wednesday it had "spotted an error" in the number of two-year-olds eligible for pupil premium, which it used to calculate early years' block funding for the 2024-25 DSG.

"This led to an over-payment in the March DSG 2024-25 payment," it said in a website update. "We will adjust for payments accordingly in the July early years' block update."

Yikes!

Meanwhile, a *Schools Week* FOI reveals Ofsted spent £66,000 fighting to reverse an unfair dismissal decision.

Andrew Hewston, an inspector of 12 years with an "unblemished" record, was sacked for gross misconduct in 2019 after brushing rainwater off a 12-year-old boy's head during a school visit.

A 2023 employment tribunal ruled this was unfair dismissal. Ofsted challenged this, but last month the Court of Appeal upheld the ruling Hewston was unfairly dismissed.

Christina McAnea, the general secretary of Unison, last month criticised Ofsted for pursuing the case.

"Andrew Hewston's career was cruelly and unnecessarily cut short by Ofsted," she said. "He never should have been sacked and Ofsted shouldn't have wasted public money pursuing him needlessly through the courts."

The bill of £66,000 would almost be enough to cover an inspector's salary for a year or, for a more seasonal illustration, buy more than 77,000 Crème Eggs.

Speaking to *BBC Breakfast* on Wednesday, Bridget Phillipson triggered a collective memory shared by all those who attended state primary school before the arrival of Jamie Oliver and his fight against the Turkey Twizzler.

A primary school from her constituency visited Parliament this week, and asked what her favourite school dinner was.

"The answer I sadly had to give them was that when I was at primary school the school dinners were absolutely awful and I hated them," the education secretary told the BBC.

"My abiding memory of school dinners is sadly custard with a thick skin, and orange fish fingers."

THURSDAY

There are few in the academy trust sector who tell it like it is. But not Sufian Sadiq of the Chiltern Learning Trust.

His speech to the Confederation of School Trusts' (CST) school improvement conference in Birmingham offered a

slightly alarming insight into the way personal accountability works, as he sees it, among leading schools.

"If you're really poor at leadership in football, you get sacked. If you're really poor at leadership in school leadership, people leave, but you're still there," he told delegates.

"Hey, because your governors, they're not quite with it... it's the teachers that take the hammering due to poor leadership in schools."

The CST is known for its preference to attempt to influence policy behind closed doors, rarely speaking out on matters such as school funding.

But no longer. Chief executive Leora Cruddas did not mince her words as she described the current financial situation facing schools.

"I am under no illusions, and we're talking to the secretary of state about this at the moment, that we need to build the resilience of our school system in ... probably the worst fiscal environment in living memory," she said.

"It is now essential that all schools are part of a strong and sustainable group with collaboration at its core, but with the expertise to continue to develop and improve those schools."

But she did have some positive things to say, as she told how the English academy system was "leading practice in the world".

We'll leave it on that upbeat note as we wish you a happy and peaceful Easter.



Birmingham 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 Birmingham 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).



Lytham St Annes High School



HEADTEACHER

SALARY: HIGHLY COMPETITIVE SEVEN-POINT SCALE WITHIN GROUP 7 (L24 – L39)

Required for either September 2025 or January 2026

Following the school's recent joining to The Coastal Collaborative Trust, we are seeking an experienced and inspirational leader to take our popular school into the next phase of its development. Are you passionate about high quality teaching and learning? Do you have the highest expectations of every member of the school community? Are you a values-driven leader who models integrity and a commitment to inclusion?

If you can answer yes to these questions, we would love to hear from you. Further details about the academy, the application process and the application pack are available on the academy website: www.lythamhigh.lancs.sch.uk

Closing date: 9am on Friday 25th April 2025

Interviews: Wednesday 30th April 2025 and Thursday 1st May 2025

CLICK TO APPLY



Education Director with responsibility for safeguarding

Aspire Academy Trust is seeking a strategic thinker who has a demonstrable and successful track record of inspirational, dynamic and impactful senior educational leadership.

As an Education Director, you will champion collaborative working and continual professional development for all schools within the trust. Aspire encapsulates this commitment, living by its strapline "working together, inspiring excellence" in each of its 37 primary academies – of which three have Church of England Foundation - 22 nurseries and 2 outdoor education centres, located across Cornwall.

Our trust seeks a senior educational leader with a strong understanding of school improvement and safeguarding. They should also have experience of impactful school improvement both in individual settings and across groups of schools as well as experience of national safeguarding regulations and how to ensure these are in place across a large trust.

Click here for further information on how to apply

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](#)



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



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)

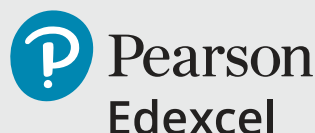
Start date: 1st September 2025

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](#)

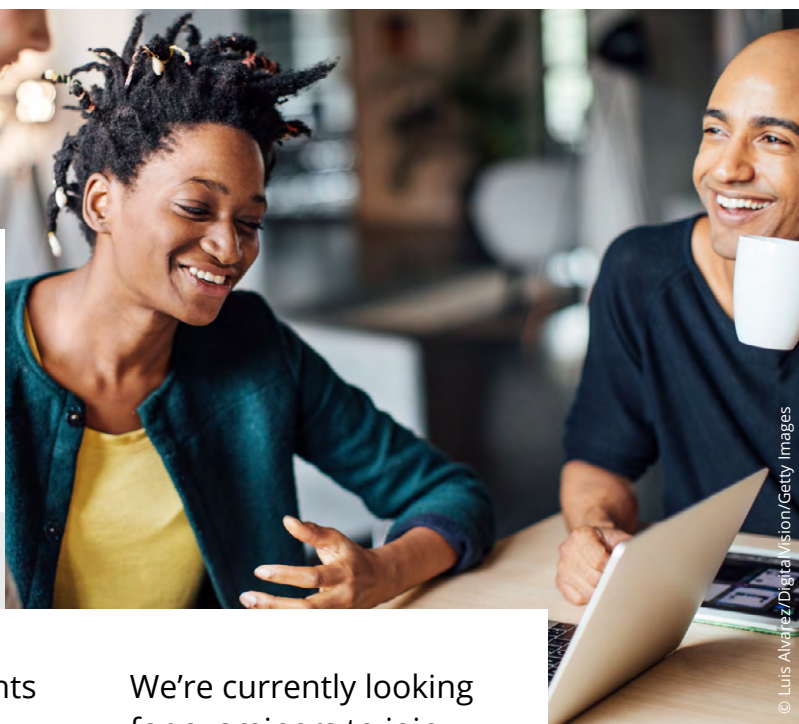


Become an examiner

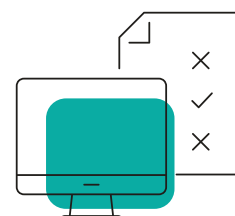
Join our team today.

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

