



## HOW TO RECRUIT GREAT GOVERNORS (DON'T CALL THEM VOLUNTEERS!)



Page 30

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN MUMS RETURN TO TEACHING?



Pages 11-12

## HOW WE CAN ENSURE OUR SCHOOLS CATER FOR ALL OUR KIDS



Page 25

## 'TEACHER VISA' CALLS FOR OVERSEAS RECRUITMENT



Page 18

# INVESTIGATION: ON THE SEND CRISIS FRONTLINE



INVESTIGATION | Page 21

## Schools warned over 'inadvertent' minimum wage breaches

- Unqualified teacher rates may fall below threshold
- Lawyers warn leaders over 'compliance risk'
- But DfE says it's an issue for schools to deal with

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE | Page 4

SCHOOLS  
WEEK

## Meet the news team

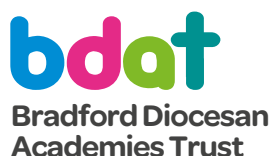
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WEEK

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All eyes turn to next week's spending review, which will set the school funding landscape for the next three years.

With unfunded teacher pay rises savaging school budgets, leaders are increasingly nervous about how it might go.

Unsurprisingly, the government has prioritised child poverty. This was a key election campaign priority, but ministers are under heavy criticism for wider cuts to disability benefits that seem to contradict their own poverty promises.

Eager to get some good press, the government announced the expansion on free school meals this week (page 7). While the plans were broadly welcomed for improving things for children, schools won't see a pupil premium uplift.

But what else might schools expect next week? One issue that could feature is special needs reforms.

Ministers need to communicate clearly how any changes will improve outcomes and support for the country's most vulnerable pupils.

One way to get on the front foot of what are politically sensitive reforms would be to announce new investment and funding first.

Our investigation into the staff on the frontline of the SEND crisis (pages 20 to 24) shows just how urgent this is.

And chef Jamie Oliver makes a passionate case for why schools need to do more to cater for all pupils (page 25).

The government has also promised more clarity on its pledge to deliver 6,500 new teachers in shortage subjects after the spending review.

This week delivered more potential green shoots of a recruitment and retention recovery (page 5), but there is still a long way to go.

Our exclusive analysis of a large-scale study looking into what happens when new mothers return to teaching also shows the potential of flexible working to boost retention (pages 11 to 12). The big question for ministers is how they support schools to take the issue out of the 'too difficult' drawer.

Meanwhile, we have a super double-bill opinion special on both the outcomes of white working class children and, as we celebrate volunteers week, good governance.

## Most read online this week:

- 1 Striking teachers tell trust to extend lunch break instead of lessons**
- 2 Headteacher appointed as new DfE 'school leader adviser'**
- 3 MAT names inclusion director as new CEO**
- 4 DfE extends neurodiversity support scheme, but with less funding**
- 5 Biggest-ever academy trust merger given minister greenlight**

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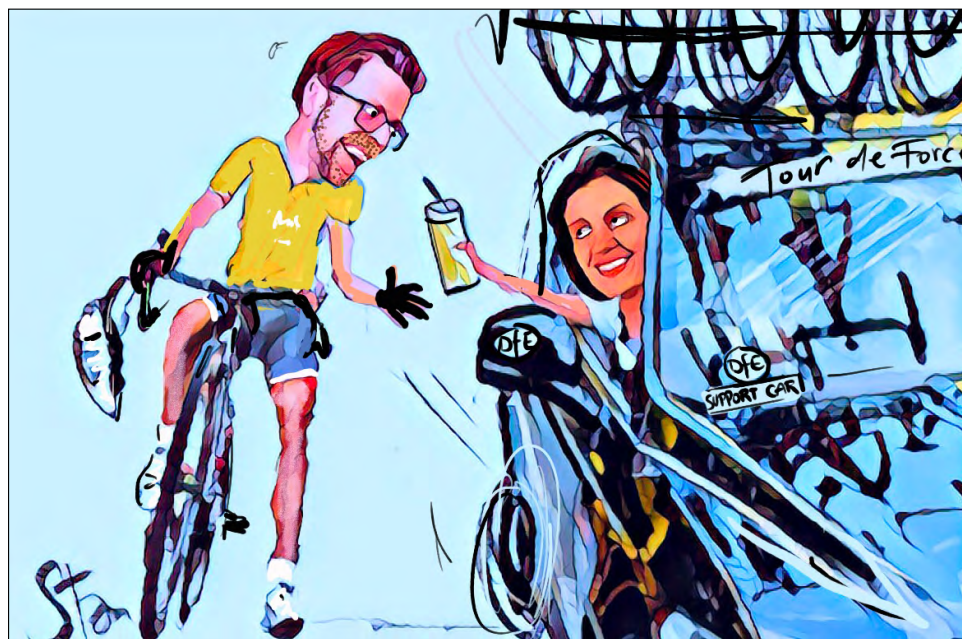
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See story, page 16



## NEWS: TEACHER PAY

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# Schools risk breaking minimum wage law

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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EXCLUSIVE

Schools risk “inadvertently” breaking minimum wage law if they follow national pay scales for unqualified teachers, legal experts have warned, with ministers leaving leaders to navigate the confusion on their own.

Multiple recent increases mean the national living wage (NLW) is now £12.21 an hour for those aged over 21.

Someone working 37.5 hours a week can expect to earn £23,800 a year, while someone working 40 hours could earn almost £25,400.

However, despite the proposed 4 per cent pay rise for teachers next year, the first point on the unqualified pay range outside London is now below these thresholds at £22,601.

Teachers are technically only “directed” to work 1,265 hours a year, but in reality work much longer. According to the Department for Education, full-time teachers report an average working week of 51.2 hours.

Hannah Bingham, a senior HR consultant at law firm Browne Jacobson, said the pay scale issue “could cause a compliance risk” if unqualified teachers were expected or directed to work unpaid hours “beyond those for which they are salaried”.

“Even if the contract says 32.5 or 37.5 hours, if in practice the role demands longer hours, for example extracurricular clubs, marking, planning, the effective hourly rate might breach the national living wage.”

The draft pay scales, published in the report of the School Teachers’ Review Body (STRB), will come into effect from September once the government has consulted on its pay decision.

The report said that employers “should ensure that implementation of the pay award complies with the national living wage policy.”

“We also expect that the department will want to satisfy itself that employers are compliant.”

However, when approached by Schools Week, the DfE said the matter was one for employers.

Louise Hatswell, a pay specialist at the Association of School and College Leaders, said it was “not acceptable for the government to distance itself and claim this is solely an issue for employers.”

“After all, it is the government that sets the statutory pay levels, and at the very least, it should



## ‘The pay scales could cause a compliance risk’

guarantee that they are lawful and deliverable.”

National data shows that in 2023-24, 3,714 teachers, or 0.7 per cent of those nationally, earned less than £25,000 a year. But rates vary by region.

In the north east, north west and inner London, just 0.4 per cent of teachers earned less than £25,000. In the east of England the figure was 1.2 per cent.

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the school leaders’ union NAHT, said: “This could potentially put some schools in a difficult position.

“It will be important that trusts and local authorities work closely with individual schools to help them understand the implications and any actions they need to take.”

Schools could also face a similar issue with support staff pay.

Even after the proposed 3.2 per cent pay rise this financial year, the lowest pay point will be around £24,410.

However, the process for setting support staff pay has not concluded, so the full pay scales are not known.

Bingham said schools and trusts “may face reputational risk or compliance audits if this issue is not addressed proactively”.

“We share in the concern that schools using the lowest pay

points on the unqualified range may inadvertently breach NLW law, especially where hours worked in practice are longer than contractually stated.”

She urged schools to carry out a pay risk audit, update their pay policies with pay floors that complied with the minimum wage and arrange training for HR and payroll teams.

It follows concerns that teacher pay rises overall are not keeping up with wage rises in the wider economy. The national living wage rose by 6.7 per cent in April, whereas teachers’ pay will rise by 4 per cent in September.

The STRB estimated teachers’ earnings in 2023-24 were 18.2 per cent below their level in 2010-11 in real terms, compared with 2.5 per cent across the whole economy.

Stephen Morales, the chief executive of the Institute of School Business Leadership, said: “Whilst there is technically a vulnerability of breach with the new pay settlement it feels like a temporary gap in the arrangements.

“We would always encourage our members to do the right thing and be diligent enough to close any loopholes.

“That said, it is important that we make schools and trusts aware of the short-term risks of falling below the NLW and inadvertently underpaying important support staff colleagues.”



Stephen Morales



## NEWS

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## Fewer teachers quit and more return: 8 workforce findings

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

New workforce data for 2024 shows recruitment and retention pressures may be easing. Here's what school leaders need to know

**Teacher numbers shrink for first time in years**

The number of full-time equivalent teachers has dropped by 400 since last year to 468,300, the first fall since 2017-18.

But the government said this "aligns with changes in the pupil population" as nursery and primary full-time teachers decreased by 2,900 (1.3 per cent), but secondary numbers rose by 1,400 (0.7 per cent).

This means there are now more teachers at secondary than primary for first time since 2013.

**Fewer join (but more returners) ...**

The number of full-time teachers joining the sector stood at 41,700, down 1,400 since last year. It's the lowest figure since records started in 2011-12.

The figure includes new teachers, those joining the state sector and returners.

But the rate of those returning is the highest since 2014-15.

In all, 17,274 returned to teaching, up from 16,985 in 2023-24. The figure has risen every year since 2021-22.

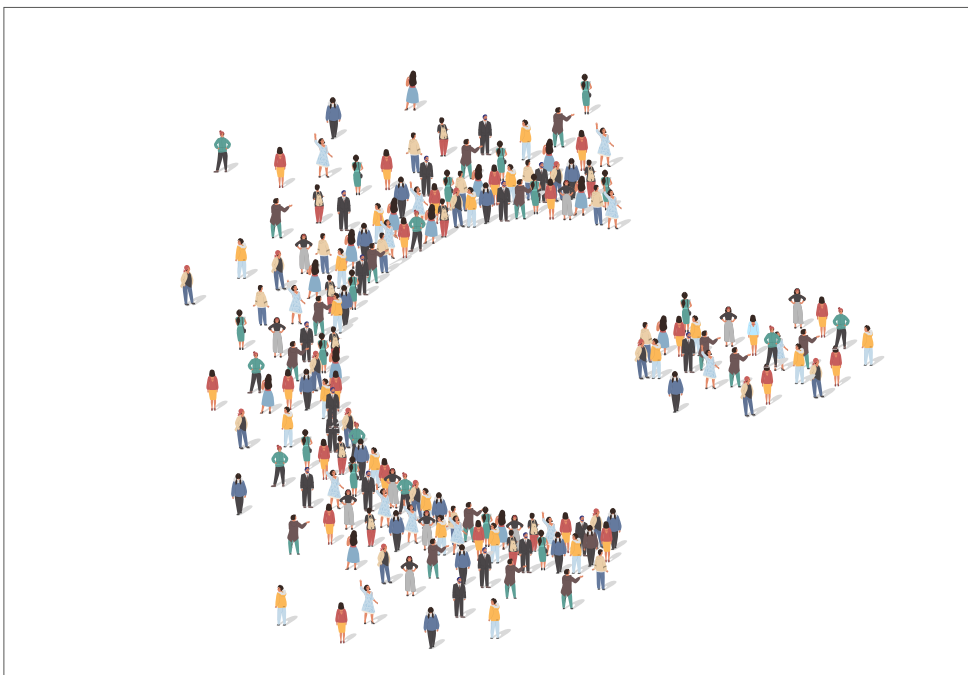
James Zuccollo, of the Education Policy Institute, said this suggested teaching jobs were "becoming more attractive". The government must "understand" why and "build on that success".

**.. and fewer quitting, although numbers still high**

About 41,200 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers left in 2023-24, down on 42,600 in 2022-23 and the lowest since 2020.

Most of last year's leavers (91 per cent) quit for jobs outside the state sector.

But numbers are still high. More than 1,600 heads left for a job outside the state sector in 2023-24. That stood at 438 in 2010-11.

**Retention rates improve for new teachers**

Retention rates for the two newest cohorts of teachers also increased.

Just under 90 per cent of those who earned their stripes in 2023 were still teaching one year on – up by 0.7 percentage points and higher than any point over the past 15 years.

Meanwhile, 80.5 per cent of teachers who qualified in 2022 are still in the profession, up on 79.2 per cent.

Retention rates worsened for most other cohorts. But Jack Worth, of the National Foundation of Educational Research, said the "steady improvement" was an indicator of "green shoots of progress" towards addressing "chronic" recruitment and retention issues.

**Part-time rise drives down teacher numbers**

Changes to working patterns also impacted full-time equivalent (FTE) teacher numbers.

This year, 4.4 per cent of the workforce increased their working hours, while 6 per cent reduced their hours. This led to a net decrease of 2,530 FTE qualified teachers.

The gap has also grown. In 2023-24, more teachers increased their hours (4.8 per cent), and fewer decreased their hours (5.7 per cent) compared with this year. This equated to a 2,050 FTE decrease in teachers.

**Vacancies come down, but still above pre-pandemic rates**

The number of unfilled teaching posts reduced to 2,200, after more than doubling in the previous three years from 1,100 in 2020, to a peak of 2,800 in 2023-24.

Vacancies also dipped to 5 per 1,000 teachers, from 6 per 1,000 in 2023. But levels remain higher than pre-pandemic.

**Average teacher pay almost £50,000**

Median classroom teacher pay rose by 6.3 per cent to just under £49,000 in 2024-25, while headteacher salaries increased 5.5 per cent to more than £83,000.

The DfE noted male and female salaries "are broadly similar in most cases", but secondary heads earned 5 per cent more.

**Leadership gender gap narrows**

Figures show women remain less likely to be in leadership roles, but the difference has reduced over time.

The proportion of leadership positions held by women rose by one percentage point to 70 per cent this year. Since 2010-11, the level has risen by four percentage points.

Overall, 76 per cent of teachers are women.

## NEWS: FUNDING

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## Heads 'literally walking on fire' to prop up budgets

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Headteachers are "literally walking on fire" to raise money for their schools, ministers have been warned ahead of next week's spending review.

All eyes are on Chancellor Rachel Reeves who on Wednesday will set out her plans for government spending over the next three financial years.

It is the first multi-year spending review since 2021, and school leaders are hoping for a period of sufficiency and stability after the turmoil of recent years, when costs have repeatedly outstripped funding.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned schools face a £400 million black hole next year because of unfunded pay rises, despite additional cash allocated at last year's budget and a further £615 million this year.

A survey by the headteachers' union NAHT this week found 98 per cent of its members reported not having enough money to meet pupils' needs, with leaders turning to ever more desperate measures to raise cash.

Natalie Sefton, the head of St James's C of E Primary in Wollaston, Northamptonshire, will participate in a fire walk organised by her parents, teachers and friends association (PTFA) to raise cash for glue sticks, crayons and "the basics we can't afford".

She said her school had already had to find £75,000 of savings last year, and would need to save another £100,000 this year. Curriculum enrichment and school trips have been cut because coach fees are too high.

She said the school relied on its PTFA to "provide a buffer" before the end of each financial year.

"They provide us with pencils, crayons, glue sticks, basically the basics that we can't afford to replace until April."

A few weeks ago the PTFA asked if she would take part in a fire walk to raise cash "because they feel that my completing it would raise a lot of attention".

"I definitely don't get paid enough to do that. It's definitely not in my job description. But I do recognise that it's something that is potentially going to bring in more money for the financial



Chancellor Rachel Reeves

year ahead."

The partially funded pay rise for next year, with soaring energy costs and a 10 per cent increase in the cost of traded services from the local authority, will make matters worse.

"We're hand to mouth. That's how it feels on the ground." She was waiting "with bated breath" for the spending review.

"We are keeping our fingers crossed that we're going to get something substantial because, honestly, I don't know what we are all going to do if we don't get the right funding."

Alison Grennan, the head of St Luke's primary in Wolverhampton, said her school has increasingly relied on reserves, but expected these to dry up next year.

She has not been able to replace departing staff, and has cut trips and experiences for pupils.

Grennan said the government was "constantly going on about raising standards, and I'm fully supportive of that, but I don't know how they think we can do that if the funding doesn't cover the staffing that we need."

Ministers have consistently warned more difficult choices lie ahead.

But leaders hope they have been trying to manage expectations, and that the schools' budget will

finally rise in line with costs.

Paul Whiteman, the NAHT's general secretary, said school leaders "are literally walking on fire for their pupils and staff."

"They are doing everything they can to make things work, but there are just no palatable moves left to make."

A central criticism of government is that funding for pay rises and the lift in national insurance contributions is not based on what it actually costs to run schools.

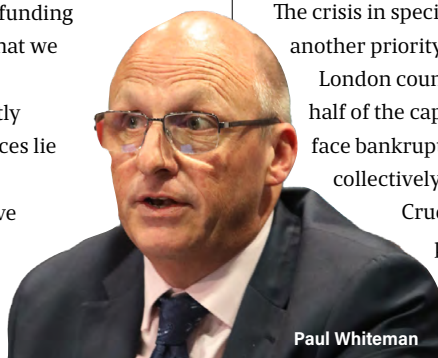
Julia Harnden, a funding specialist at the ASCL union, warned this week that a "headroom" described by the government in its instructions to schools "varies significantly between individual schools".

Leora Cruddas, the chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, wants to see school spending "re-based to reflect actual staffing and running costs, and a capital settlement that makes bold progress in fixing years of under-investment in buildings".

The crisis in special educational needs is another priority.

London councils have warned that about half of the capital's boroughs effectively face bankruptcy as their deficits collectively soar to £500 million.

Cruddas said special needs provision faced a "structural and a financial crisis".



Paul Whiteman

# Free school meal expansion (but no extra pupil premium)

FREDDIE WHITTAKER  
@FCDWHITTAKER

All children from households eligible for universal credit will be offered free meals from next year, but schools won't get extra pupil premium cash for those that gain access to free lunches. At present, only families with a household income below £7,400 can claim free lunches.

The Department for Education said it estimated more than 500,000 extra pupils would become eligible as a result of its extension, and claimed it would pull 100,000 children out of poverty.

It has been handed £1 billion in new money to fund the extension over three years.

Prime minister Sir Keir Starmer said: "Feeding more children every day, for free, is one of the biggest interventions we can make to put more money in parents' pockets, tackle the stain of poverty, and set children up to learn."

But the Department for Education has said the pupils who become eligible under the extension will not attract pupil premium funding, which is meant to help schools support their most disadvantaged pupils.

At present, schools receive up to £1,480 a year



Sir Keir Starmer serves food during a visit to a school in Essex

for each pupil who has been eligible for free school meals at any point in the previous six years. That won't be the case for those who become newly eligible under the planned extension.

Dr Tammy Campbell, of the Education Policy Institute, said there did "not appear to be a clear rationale from government as to why the new free school meal eligibility criteria will not be reflected in pupil premium eligibility."

"The government is clear that these children are growing up in difficult circumstances. As such they are more likely to have lower attainment and benefit from additional support in school."

Russell Hobby, CEO of Teach First, said without

the extra pupil premium funding, "schools miss out on essential resources that could further support pupils' academic progress and wellbeing".

The DfE said it expected "the majority of schools will allow parents to apply before the start of the school year 2026, by providing their national insurance number to check their eligibility".

School food campaigner Andy Jolley said the extension was a "really positive move".

But he warned it was a "missed opportunity to introduce auto-enrolment" for free school meals.

"There is a risk some families will fall through the gap and not register, whilst schools will be concerned there is a new expectation on them to process parents' national insurance details."

## Funding for poor pupils reviewed amid cash fall row

The government is reviewing the way it allocates funding for disadvantaged pupils to "ensure it is targeted to those who need it most", amid concerns the shake-up of free school meals could cut pupil premium cash.

As part of the announcement this week, ministers confirmed that "transitional protections" – put in place during the rollout of universal credit to stop pupils losing access to meals if their household income increased – will end next year.

The actual number of pupils with transitional protections is not published. Government would not provide the figure to *Schools Week*.

The Conservatives claimed the changes would cost schools £1.5 billion in lost pupil premium funding. They claimed 1.2 million children with transitional protections in place would stop receiving FSM and attracting pupil premium.

However, education secretary Bridget

Phillipson said this was a "barefaced lie".

"Not one penny is being taken away from disadvantaged children – not through transitional protections, not through pupil premium, not through related school funding."

The Department for Education added "current level of pupil premium and related school funding will be maintained and no-one will lose pupil premium eligibility next year, while we look over the long term at how we allocate it in a better targeted way".

Pupil premium cash is also paid for pupils who have been eligible for free meals at any point over a six-year period, meaning any loss of funding would not come for years, the DfE added.

A spokesperson added its extension would mean "over 500,000 more children on free school meals, after transitional protections end, with nobody losing their free meals unless they

earn above the limit for universal credit".

Ministers had already pledged to review the national funding formula, which allocates a portion of school funding based on disadvantage. The pupil premium is paid on top of that cash, and spending next year will total around £3 billion.

The DfE said that over the longer term, "we recognise there are disparities in outcomes for children attracting pupil premium and this government is committed to doing more to improve the life chances of our most disadvantaged children and break the link between background and future success."

"We are therefore reviewing how we allocate pupil premium and related funding to schools and local authorities to address this issue and ensure it is targeted to those who need it most – while maintaining the overall amount we spend on these funding streams."



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## NEWS

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# Morris and Patel to lead white working-class kids inquiry

JOHN DICKENS

@JOHNDICKENSSW

Trust chief executive Sir Hamid Patel and Estelle Morris, a former education secretary, will lead a year-long inquiry into the education outcomes of white working-class children.

Contrary to reports in national newspapers, the inquiry has not been ordered by Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, although Sir Kevan Collins, the school standards tsar, will be involved as a board member.

The inquiry will be run by consultants Public First and Patel's Star Academies trust.

Funding for the project will come from private philanthropy, raised by Patel.

In a statement sent to national newspapers at the weekend, Phillipson said white working-class children had "been betrayed – left behind in society's rear-view mirror."

"They are children whose interests too many politicians have simply discarded. That's why I have tasked my officials with bearing down on this scandal."



Government data published on Monday showed just 21 secondary schools in which disadvantaged white British pupils had a Progress 8 score greater than zero. This was based only on schools where more than 20 per cent of GCSE pupils came from white working-class families.

"We'll look closely at what's working in the tiny number of schools that the data indicates may have cracked this problem," Phillipson said, "alongside evidence that will be gathered by a new independent inquiry."

Contrary to reports, David Blunkett, a former education secretary, will not be on the panel.

It will be called the 'Independent Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes'. But no further details have been announced.

"The data shows a clear picture," Phillipson said. "Across attendance, attainment and life chances, white working-class children and those with SEND do exceptionally poorly."

Of the 1,228 secondaries with more than 20 per cent white working-class pupils taking GCSEs, 1,061 (86 per cent) had a Progress 8 score for those youngsters of -0.5 or worse.

The 21 schools with a score of 0.5 or better made up just 1.7 per cent of the institutions. The rest had a Progress 8 score of between 0 and -0.5.

Phillipson added: "My message to parents is that we will create a school system where every child, in every classroom, has the support they need to achieve, and a fair crack at making a success of their life."

National newspapers said the move has been seen as an attempt to take on Nigel Farage's Reform party.

It is not the first inquiry into the issue. The education committee ran an inquiry in 2014 and again in 2021.

The latter concluded white working class pupils had been let down after decades of neglect.

JESSIE WILLIAMS | @SCHOOLSWEEK

## Flagship training provider to award its own PGCEs

The National Institute of Teaching (NlOT) has been granted the power to award degrees, in a move it says takes it closer to becoming a "specialist, school-led university for the teaching profession".

From September, the government's flagship teacher training provider will award its own postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE).

Teacher trainers without such powers have to partner with universities to award trainees their final qualification.

Set up by academy trusts Star Academies, the Harris Federation, Outwood Grange and Oasis, NlOT has been granted the new powers by the Office for Students, the higher education regulator, following a multi-year assessment.

Melanie Renowden, NlOT's chief executive, said it meant the institute could "more effectively combine the

academic enquiry and practice-based learning that new teachers need when they are building fundamental knowledge and habits.

"We believe that taking this school-led and research-informed approach to educators' professional development will pay long-term dividends for the teachers themselves and for the generations of children they will teach."

Launched in 2022 with £120 million of funding, NlOT offers teacher training, mentoring and early career support, alongside a range of leadership courses.

The government-funded organisation faced criticism after it emerged that recruits from two of its founders – Harris and Star – counted towards its recruitment figures in 2023-24.

Sir Dan Moynihan, the chief executive of Harris and

chair of the NlOT board, said the new powers represented "a significant advancement in our work on teacher education and recognition of our rigorous academic standards."

"We will use the powers ... to continue developing high-quality teachers, ensuring they are well-equipped to meet the needs of pupils today – particularly those facing the greatest challenges."

"Above all we will remain grounded in schools, prioritising what all teachers and leaders want: delivering what works best for children."

It comes as the sector continues to face a huge teacher recruitment and retention crisis.

The government has pledged to recruit an extra 6,500 teachers by the end of this parliament.

But government officials have admitted delivering the flagship election manifesto pledge was a "significant challenge".



Melanie Renowden



## NEWS

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## Defence review wants more school cadets (but DfE cut cash)

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

The government should expand in-school cadet forces by 30 per cent by 2030, its defence review said, less than a year after the Department for Education cut funding.

The review also said it should set an ambition to have 250,000 cadets – in school and community forces – in the “longer term”.

But the Ministry of Defence insisted that government and private funding would be needed to support the expansion.

The DfE recently slashed £1.1 million from a scheme set up to do just that, citing “difficult choices” about the financial situation inherited by Labour.

The government has accepted all of the review’s recommendations, but plans for the expansion as well as any funding arrangements have not been finalised.

According to government statistics, about 51,000 pupils are in the school-based “combined cadet force (CCF)”. There are also more than 88,000



community cadets.

About 15,300 more school-based cadets would be needed to reach the 30 per cent target by 2030.

School-based cadets represent 36.6 per cent of those nationally. If they were to continue to make up the same proportion under the government’s longer-term ambition, their numbers would have to rise about 79 per cent to more than 91,000.

Neil O’Brien, the shadow education minister, told Schools Week: “The defence review calls for cadet expansion but the DfE recently cut funding for cadet expansion. The government is all over the place.”

The DfE was approached for comment.

There are also concerns about staff availability to support any growth in cadet forces.

A MoD-funded evaluation found pupils participating in cadet forces had “significantly lower levels of absence”. Schools also reported “positive outcomes associated with the CCF contingent”.

Leaders viewed having cadet forces as “a significant resource investment, but one that was a good investment for the school to make”. The report also noted “concerns about the turnover of CCF adult volunteers”.

John Howson, a teacher recruitment expert, said many new staff would be needed in “areas where the schools have been failing to meet recruitment targets for teaching staff for years”.

In its review, the MoD said there should also be a “greater focus within the cadets on developing STEM skills and exploring modern technology”.

“Defence, wider government, and partnerships with the private sector must provide appropriate leadership, support and funding to deliver this expansion.”



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## ANALYSIS: RETENTION

## Mums who return to teaching part-time more likely to stay

JESSIE WILLIAMS

@SCHOOLSWEEK

EXCLUSIVE

Teachers returning from maternity leave are more likely to stay in their jobs if they work part-time, a major new study suggests.

It also reveals how the first 12 months back are crucial for retaining new mums.

The Key Group report – believed to be the first large-scale study into what happens when teachers return from maternity leave – also found mothers are less likely to quit in the medium-term than their peers.

The study was based on 150,000 teachers across a four-year period at more than 6,700 schools in England, including nearly 3,000 teachers who went on maternity leave.

**Part-timers more likely to stay**

Overall, teachers starting maternity leave in 2020 were slightly less likely to leave their school over the following four years (39 per cent), compared with all teachers (42 per cent). This includes teachers who move to another school, rather than leave the profession.

The leaving rate dropped to 32 per cent for returners who worked part time. This went up to 45 per cent for those who went back full time.

Researchers say this suggests that offering part-time roles is “one way to retain females, and to retain them at higher levels than average”.

Women in their thirties make up the largest single demographic to leave teaching each year, so this should be “prioritised if we want to really improve retention rates overall”, they add.

Nearly one in four of the 40,000 teachers who left the profession in 2022-23 were women in this age group.

Baroness Bousted, a former union boss who now leads the Teaching Commission, says it is no longer “good enough” to put part-time and flexible working in the “too difficult” drawer.

“We need, as a profession, to ask ‘how can we accommodate this request in order to keep our best talent?’”

**The north-south and primary-secondary divide**

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, has previously said she is “really concerned” about the number of experienced women, particularly those in their 30s, who leave teaching because they find it too difficult to combine work with

**‘It’s not good enough to put flexible working in the ‘too difficult’ draw’**

family life.

The report found big differences between school type and location. Thirty-one per cent of all teachers in the study worked part-time in the south west, compared with 16 per cent in inner London.

Returning mothers were twice as likely to work part-time (40 per cent compared with 20 per cent of all teachers), with discrepancies between returners in primaries (32 per cent) and secondaries (44 per cent).

Matt Crawford, the chief executive of the Embark Federation, says timetabling could be a hurdle. “It’s much easier to accommodate part-time teachers in primary, where you can run job shares, or slot an SLT [senior leadership team] member into a class.”

It is more difficult at secondary, especially in core subjects that have multiple lessons a week, and where leaders do not like multiple teachers because it makes accountability for GCSE results harder.

Returning mothers working in secondaries had a 43 per cent leaving rate – rising to 60 per cent of the 162 teachers who worked in London secondary schools. The leaving rate was 37 per cent in primary schools.

Meanwhile, schools in the north of England did



Emma Sheppard

a better job of retaining staff coming back from maternity leave.

The report flags the relatively higher wages of teachers compared with other sectors in the north, while the high cost of living could be a factor for the poor retention in London.

**The hurdle of the first year back**

The study found 17 per cent of returning teachers quit within a year of coming back from maternity leave, five percentage points higher than the leaving rate for all teachers.

However, if they stayed more than a year the rate dropped to just 10 per cent in later years.

Emma Sheppard, the co-author of the 2024

Continued on next page

ANALYSIS: RETENTION



Missing Mothers report, says the first year back is when women are “particularly vulnerable to leaving. Even when working in the most supportive of schools, this is a period of huge change that requires understanding and flexibility from employers.”

One-to-one and group coaching could help schools support mothers to “navigate the necessary compromises and find harmony between their home and school lives, without reaching breaking point in either sphere”.

Anna McShane, the director of The New Britain Project, an independent think tank, says teaching is “haemorrhaging” experienced women because it failed to accommodate the “basic realities of motherhood”.

The Missing Mothers report found mothers in their thirties cited excessive workload, family commitments, and lack of flexible working arrangements as their reasons for leaving teaching.

Leadership FOMO

The lack of flexible working in leadership is another hurdle, with 31 per cent of female classroom teachers working part-time compared with just 8 per cent of heads.

Shanti, a year 3 teacher with two children, works three days a week in a job-share. “I wouldn’t be able to do my job if it wasn’t part-time – I couldn’t make it work practically,” she says.

“But I do worry that it’s impossible to climb the ladder as a part-time teacher and that makes me feel stagnant.

Jonny Uttley, the chief executive of The Education Alliance, says many part-time teachers “have to



Claire Heald

give up hopes of progressing to leadership. Far too many great female teachers with leadership potential do not progress once they go part-time.”

But Uttley says his trust has three heads working four-day weeks, with a deputy stepping up on the fifth day. “This is great leadership training in itself.”

Claire Heald, the chief executive of The Cam Education Trust, says it can “sometimes be easier” for mothers to fill leadership roles because



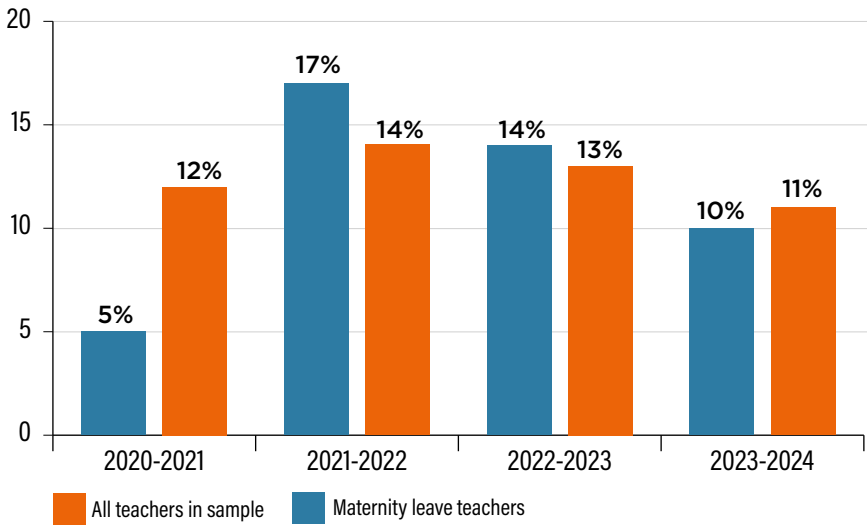
Jonny Uttley

therein be more flexibility than a full timetable of classroom teaching.

The report also calls for all trusts and schools to evaluate their retention data and offer part-time working to all returning mothers.

They should also advertise vacancies as “being open to flexible working, part-time working and job shares”, and to consider termly updates to the timetable to accommodate those making requests throughout the year.

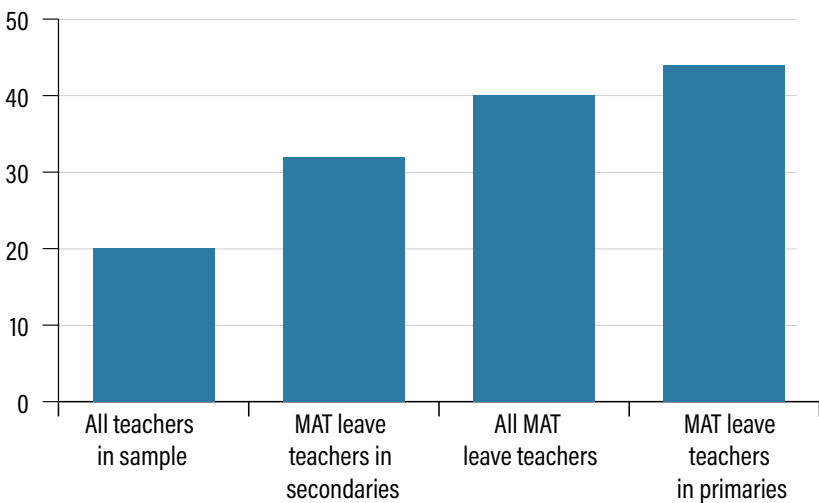
Leaving rates year-on-year



Source: Key Group analysis of leaving rates of 2,982 maternity returners and nearly 150,000 teachers

SCHOOLS WEEK

The percentage of teachers working part-time



Source: Key Group data of 150,000 teachers and whether they were working part-time by September 2024

SCHOOLS WEEK

## NEWS: MAT MERGERS

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# Trust pulls plug on merger after chair's resignation

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

A MAT has walked away from merger plans at the last minute, claiming the trust it was joining had been plunged into "instability" after the sudden resignation of its chair.

Veritas MAT had consulted parents on teaming up with Rainham Mark Education Trust (RMET), with an application due to be submitted to the government.

However, Veritas pulled the plug this week. In a letter to parents it said the decision followed a "sequence of events" that "resulted in the resignation of RMET's chair".

"This instability in governance at RMET is not in accord with the five pillars of high-quality trusts," the letter added.

"Veritas trustees concluded there was no longer a secure foundation to progress a merger, and that a merger would not be in the best interests of Veritas' pupils, staff or community."

Kent Online reported that RMET announced David Valentine, its chair, had resigned with "immediate effect" citing "personal reasons". The trust would not give any more information.

## Left in a 'quandary'

Dr Kerry Jordan-Daus, the chief executive of Veritas, stepped in to lead RMET on an interim basis last summer, with the agreement due to end later this month.

The trusts later deemed it "an opportune time for both trusts to join" and form a six-school MAT.

Documents shared with parents said because Jordan-Daus had "a proven track record of transformational leadership... preliminary discussions had already taken place through both trust boards as to whether this could become a permanent arrangement". It would have also provided RMET "much-needed stability".

But Emma Knights, a former National Governance Association boss, said those involved in planning mergers should not jump in before everything was signed and sealed.

RMET had been left "in a quandary", as it would have been able to go "back to where they were... [with] no change at all" if it had its own chief executive.



Simon Haseltine, the chair of Veritas, told Schools Week that trustees had focused on their "priorities, values and vision and whether the merger would enhance this".

An RMET spokesperson added it was now "taking actions" to ensure its "board has the resource it needs to build on its positive trajectory".

## 'If it's snubbed – what then?'

Paul Tarn, the chief executive of Delta Academies Trust, took over Coast and Vale Learning Trust as chief executive last year, following an "in-principle agreement" to join forces.

At the time, one MAT leader warned of the risks of such a move, noting: "[The trusts] are so far down the line. If the board doesn't think it's the right match, what happens then?"

Despite this, ministers approved the proposals – which will take Delta's tally to 63 schools – four months ago.

Government data shows how mergers are changing the profile of the academy sector. The average size of a trust has increased from 3.1 schools in 2019 to 5.3 this April.

Analysis also suggests that the proportion of chains that are single-academy trusts has fallen from 58 per cent to 47 per cent over the past six years.

In 2019, the second most common size of trust, after standalone, was three to five schools. Now it is six to 10.

## Growth 'more sustainable'

There has been a spate of larger mergers. Last week it was confirmed that ministers have

given the go-ahead to plans to create England's second biggest multi-academy trust.

In a proposal drawn up by the Archdiocese of Birmingham, six chains will combine to create a 63-school MAT, St Gabriel the Archangel.

DfE officials were due to make a decision in February, but papers from the meeting, released last week, show the case was instead escalated to government ministers "due to its novel nature".

Plans for Futura Learning Partnership and the Olympus Academy Trust to form a 35-school MAT are also due to go before the department's southwest advisory board this month.

A bigger trust "with a substantial number of large secondary schools, would be much more financially resilient", parents were told.

The Compass Partnership of Schools and Eko Trust are set to merge next year to form a new 25-school chain stretching across London, Essex, Suffolk and Brighton.

A report by the Kreston group of accountancy firms this year said large MATs had a better financial performance and were "more confident about the future".

"So, if the sector is trying to ensure that it is financially sustainable then the obvious solution would be for MATs to become large or at least for the smaller MATs to become larger."



Emma Knights



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# Harris Federation scales back redundancies

**JACK DYSON**  
**@JACKYDYS**

One of England's biggest trusts has scaled back redundancy plans at 20 of its schools.

Schools Week revealed last month that 45 jobs were at risk across the Harris Federation, with the MAT blaming "extremely challenging" budgets caused by "unfunded" pay and national insurance rises.

After National Education Union members in four academies balloted for strike action, the trust confirmed the number of job cuts has been reduced to 15 "out of a teaching workforce of 2,650".

But Daniel Kebede, the NEU's general secretary, said that a loss of 15 frontline teaching staff meant a "cut to children's education".

In a letter last month about the redundancies, Harris said it was "facing an unfunded pay rise for teachers of 2.8 per cent and for support staff of 3.2 per cent, which we will have to fund from existing budgets".

It also faced a "critical drop in income as, like nearly all London schools, we are experiencing a significant drop in our rolls resulting from the



falling birth rate and therefore we have no extra income to offset costs".

Since then, the government has approved a 4 per cent pay rise for teachers and provided some extra funding – but Harris said schools still had to find 2.3 per cent of the rise themselves.

Kebede claimed the NEU ballots resulted in the trust "backing down".

Pointing to chief executive Sir Dan Moynihan's £515,000 pay packet, he said that "attempts to make financial savings at the coal face [are] unacceptable from a chief executive who earns over half a million".

"The underhand practices of individually



targeting staff must end, and open and transparent negotiations with staff trade unions must begin to avoid any future redundancies that will directly impact on pupils' learning."

The 15 planned redundancies are spread across 11 secondaries.

A Harris spokesperson said that when the consultation was initially announced... "we said that we hoped the final number would be lower, with some affected staff redeployed to other roles and others due to leave or retire".

The trust was doing everything it could to support staff in the 15 roles.

Harris said it excluded overseas-trained teachers without leave to remain in the UK and those on maternity leave from redundancy.

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

## ‘Extend lunch instead of lessons’, unions tell trust

Union chiefs are urging one of England's biggest MATs to extend its 30-minute lunch breaks – instead of teaching time – after announcing strikes across 14 of its schools.

Six days of walkouts across Outwood Grange (OGAT) academies began this week over plans to push the end of the secondary school day to 3pm.

The trust said the "small" changes "will mean students can learn more and achieve even stronger outcomes". It would also mean its school day met the government's expectation for a 32.5-hour week.

But teachers' union NASUWT accused the trust of "inadequate" breaks – with just 15 minutes for a break in the morning and 30 minutes for lunch.

Matt Wrack, the union's acting general secretary, said OGAT was "damaging the

morale of its staff with these proposals".

The DfE introduced new non-statutory guidelines in July 2023, which said it expected all schools to offer a 32.5-hour week.

It initially said all schools should comply with this by September 2023, but then pushed that deadline back by a year "in recognition of the pressures facing schools".

Currently, Outwood schools open at 8.25am and lessons end at 2.30pm. The trust wants to extend this to 3pm.

The trust previously said the extra time would allow pupils to study topics "in more depth", making them "better prepared for GCSEs".

However, the NASUWT said that "most schools" had hit the 32.5-hour target "by extending break and lunch times, rather than by seeking to direct staff to work more hours for no extra pay".

Members reported that "a significant number of pupils are unable to eat or use the toilet as there is inadequate time available".

A Teacher Tapp study, released last month, has suggested 11 per cent of primaries and 14 per cent of secondaries had lunch breaks of less than 30 minutes.

The strikes in the 14 Outwood schools will run over six days until June 19.

NASUWT members at five academies will take part in the action, with NEU members in all 14 also voting to walk out.

Daniel Kebede, the general secretary of the NEU, said the vote "demonstrates the level of anger" at the plans.

An OGAT spokesperson said the trust had been "constructively engaged with our trade union partners and our colleagues since October".

## NEWS

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# LA-maintained school head joins DfE as adviser

JESSIE WILLIAMS

@SCHOOLSWEEK

Bridget Phillipson has appointed a maintained school headteacher as her “school leader adviser”.

Andrew O'Neill, the head of All Saints Catholic College in west London, took up the role on a 12-month secondment on Wednesday.

The Department for Education told Schools Week O'Neill would bring “frontline expertise directly into the heart of policy-making”.

“Exceptional school leaders drive high and rising education standards, and Andrew will provide crucial sector insights as we continue to deliver against our Plan for Change mission to break down barriers to opportunity and deliver excellence,” a government spokesperson said.

“This role will help us break the link between background and success by supporting underperforming groups – including white working-class children – and raising standards across all schools.”

The DfE said O'Neill, who was appointed after an open recruitment process, was the strongest candidate. He had a “proven track record of school leadership excellence, system-level insight and innovative approach.”

“He brings extensive experience across school improvement, special educational needs, data analysis and innovation.”

The role, advertised with a £125,000 salary, offered a “unique opportunity for an experienced school leader to contribute directly to policy development and sector engagement”.

Similar roles under the former government were originally called “teachers in residence”.

This year's job advert said the new adviser would work closely with “civil servants and education leaders on key priority projects in areas such as raising standards and delivering RISE universal priorities, promoting best practice, and supporting schools to achieve excellence”.

They would help develop strategies to promote “high and rising standards and create a self-improving sector in key areas of policy” and “provide



Andrew O'Neill

## ‘I’m glad there is another sensible voice speaking into policy’

insights into effective engagement approaches for teachers, headteachers and school staff across the sector”.

O'Neill said he was “looking forward to getting started”, adding: “Thank you to so many colleagues across the system whose work, wisdom and challenge have shaped my thinking and leadership over the years.

“I look forward to continuing those conversations in a new context and learning from even more of you as I step into this role.”

O'Neill was crowned secondary headteacher of the year at the 2022 Pearson teaching awards.

He has also created an online school analytics platform called Lighthouse, set up a group to give maintained schools a policy voice and is a member of the Headteachers' Roundtable.

His school has also had national media attention over initiatives such as lie-ins for teachers and longer school days.

O'Neill has also

spoken publicly in favour of Labour's schools agenda, including academy reforms, and is on the government's inclusion adviser group.

School leaders have welcomed his appointment. Dan Morrow, the chief executive of the CELT academy trust, said it was “superb news for the sector. Andrew has integrity, wisdom and an excellent track record.”

Others also pointed out that O'Neill's background in council-maintained schools was a break from the domination of advisers from the academy sector.

Caroline Barlow, the head of Heathfield Community College in East Sussex and co-chair of the Headteachers' Roundtable, said she was glad there was another “sensible voice” speaking into policy and that it came from a maintained school leader who was committed to “balance and collaboration across our sector”.

Paul Walton will serve as acting headteacher at All Saints.



Dan Morrow



Caroline Barlow



## NEWS: POVERTY

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# Popular schools should prioritise places for poorer pupils, says charity

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

Oversubscribed schools should be encouraged to prioritise disadvantaged pupils in admission rounds and ensure “potential isn’t determined by postcode”, a leading education charity has said.

Teach First has called on the government to boost pupil premium funding to motivate schools to adopt the approach, as part of a multi-billion package of reforms it says will “break the cycle of poverty”.

The charity suggests a pilot in which oversubscribed schools give priority to children eligible for free school meals. This could be run across multiple areas by working with a trust with national reach. If successful, the policy could be scaled nationally.

“Prioritising children from poorer backgrounds in oversubscribed school admissions is a bold but necessary step to make sure potential isn’t determined by postcode,” said Russell Hobby, Teach First’s chief executive.

Schools have been allowed to prioritise disadvantaged children since 2014, but just 5 per cent of secondaries do so.

Teach First said catchment-based admissions disproportionately favoured wealthier families who could afford to live near high-performing schools.

It said many schools inherited admission criteria from councils or previous leadership, but there was no incentive to change without “strong government backing or adequate funding”, especially “in light of potential local pushback”.

It said a pilot could test “impact on attainment, effect on community cohesion within the schools and parental perceptions, while assessing the feasibility of implementation”.

Reach Schools, a multi-academy trust in west London, prioritises poorer pupils, resulting in a “stable, above-average proportion of disadvantaged pupils and a fairer, more inclusive intake”, said Rebecca Cramer, its chief executive.

“If we want schools



to reflect and uplift their communities, we need to exercise our freedoms as schools to ensure that access to great education is fair for all, especially those who need it the most.”

When oversubscribed, Totteridge Academy in north London reserves half of its places for those on pupil premium.

This was introduced after the school’s results soared and its improved reputation led to the “unintended consequence” of fewer poorer pupils.

Last year, Progress 8 scores for pupil premium youngsters was +0.88. The change also helped create a “clear moral purpose and shared vision that ensures all pupils make excellent progress”, a report said.

But Pepe Di’Iasio, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), said it was difficult for schools to “make unilateral decisions” to prioritise disadvantaged children, because the accountability system would then penalise the school or trust in comparison with others.

He also said prioritising poorer pupil was not “straightforward”. It could, for instance, leave pupils with longer journeys to school because they were out of the traditional catchment.

Brighton and Hove City Council this year became the first

local authority to adopt an admissions policy that prioritises pupils on free school meals.

Data shows one popular school, Varndean, will admit 113 pupils eligible for free school meals this September. That accounts for 38 per cent of the intake, above the average in the area and nearly double the 20 per cent of last year.

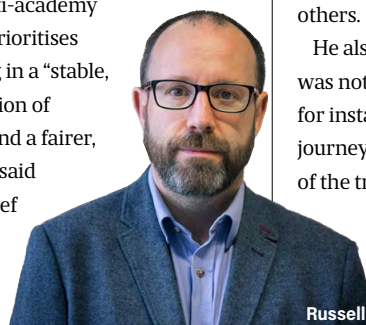
Nearly 100 children on free school meals received places at out of catchment secondary schools, with most at Varndean and another of the city’s most popular schools, Brighton and Hove News reported.

Di’Iasio said a targeted pilot seemed a sensible first step, but added that ASCL favoured a review of the school admissions code.

Other policy recommendations from Teach First included restoring the pupil premium to 2015 levels in real terms and creating a new subcategory for “persistently disadvantaged” pupils. This would cost about £640 million per year.

It also called for an expansion to teacher retention payments for those in disadvantaged schools, costing about £123 million a year, and abolishing the two-child limit, at a cost of £3.4 billion a year.

Hobby said next week’s spending review was a “crucial moment for the government to strengthen the pupil premium, so every child gets the support they need to thrive”.



Russell



Pepe Di’Iasio

## NEWS

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# Leaders want 'teacher visa' to ease overseas recruitment

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Teachers from overseas play a "key role" in helping fill vacancies in English schools, a study has found, but complicated visa rules and pricey recruitment agencies create barriers for leaders.

A new government-funded evaluation of the recruitment of international teachers also found some recruits were "unprepared to manage behaviour in English schools", while many "expressed difficulties adjusting to the culture and behaviour".

Leaders who took part in the study have called for a specific "teacher visa" that could work similarly to the simpler health and care worker visa.

The research was commissioned after the previous government introduced a £10,000 relocation payment (IRP) to encourage overseas physics and language teachers to take jobs in England, and extended some training bursaries to international trainees. The payments were scrapped last spring.

The DfE surveyed overseas teachers who successfully gained QTS in England and those who had successfully applied to train here. Researchers interviewed 38 leaders, 30 teachers, 10 recruitment agencies and 15 teacher trainers.

The proportion of secondary trainees not from the UK or the EU doubled from 3 to 6 per cent between 2019 and 2024. And the proportion of modern foreign language teachers from outside the UK and EU soared from 6 to 38 per cent.

This year, 87 per cent of secondary trainees are from the UK. Five years ago, that figure was 92 per cent.

## 1. Calls for a 'teacher visa'

The study found a "general consensus" that information on the government's website about visas was "hard to understand". Trainees and teachers "both experienced challenges with the cost of visas, and the cost of relocating".

"Many interviewees said a specific teacher visa could help streamline the application and selection process," the study said.

"Some interviewees felt this could operate similarly to the health and care worker visa which was viewed as less complex and cheaper than the skilled worker visa route."



The requirements for a health and care worker visa are tailored to staff in that sector, while teachers must apply for a general skilled work visa.

## 2. Recruits 'unprepared' for behaviour in England

Teachers and trainees held a "held a strong, positive perception about the quality of England's education system before they arrive", the report found.

But some leaders said many international recruits were "unprepared to manage behaviour in English schools". Many teachers and trainees "also expressed difficulties adjusting to the culture and behaviour in English schools.

"Professional development before starting a teaching role was used successfully by some schools, and some recruitment agencies, to manage this transition," the report said. "Training providers also provide support and guidance to help trainees integrate."

The research concluded that creating "realistic expectations" could help teachers and trainees effectively adjust and "do so more quickly".

## 3. Scrapped relocation payment 'exerts weak influence'

Researchers found support and incentives were "effective to a point".

But the relocation payment was "often less important than a bursary on a decision to train in England". The IRP was closed last year

"A genuine impact analysis would be necessary to measure additionality, but the qualitative evidence suggests in year 1 that IRP exerts weak influence on the choice to teach in England."

The study found 26 per cent of surveyed teachers were aware of the payments, while only 40 per cent of those teaching in eligible subjects received it.

## 4. Leaders want central portal

The study found many school and training provider leaders "were unsure which qualifications were equivalent to those needed by British nationals to train or teach in England".

This made decisions on who to recruit or enrol "difficult", and researchers said information that clearly mapped equivalency at a subject level across all key countries "would help".

Leaders and teacher trainers also reported that "realistic, honest information on life in England" – on the cost of living, for example – "could help teachers and trainees make informed decisions about migration".

Leaders told researchers they would like an "in-one-place system" for international recruitment advice and recruitment.

## 5. Regulate 'expensive' recruitment agencies

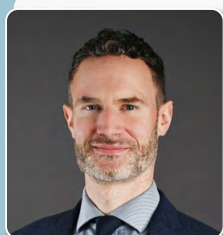
Leaders reported "mixed experiences" working with recruitment agencies.

Some found they effectively filled vacancies, while others felt they "provided poor-quality candidates".

Leaders said they wanted agencies regulated to ensure value for money and reduce "perceived sharp practices, including forwarding unreviewed CVs and ineffective candidate screening".

"All felt agencies were very expensive, but many felt they had no other option to find teachers."

## MOVERS AND SHAKERS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US [NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)**David Hatchett****Chief executive, Anthem Schools Trust****Start date:** October**Current role:** Director of standards and inclusion, Lift Schools**Interesting fact:** David has been a Kylie Minogue super-fan since he was 8. He finally met her at an invitation-only midnight signing event to mark her 50th birthday and the release of a new album.

# Movers & Shakers

Your fortnightly guide  
to who's new  
and who's leaving

**Adam Ryder****Head of secondary, Nord Anglia International School, Abu Dhabi****Start date:** September**Current role:** Deputy executive principal, The GORSE Academies Trust**Interesting fact:** Adam grew up in The Salvation Army, where his parents were officers, and now has a love of brass bands. He plays the cornet.**Stuart Anderson****Chief executive, the University of Lincoln Academy Trust****Start date:** September**Current role:** Deputy chief executive, Archway Learning Trust**Interesting fact:** Stuart is a keen runner, clocking up many miles each week before work. He has also completed a number of Iron Man events.**Karl Grimes****Director of strategic partnerships at the Changing Education Group****Start date:** May**Former role:** Careers hub strategy and development lead at The Careers & Enterprise Company**Interesting fact:** Karl used to sing in a show choir and is a karaoke champion.**James Higham****Chief executive, Archway Learning Trust****Start date:** September**Current role:** chief executive, Transforming Lives Educational Trust**Interesting fact:** James hates Marmite, loves pineapple on pizza, and always has jam before cream on a scone.

## Head of Catholic trust to retire

FEATURED

**Nick Hurn**

The chief executive of one of England's biggest multi-academy trusts retires this August.

Nick Hurn has run the 47-school Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust since it was launched in the north east five years ago.

After four of his schools were impacted by RAAC, he also became a rallying voice for leaders hit by the crumbly concrete crisis, proposing lockdown-style teacher assessed grades for affected children.

He says he is now looking forward to a "new chapter" and spending more time with his family.

Lucie Stephenson, Bishop Wilkinson's deputy chief

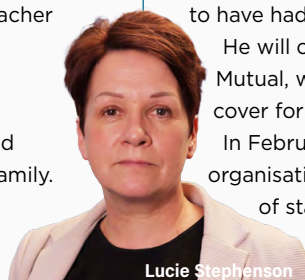
executive, will take over on an interim basis. The post will be advertised early next year.

Turn says he has worked with "some amazingly talented and inspirational people and many wonderful students throughout my career".

"I feel very proud and incredibly fortunate to have had over 40 years in education."

He will continue to run Education Mutual, which provides staff sickness cover for thousands of schools.

In February, it was revealed the organisation will cover the legal costs of staff who want to sue social media trolls.

**Lucie Stephenson**



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# Investigation

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS & JOHN DICKENS  
@SCHOOLSWEEK

# 'BURNT OUT AND ISOLATED' THE STAFF ON THE SEND CRISIS FRONTLINE

**Special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) will be central to any government plan to make mainstream schools more inclusive. But are the roles even sustainable now? Schools Week investigates...**

**N**ot many staff feel able to do it, nor continue in [the] role for long," Stephen Ellis, former head of the North

Birmingham SENCOs group, told MPs at their 'Solving the SEND crisis' inquiry.

He revealed three-quarters of SENCOs in his area had "changed over a two-year period", adding: "Morale is low. Turnover is high. Less and less time [is] given to SENCOs due to funding cuts."

The number of teaching vacancies mentioning 'SENCO' or related terms soared from 37,737 in 2018-19 to 76,633 in 2023-24, SchoolDash analysis commissioned by Schools Week shows.

Vacancies averaged around 3,100 a month in 2019. This year it was more than 7,000.

The rise has also outstripped a wider surge in school workforce vacancies. SchoolDash found the proportion of vacancies mentioning 'SENCO' had risen from four per cent in 2019 to six per cent last year.

Every school is legally required to have a designated SENCO. But Abigail Hawkins, a former SENCO who runs support group Sensible SENCO, said some are waiting "18 months to get hold of somebody" to fill vacancies.

While many issues with the job are longstanding, experts fear they may now be exacerbated by reforms to make mainstream schools more inclusive.

SENCOs will be "central to the success of any government plans to expand SEND provision within mainstream schools", said Margaret Mulholland, SEND and inclusion specialist at leaders' union ASCL. "But these roles have to be sustainable".

In a submission to MPs, SENCO Kate Worrall added: "If you want



Margaret Mulholland

# Investigation: SENCos

to start improving the outcomes of children with SEND then you need to start with SENCos – they are the grassroots and they are leaving the profession in droves because they are overworked, undervalued and isolated”.

## ‘Overwhelmed by admin’

“Having sufficient time for the role is something SENCos say is the biggest issue,” said Michael Surr, head of education at SEND charity NASEN.

More than half of SENCos reported having teaching responsibilities on top of their role, according to the landmark 2018 SENCo Workload survey by NASEN, education union NEU and Bath Spa University.

The report called for different levels of protected time for SENCos based on their school type. Those in an average-sized primary should get at least 1.5 days for the role, with three to four days for those in a secondary.

But by 2020, only around two thirds of schools had met these recommended thresholds.

Dr Helen Curran, who co-authored the Bath Spa reports, said the “hope” of giving staff protected time “has largely not materialised”.

A 2023 poll of nearly 550 SENCos by Sensible SENCo found 17 per cent were given half a day or less per week to fulfil their duties.

SENCos are instead “increasingly overwhelmed by operational demands, often without sufficient time to fulfil even the core requirements of their role,” said Curran.

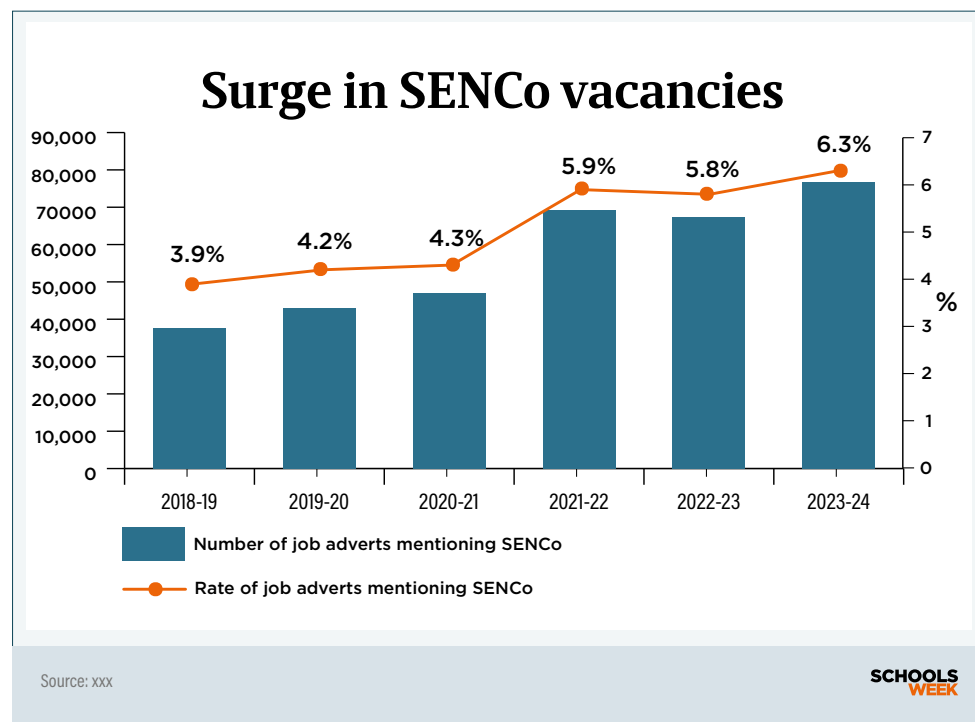
One primary school SENCo, who wanted to remain anonymous, told Schools Week she is “really struggling. I’m marking 90 plus books a day on top of my SENCo role. I end up doing SEN work during my PPA time, so I’m doing all my planning and marking at home.”

She is worried that this leaves children waiting longer for assessments and has approached her head to resign “a couple of times already”.

In March, Teacher Tapp asked nearly 400 SENCos if they expected to be in their role next academic year. One in 10 said no. Another 14 per



Abigail Hawkins



## ‘My working week is 60 hours plus eight at weekends’

cent said they were likely to be but would “prefer not to be”.

According to a survey of 358 SENCos by Twinkl last year, those looking to leave overwhelmingly cited workload – and the large admin burden – alongside lack of support and bureaucracy.

One said: “My average working week is now 60 hours Monday to Friday, plus eight at weekends. You suddenly end up realising you’ve spent more time with – and fighting for – other people’s kids at the expense of your own.”

### Budget pressures force ‘multiple hats’

SEND recruitment expert Olivia Sheppard said ever-tightening budgets mean the role is increasingly “evolving into one wearing multiple hats”.

She knows of one school trying to hire a SENCo who will also be a SEN teacher and assistant head.

“But there’s only so long you can do it before you completely burn out,”

she added.

In a recent NEU ‘state of education’ poll, two-thirds of the 625 SENCos surveyed said their workload was unmanageable.

The number of children getting SEN support rose to 1.6 million last year. Meanwhile, the number of pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) has soared from 345,000 in 2019 to 576,000 in 2024 – 10 more EHCPs per school on average.

“Phone calls, meetings, paperwork, liaising with external specialists – it takes days to gather information required for an EHCP,” said Hannah Moloney, a SENCo of 14 years. She helped spearhead the Bath Spa survey in 2018

after working in a school where she calculated her SENCo time equated to just 12 minutes per year for every child on the SEN register.

“There’s a huge disparity between what you need



Dr Helen Curran



# Investigation: SENCos

to do the job and the time you get," she added. "And now workload is increasing – but time is not, meaning it's actually a reduction in time for SENCos. It's a perfect storm for workload."

## The fight for assessment

The government is considering reforms to the EHCP system which could see them "narrowed". One idea is plans would only be issued for pupils attending special schools.

One SENCo told *Schools Week* she has children who have been waiting since October 2023 for their final plan – more than 80 weeks.

"They're never going to get that time back," she said. "We haven't got time to hang around. It's just not fair."

When children are given EHCPs, many also include requirements schools simply cannot provide.

Former SENCo Robin Jones-Ford highlighted an EHCP that said a secondary school pupil must have "an individual workstation in every classroom".

"That might possibly work in primary, but there's no way on God's earth that's going to work in secondary. But it states it in the EHCP, so the school is legally required to provide that."

SEnCo Kerry Bircher said one child at her school is required to have "special time... basically where it's complete one-to-one, no interruptions between a trusted adult and that child."

But funding the school gets for that role does not cover the cost.

SENcos said these issues are exacerbated by a lack of external specialists, such as occupational and speech and language therapists.

Meanwhile, many are forced to watch as much-needed funding they have fought hard to source for pupils with SEND is instead spent on patching up holes in their school's budget.

Jones-Ford said a lack of ring-fenced funding made his role feel "impossible". As a former head, he understands "how difficult it is to balance a budget" but it "sticks in your throat" to see SEND funding being "pulled out to paper over the other cracks".



Hannah Moloney



## 'There's only so long before you completely burn out'

### 'I'm banging on the door'

The SEND code of practice recommends SENcos are on the senior leadership team. But a 2022 Teacher Tapp survey found just 43 per cent of secondary SENcos were, compared to nearly three-quarters in primaries.

One SENCo told *Schools Week* that because she is not on the SLT, she feels children with SEND are "out of sight, out of mind" when decisions are made.

"I'm standing there banging on the door, saying, 'what are we doing for this child?' They get lost in the process."

Bircher said this should be a requirement. "If you're not on SLT, then I think that speaks volumes in the priority that your school gives to inclusion."

Salaries also vary wildly. Slightly fewer than one in five SENcos who took part in the NEU survey were in the leadership pay range, with just over half in the upper pay range. Most of the rest were in the main pay range.

The 2020 National SENCo Workforce Survey found 70 per cent of SENcos were receiving extra pay for the role – which could be a SEN allowance or TLR.

Responding to the NEU's recent 'state of education' survey, SENcos aired frustrations over pay inequity, adding it was "very unhelpful" that schools are "given autonomy over how they pay" them.

Ellis, in his submission to MPs, said someone can now earn "as much in local supermarkets and Amazon as they can earn being specially trained and experienced SEND staff".

Moloney, highlighting research suggesting 90 per cent of SENcos are women, said "people underestimate the level of skill and knowledge required".

### What needs to change?

Many who took part in the NEU survey suggested protecting SENCo time is key to solving problems. The SEND code of practice only states schools "should ensure" SENcos have "sufficient time" to do their job.

Some said having a SENCo on the senior leadership team should be statutory – and they should be paid on the leadership scale.

SENcos "should be senior, strategic leaders in every school", said Bart Shaw, operational lead of the Whole Education SEND School Improvement scheme which has worked with 1,000 schools

# Investigation: SENCos

nationally.

But many staff also want “more of a whole-school approach to SEND”.

Katherine Walsh, director of inclusion at the River Learning Trust, said: “We need all teachers and leaders thinking about experience and outcomes for children with SEND. The SENCo should be a strategic leader to make sure everyone is working together with collective accountability.”

Ginny Bootman, an author and SENCo of 20 years, said there has been “a push for the need for assistant SENCos [so] it doesn’t all fall to one person. Division of the role” – with one SENCo responsible for admin and another in the classroom – “could also be helpful”.

But Moloney said the current “crisis is an opportunity for significant change. I think the next 10 years will be transformational – it’s such a massive job, it can’t just be one person.”

She also believes SENCos need to be better skilled in “screening and identifying needs at a basic level”.

“We haven’t got other people to rely on [to do this] anymore. So we don’t know what children’s needs are, don’t know enough about the complexity of supporting these children nor how curricula can adapt. This means we lack awareness and understanding for how to fund and deliver education because we have a huge knowledge gap.”

Amelie Thompson, assistant director of education (SEND) at the Greenshaw Learning Trust, called for a relaunch of a study similar to the Bath Spa Workload Survey, adding that inclusion reforms meant it was “key we fully understand how the role of SENCO is positioned and enabled as a leadership role”.

Surr suggested a “SENCo register” could form part of the annual school workforce census to better understand the job.

## ‘It’s the best role – we need to enable that’

Experts have welcomed the new national professional qualification for SENCos, a leadership course that is now



## ‘We need all teachers and leaders thinking about SEND’

statutory.

But Mulholland called for an expansion “to allow schools to train more than one SEN leader at a time” to allow for succession and strategic planning.

Thompson said the oversubscribed NPQ showed there was a “real desire to understand how to build inclusive systems and how to enable the SENCo in their role”.

She added groups of schools can help “centralise SEND efforts” to build an “understanding there’s a responsibility we all share. It’s about making this built into structures and strategies, not a bolt on”.

Walsh said trusts can also help reduce the administrative burden. For instance, River Learning Trust has worked with Oxfordshire to streamline EHCP consultations. This has enabled its schools to prioritise responses

based on parental preference or nearest school – rather than up to seven SENCos responding for the same pupil.

“Each prioritised consultation gives our SENCos two hours back,” she added. Another

example was how SENCos can share solutions for children with similar needs.

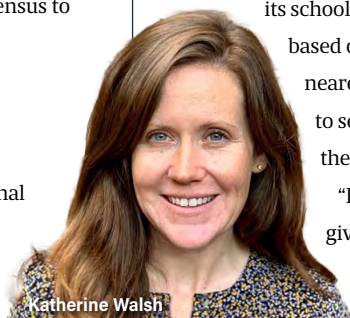
A report by the National Foundation for Educational Research found the introduction of trust-level SEND leaders had played a “significant role” in helping SENCos deal with challenges, and being part of a trust helped “alleviate the isolation”.

Walsh added SENCo is the “best role in school – it’s a really innovative one and we need to enable people to see it that way”.

River Learning Trust is moving the role away from admin and to an “expert teaching and learning role,” she said. “If SENCos are supporting teachers – they need to be working alongside them”.

Management tries to protect half of SENCo time for being in class, doing learning walks or overseeing interventions.

“We aspire for all of our new heads to have done the SENCo role,” Walsh said. Thirty-nine per cent of children have SEND at some point – we need all leaders to understand this proportion of their school population. We can’t have a system for children, and a system for children with SEND.”



Katherine Walsh

## Opinion

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JAMIE OLIVER

Celebrity chef and dyslexia campaigner

## How we can ensure our schools cater for all our kids

**Two actions would begin to transform the school experiences of children with dyslexia and other neurodivergences, writes Jamie Oliver, and it's about time they did**

I'm 50 years old and I've just been back to school. I met some amazing teachers and some absolutely incredible kids, but I came away feeling a bit deflated. When it comes to SEND, nowhere near enough has changed since I was a child.

Teachers and educators are working their socks off to inspire our future generations, but they're being tripped up, because they're being sent into the classroom without the skills and knowledge they desperately need to enable and empower every child. Dyslexia is one of the biggest areas of need in the classroom.

Writing for Schools Week, I know I'm preaching to the converted. I've heard repeatedly how frustrating it is to be working within a system that's laser-focused on just 75 per cent of the class, allowing SEND children to fall between the cracks.

You wouldn't open a supermarket that only caters to 75 per cent of the population, and you'd never get away with it in a restaurant.

Neurodivergent children aren't broken. They're creative, curious and capable, but they are being

let down simply because they experience the world (and the classroom) differently.

Ignore those differences and the consequences can be profound. It's not just about struggling with reading and writing, and therefore a much increased chance of disengaging with education more broadly. For me, it's really about mental health, self-worth and reduced life chances.

I've been pretty vocal about the fact that I found school a real challenge. But it's 2025! Surely it's time to move things along.

I was constantly dragged out of class to go down the corridor to my 'special needs' class, and my peers constantly took the mickey out of me. But I was OK because out of school – growing up in a pub – I had cooking.

I was lucky. Cooking gave me drive, confidence and hope. What school eroded away, I found in the kitchen.

But what about all the kids who haven't found their thing yet? Most won't within their school years. School is supposed to be a safe space, an inspiring place where all kids can grow and thrive at their own pace.

We need to acknowledge that dyslexia and other neurodivergences are simply different ways of thinking, learning and interpreting. Britain and its kids deserve a truly inclusive



“ It's 2025! Surely it's time to move things along

school system that values all ways of learning, flexing to the needs of all children.

That it doesn't is not a failure of our teachers; it's a failure of the system, which fundamentally needs to be reimagined and appropriately supported. But there are a couple of key actions that could kickstart all of this and make a real difference right now.

First, we need to move from a reactive system to a proactive one, by ensuring all children have a universal dyslexia and neurodivergence screening check within their early years at school.

Right now, 80 per cent of those with dyslexia leave school undiagnosed. Learning differences don't follow a neat, linear path, so we need multiple opportunities within school years to identify when a child is struggling.

A simple, in-class screening tool could be profound, and there are many ready and waiting to be built into the national curriculum assessment schedule.

We also need better support for our teachers, educators and support

staff. Current teacher training doesn't equip them to help every child to reach their full potential.

Dyslexia-friendly teaching must be at the heart of initial teacher education, early career development, and ongoing professional development.

The 2024 update to the initial teacher training framework developed by the previous Conservative government was an improvement, but it's not enough. There's no mention of dyslexia or specific learning difficulties, it's still too focused on phonics and doesn't offer a broader toolkit.

It also does nothing to develop the knowledge and understanding of those already teaching, who need additional support to nurture the neurodivergent kids in their classes.

We're at a turning point. The education system is under pressure, but it's also hungry for change. We need to act now.

Let's please support the next generation of teachers so they can support the next generation of learners, whatever their needs.



## Opinion

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DIANA  
SUTTON

Director, The Bell Foundation

## The schools bill must do more to support displaced children

**Labour's bill promises to deliver needed change for children not in school, but without amendments a particularly vulnerable group could be left out, writes Diana Sutton**

Government is championing its children's wellbeing and schools bill as key to improving access to education for the most vulnerable. Soon to start its passage through the House of Lords, it includes new powers for local authorities to direct academies to admit children and sets up a register for all children not in school.

Local authorities' duty to ensure every child is in education or training until the age of 18 includes refugees, asylum-seekers and resettled children and young people. Yet this legislation – as currently drafted – will do little for the thousands of vulnerable refugee and asylum-seeking young people who arrive later into our education system.

These children often face a postcode lottery and barriers which can result in up to a year out of school. This time out of education not only affects their learning; it can lead to social isolation and safeguarding risks too.

Recent research we commissioned with Refugee Education UK found that two common barriers are a lack of available school places and schools' reluctance to admit

displaced young people arriving after the start of the school year.

Schools reported concerns about refugee and asylum-seeking young people's grades affecting overall school performance. Indeed, many were unaware that the GCSE results of these students can be excluded from a school profile.

Other evidence shows that in 2017, displaced children were an estimated 17 months behind their non-migrant peers in their GCSEs. This is even worse than children with persistent socio-economic disadvantage.

That's why, together with the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and Refugee Education UK, we recommend three changes to the bill to ensure better access to education for displaced children.

### A place for every child

The bill requires schools and academies to cooperate and ensure that every child in their area has a school place. It gives local authorities the power to direct both schools and academies to admit pupils who have been refused admission to all local schools.

The bill also proposes changes to the School Admissions Code to allow directions to admit those to whom 'Fair Access Protocol' (FAP) arrangements apply, such as refugees.

Properly implemented, these proposals could be a significant step



## “ Barriers can result in up to a year out of school

forward for displaced children, but guidance needs to be clear on the operations of FAPs. For example, research has found that in some areas the protocols appeared to permit schools refusing to admit pupils even when the local authority believed there was no legal basis for a refusal.

It is therefore necessary to ensure that the FAP process functions as intended and that schools understand their responsibilities, to minimise downstream bottlenecks in the adjudicator appeals process.

### Support for migrant parents

The bill introduces a new register of all children who are not in school, but refugee and asylum-seeking families may not be aware of it or may be nervous of engaging with it due to limited English skills or being unfamiliar with the UK system.

Supportive outreach to these new communities will be necessary to ensure that the register fulfils its intended function and helps displaced young people to access a school place.

### Clear identification of need

Virtual school heads' duties include promoting the educational achievement of all looked-after children. The bill proposes extending these duties to oversee the educational achievement of children in need as a group, due to their low educational achievement.

This is sensible and proportionate, but it does highlight discrepancies in provision between refugee and asylum-seeking children who have similarly low estimated attainment, and children who are vulnerable for different reasons.

While nine per cent of all looked-after children are unaccompanied asylum seekers, it should also include reference to other refugee and asylum-seeking children who are vulnerable and whose educational attainment is typically low.

The government's new immigration white paper promises to support displaced people who are already here with language learning and integration. This must include those of school age too.

## Opinion

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## White working class children



## MICHAEL CATER

Executive headteacher and CEO,  
Character Education Trust

## Working-class kids don't need fixing – our system does

**Labour must finally deliver on its decades-long promise of a truly comprehensive and inclusive system, writes Michael Cater. Here's how**

For decades, politicians have failed to address the root causes of the disadvantage gap. Tinkering at the edges made some difference, but the diminishing returns of that approach were evident before Covid. Generations of working-class pupils continue to inherit the same barriers to success.

Our education system is not broken – it's working exactly as designed. It filters, sorts and rewards those who fit the mould.

Recent articles in these pages and in *The Times* focus on white working-class children (which I was myself), but for working-class children of all backgrounds, the truth is that the mould was never made for them.

I've spent 25 years working in these communities. This is what I believe needs to change.

### Representation matters

Teaching remains one of the most middle-class professions in Britain. Working-class children need role models they can relate to – people who understand their communities, their families and their lives beyond the school gates.

We must improve access to the classroom for working-class

professionals, many of whom may have had poor experiences of school themselves.

### Embrace working-class values

Family, pride, resilience, hard work and loyalty. These aren't just buzzwords; they're the social glue that holds communities together and can be a powerful source of motivation and identity.

This isn't about lowering aspiration. It's about changing what we value and how we value it. Working-class kids shouldn't be forced to chase after an idea of success that often entails leaving their community and values behind.

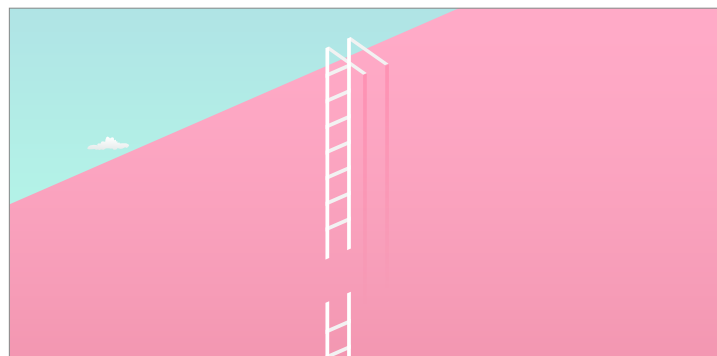
### End selection

Grammar schools persist. Some politicians even love to champion them as a route to social mobility. But the low numbers of disadvantaged pupils in them show what this really is: selection by class at age 11.

This stifles ambition and compounds inequality. It's not aspirational and it's not meritocratic. It's managed exclusion and misguided aspiration.

### Redefine ambition

At school open evenings and in school prospectuses, we need to stop parading tiny handfuls of Oxbridge or Russell Group acceptances as the pinnacle of achievement and social mobility.



## “ Our measures reflect deeply ingrained snobbery

These are great pathways for a tiny few, but they're not the only ones that matter. Success is also taking over the family business, becoming a brilliant plumber, a talented builder or a committed carer.

This isn't about reducing aspiration for working-class kids. It's about reclaiming and redefining it. Working-class communities are fiercely ambitious.

### Update uniforms

Let's stop dressing working-class children like they're stepping out of a Victorian boarding school. Traditional uniforms may symbolise 'discipline' to some, but to many children, they reinforce a message that school is a place where they don't belong.

Uniforms should reflect dignity, not deference to outdated norms borrowed from private institutions, with blazers and stripy ties. The argument that uniform is a social leveller is a myth. It's an outdated tradition, rare outside of the UK, where the idea of social equality has been bent to fit a performative and exclusive tradition.

### Reset accountability

Our measures of success reflect deeply ingrained snobbery. If working-class children aren't meeting these measures, perhaps

it's time to question them rather than the children.

Instead of the narrow EBacc, let's recognize a broad spectrum of qualifications that align with the interests and strengths of working-class aspirations, including vocational pathways.

And instead of the myopic Progress 8, let's make success also about personal growth, practical achievement and meaningful contribution.

### Improve literacy and numeracy

Improving functional literacy and numeracy remains the single most important tool for social mobility. That work must be relentless, focused and properly funded, with access to a curriculum that allows this to be measured.

Caroline Benn and Professor Clyde Chitty wrote *Thirty Years On: Is Comprehensive Education Alive and Well or Struggling to Survive?* almost 30 years ago. Their conclusions are still as relevant today. For 60 years, we have failed to deliver on the ambition of the comprehensive system.

We don't need more committees or taskforces. We need schools that reflect our values and respect our ambitions – not overwrite them.

Working-class children don't need charity. They need change.

## Opinion

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## White working class children



## STEVE ROGERS

Headteacher, The Ilfracombe Academy (Athena Learning Trust)

## How we've boosted social mobility in our deprived area

**Steve Rogers explains how The Ilfracombe Academy went from persistently low outcomes to the most improved school in the country for disadvantaged students**

As an independent commission was launched this week into why white working-class children are falling behind, Bridget Phillipson stated that they are being "betrayed".

But it's not a new concern, and we already know a lot about what works to engage them and raise their attainment.

The Education Select Committee held an inquiry into *Left Behind White Pupils from Disadvantaged Backgrounds* in 2021. But while the issue seems to enter and exit the political agenda, as a headteacher in one of the least socially mobile counties and one of the most deprived wards in the country, it never leaves mine.

Ninety-seven per cent of North Devon's population is white, only 28.5 per cent have Level 4 qualifications, and 17.8 per cent have none. Our school is one of the most geographically remote from any university and nearly a quarter of students are eligible for free school meals.

However, rather than being defined by these challenges, we've redefined what's possible and are leading the way nationally when it comes to

student progress.

Once known for persistently low outcomes, our school has undergone a rapid transformation. In 2024 we were named the second most improved school in England and the most improved for disadvantaged students.

Our Progress 8 score surged from -0.51 in 2023 to +0.48 in 2024, a full grade of improvement in just one year. For disadvantaged students, the average gain was an amazing 1.36 grades. Moreover, the improvement for disadvantaged white British working-class students went up by +1.39, from -1.46 in 22/2023 to -0.07 in 23/2024.

Our journey of significant school improvement has been driven by a set of clear, decisive strategies. These approaches, often counter-cultural, have consistently prioritised student outcomes and sustained progress.

We have an unwavering commitment to sky-high expectations, for students and staff alike. Classrooms are calm, focused, and free from disruption.

Our school culture and its associated curriculum are designed to be inclusive, ensuring that all students, including those with SEND, are supported and enabled to attend every curriculum lesson with their specialist teachers.

This ensures that all students can keep pace with their peers, maximising their outcomes and reducing the attainment gap.



“ Our approaches are often counter-cultural ”

We have also been proactive and ahead of the political curve in delivering SEND provision in our mainstream setting. Our evidence-based approaches include:

- Teachers and support teams (SEND, pastoral and safeguarding) working in partnership to support students through targeted in-class interventions.
- Teaching our students to become competent, independent learners through the use of self-regulation strategies such as deep-pressure movements that allow them to focus and learn more.
- Ditching outdated interventions such as fidget spinners, exit cards and unproven alternative provisions that create distractions and draw students' attention away from specialist teaching.

Our reading curriculum uses a high-fidelity Direct Instruction model, ensuring foundational literacy is secure from the start. Children cannot flourish without it.

We've also extended the school day for Year 11 and 13 students, offering three extra hours of subject-specialist tuition each week. Crucially, we fund free transport home to remove any barriers posed by rural isolation or family income.

We've also revolutionised our careers education. Work experience in Years 10 and 12, aspiration-raising university outreach programmes, local employer visits and enriching cultural trips all encourage our students to think and dream beyond what they know.

We firmly believe that all students can achieve great things when supported by clear routines, high-quality teaching and interventions rooted in evidence.

But it's our ethos that really drives us. Rooted in strong Christian values, character development is central to everything we do. Our culture nurtures academic ambition and moral purpose in equal measure.

Our results speak volumes. In 2024, 59.2 per cent of our students achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths, compared to 38.5 per cent in 2023. Over 80 per cent earned a grade 4 or higher in core subjects. We ranked third in Devon for overall performance.

We are proof that with clear vision, high standards and the courage to stay the course, exceptional outcomes are possible anywhere.

Here's hoping government can demonstrate all three.



## Opinion



## Volunteers' Week special: Celebrating governance

EMMA  
BALCHINChief executive, National  
Governance AssociationLocal governance is key  
to community cohesion

**As the divide between home and school grows, the need for effective governance has never been greater, writes Emma Balchin. Here's how we can drive up standards**

Parents and teachers are too often portrayed as being in conflict, but it doesn't have to be this way. Good governance is no silver bullet, but it is an important part of the solution.

Governors and trustees help set the tone, values and culture of a school or trust. They ensure that schools and trusts deliver academic results and meet the needs of their staff and the communities they serve. They support school leaders, and challenge them where needed.

These dedicated volunteers are the quiet backbone of our school system. They don't seek the spotlight, but their work shapes the experiences of children, staff and families. Now more than ever, their role on key issues like resource planning, flexible working and community engagement is vital.

However, with all the pressures schools are under, the latter can sometimes be overlooked. Stakeholder engagement has been defined by the Department for Education as one of the three purposes of trust governance, but is curiously absent from its definition of the core functions of maintained

school governance.

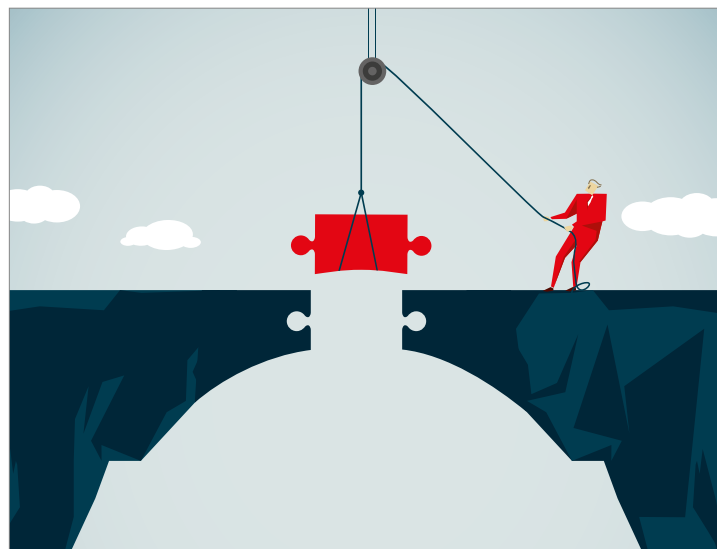
That said, the term 'stakeholder engagement' perhaps doesn't fully reflect the breadth and depth of the relationships that matter. 'Whole-school community collaboration' better captures the inclusive, holistic approach needed to deliver truly excellent governance.

Families play a huge role in shaping children's expectations, behaviours, values and outcomes; schools cannot succeed without them. But teachers are rarely trained to work with parents and families, and what engagement they do have often creates significant stress and additional workload.

This is why governance matters so much: boards are perfectly placed to bridge this gap. They can make sure their schools and trusts are listening to local voices and are rooted in their communities, reducing the risk of problems escalating.

We must give boards the permission and the mandate to do this, to listen and champion diverse local voices, to understand community context and needs, and to prioritise parent and carer engagement. Good governance makes us better accountable to those we serve.

Boards are key to staffing too. After all, governors and trustees often hold employer responsibilities, with a duty to support staff wellbeing and ensure schools are safe, inclusive



“ Boards are perfectly placed to bridge this gap

and fair workplaces.

Likewise, they don't just ensure leaders are held accountable but also that they are supported in navigating the enormous emotional and operational pressures of modern schooling.

Staff who feel valued are better able to deliver outstanding teaching and pastoral care. Boards can play a big part in making that happen.

We know that 99 per cent of academy trusts already choose to have some form of local governance in place. This reflects a widespread understanding of the importance of staying rooted to our communities. Local governance gives schools and trusts the insight they need to support better decision-making.

Of course, local governance does not just facilitate closer engagement with parents, pupils and staff. An empowered local tier is itself a meaningful form of engagement, giving stakeholders like parents and staff a clear role in decision-making.

Given its near-universal adoption, the Department for Education should do more to drive and

spread best practice in this space. For example, the omission of local governance from its trust quality descriptors is an easy fix.

More difficult to put right is the ongoing challenge of recruiting the volunteers needed to be governors and trustees. This Volunteers Week presents an opportunity to do that, to signal to the public that being a governor is a challenging and deeply rewarding chance to make a real difference for children and the people who care for and educate them.

It's also a unique opportunity to learn and to develop leadership skills. That's why we think more teachers should be governors in their local schools too. The DfE should back governorship as a CPD opportunity.

It is a challenging time for schools and families, and relationships are increasingly frayed, but governance can be a 'golden thread' that weaves communities back together. The volunteer army that keeps our schools grounded merits renewed focus, and not just this week.

## Solutions



## Volunteers' Week special: Celebrating governance



JENNY PHARO

Group chief governance officer, London South East Academies Trust

## How we've bucked the trend on recruiting great governors

**Amid a national shortage of governors, our group has had success in recruiting and retaining professionals who align with our mission, writes Jenny Pharo. Here's how**

**A**t a time when education is under increasing scrutiny – whether on outcomes, safeguarding or finances – the need for diverse and engaged governing bodies has never been greater.

As a growing multi-academy trust, we know first-hand how vital strong governance is to the success of our schools and outcomes of pupils. Recruiting governors and trustees is therefore a top priority, but also a challenge.

Governing bodies provide strategic leadership and financial oversight, so it is essential that those appointed are the right 'fit'. We need people whose values align with our mission, bring complementary skillsets and who offer broad perspectives and expertise.

But how do we find these individuals, who play such an integral role in advocating and helping our trust to grow and flourish?

**Professional recruitment**

Treating governor recruitment with the same professionalism and rigour as any senior leadership appointment is crucial. This means being clear about the skills needed, advertising widely and properly onboarding

new governors.

Too often, there is a reliance on word of mouth or closed networks to fill vacancies. This can limit the fresh perspectives needed in strategic leadership.

We have widened our recruitment network, using multiple sources to support us with this, that help us find experienced governors as well as people who are new to non-executive positions, from a wide range of industries.

As a result, we have increased the diversity of knowledge, expertise and perspectives across all our governing boards.

**Representation matters**

And such representation is crucial. We need our governors to reflect the rich diversity within our school communities.

This means looking beyond the traditional stereotype of a governor as a retired professional. While experience is undoubtedly valuable, we are increasingly seeing a new wave of younger governors stepping forward (with an average age of 30).

They have a strong sense of civic duty, a desire to give back, and they bring energy, new thinking and digital fluency to the table.

This generational shift has coincided with a broader trend in corporate social responsibility (CSR). Many large employers now encourage staff to volunteer – and being a governor or trustee is a great



## “ A new wave of younger governors is stepping forward

way to use professional skills in a meaningful context.

We have had real success partnering with businesses to promote governance opportunities to their staff as part of their CSR strategies – a real win-win.

**Inclusive governance**

As the recent Centre for Young Lives report sets out, true inclusion is about more than access – it is about belonging and ensuring every young person is supported to thrive. Governance must play a central role in achieving this.

We are currently developing an 'inclusive governance' model, aligned to our group's strategy and the government's ongoing drive for inclusion. Our guiding principle is that it is not just about who sits at the table, but how everyone's voice is heard and acted upon.

By embedding inclusion into our recruitment practices and board culture, our leadership will better reflect the communities we serve, driving better decision-making and outcomes and supporting retention.

**Flexibility is key**

Potential governors are more likely to commit if meetings are accessible. Hybrid and virtual options enable

people to fit being a governor into their busy lives.

We are clear from the outset about the expectations of governor and trustee roles. We want to make sure it can work for people with busy jobs or caring responsibilities – so transparency about our commitment to flexibility and the demands of the role is crucial.

Keeping our governors engaged once they have been appointed is also a priority. Invitations to schools, special events, and the chance to take part in strategic projects and forums all support this.

**More than volunteers**

I'm writing this for National Volunteers' Week, but in truth many governors don't want to be labelled as volunteers. Instead, we position governor and trustee roles as a form of non-executive leadership. This framing – with clear expectations, responsibilities and impact – can make it more appealing to professionals exploring new leadership experience.

Ultimately, effective recruitment of governors is not just about filling gaps. It is about building a team of strategic thinkers, critical friends and ambassadors who can help us achieve our mission.

## THE REVIEW

## OUTSTANDING

BOOK  
TV  
FILM  
RADIO  
EVENT  
RESOURCE

**Author:** Steve Baker**Publisher:** Crown House**Publication date:** April 14, 2025**ISBN:** 1785837400**Reviewer:** Stephen Lockyer, Primary teacher

It's always a risk to see the TV or film adaptation of a book you've enjoyed. Your mind has already cast it, and it rarely matches up. The other way around, however, and the screen casts the book; Jackson Lamb is Gary Oldman, and that cannot be changed in my mind.

Some novels, however, cast themselves in such a way that you can see the book on screen, characters in play. So it is with *Outstanding*.

Its author, school behaviour specialist Steve Baker, is a man who has watched over countless years in education and would be unlikely to let ITV make any of those gaffes we're so used to seeing about schools: 12 children in a class, staff shagging in cupboards, teachers enjoying hot coffee. (NEVER watch a school drama with a teacher.)

The story of *Outstanding* centres around hapless headteacher Harry Flanagan, a man not so much right for the job as right in the middle of a disaster zone. Baker skilfully paints Flanagan as a man painfully out of his depth.

Throughout, he is surrounded by all manner of Machiavellian characters who between them embody the vast majority of school tropes. Power-hungry governor? Tick. MAT CEO flying above, claws ready to snatch? Tick. Even the staff are checked off accordingly.

Stereotypes perhaps, but these have become tropes precisely by virtue of their being largely true, familiar and comfortable.

The cover rightly gives the impression of a light and lively farce, with pigs running amok. *Outstanding* isn't weighty enough to become the

*Animal Farm* of the educational world, but our porcine friends do make several appearances (along with their owner) and the book does (albeit gently) hold up the mirror of social commentary to our sector.

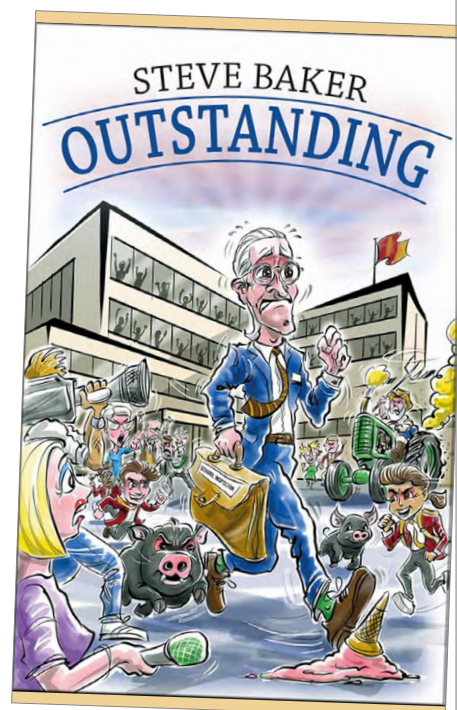
The number of characters without an agenda other than to see the school succeed is vanishingly small. Whether their drive is power, control, money or an extra TLR, almost everyone is driven by a force that isn't actually to 'improve the lives and opportunities for those in our care'.

So while the characters will no doubt mirror colleagues past and present for the educationally-experienced reader (and perhaps even themselves), it must have been a catharsis for the writer to lampoon them. Baker has clearly seen up close the damage that virtue signalling rather than virtue actioning can have.

The same could be said for the storytelling. It is a familiar tale, told well, with the droll wit of a Radio 4 comedy rather than a series of gags, and it is all the more enjoyable for that.

The plot concerns the countdown to an Ofsted inspection (and yes, they come under the magnifying glass too). Everything in the story arc suggests that it will be a resolute disaster, unless Flanagan and his (diminishing) allies are able to pull it out of the bag.

I'm not going to reveal what happens at the end. Perhaps ITV will indulge us with an adaptation for its light entertainment schedule, to which it lends itself. Better yet, read it yourself and cast it in your mind. You'll no doubt have worked with plenty of pigeons to fill its



pigeon-holes with.

Either way, it has both the levity for and empathy with education in general to provide a light-hearted escape from the job.

It was genuinely heartwarming to read a tale which 'got' schools so well, warts and all. We aren't perfect machines, and we are filled with imperfect machinists. Schools are like bumblebees: physics suggests they just shouldn't be able to fly, and yet they do.

While this book is dressed as a modern farce, it also shines a light on the fact that despite challenges, hiccups, the odd poisoned ice cream, the power struggles and personality clashes, schools can still be brilliant and beautiful places to be a part of.

I guess that's why they remain such outstanding workplaces.



## THE CONVERSATION

### LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM



**Frances Akinde**  
SEND adviser and neurodiversity champion

### TRANSATLANTIC CALLS

I've just returned from a very informative half-term trip to New York, looking at the education system there and how support for children with special needs differs from here.

The US is facing the same challenges as us when it comes to education: an increase in the number of students needing specialist support, the lasting impact of the pandemic on learning and behaviour, a growing awareness of the need for early intervention, recruitment and retention challenges, increased financial pressures and challenges in meeting demand.

However, unlike us, IEPs (Individual Education Plans or Programs) are still mandatory there. The approach is to give students all the support they need to succeed without fighting parents/carers to do so.

The New York department of education does not even contemplate tribunals. Instead, it is committed to increasing the use of technology and prioritising the needs of students with disabilities, particularly those from marginalised groups. I was very impressed.

### DIAL DOWN INTERNET

Like us, the US is also struggling with the influence of smartphones on teaching and learning. There too, there is talk of



implementing a mobile phone ban across all schools. In fact, half of all states have already passed legislation restricting or banning mobile phones using innovative approaches.

While I was out there, I found myself reading an article on the various ways schools and districts have gone about implementing these bans. The solutions in this article include the use of signal-blocking pouches just like those made by the company former schools minister **Nick Gibb** is strategically advising.

I wonder if he'll manage to move the dial here.

### DON'T STAND BY

While in New York, I also had the chance to catch up with **Right to Be**, which partners with the **Suzy Lamplugh Trust** in the UK to deliver bystander intervention training.

INSIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

#### What action are universities taking on sexual misconduct and harassment?

Last updated on Wednesday 2 Apr 2025 at 1:55pm



From August, our universities will see a new condition of registration requiring them to set out how they will implement policies and procedures for tackling harassment and sexual misconduct.

This action is long overdue, and this article outlines how three universities are adapting. Let's hope the rest are too – and schools hear the call.

### FIND MY PHONE

I left some things behind in New York. Literally. My trainers in a cab. My water

bottle in Times Square. And my hearing aids in a bath house. (Thankfully I got these back).

Having ADHD can make it challenging to keep track of belongings, especially in a fast-paced environment like New York (or a school). My experiences as an adult with identified needs are a reminder of how hard and frustrating it can be for neurodivergent adults and children to navigate the system without support.

Thankfully, I have that now and there is a lot more openness about neurodiversity and what the everyday challenges look like. And if you have ADHD yourself – or work with someone who does – then this article offers six expert tips to manage this unhelpful trait.

### NETWORK DISCONNECTION

Ben Hobbs recently shared his intention to resign as chair and CEO of the Step Up network, which he set up to support new and aspiring leaders in education.

His blog post, entitled 'Stepping back rather than stepping up' caught my attention due to its title. His sentiment echoes that of many educators who battle with the decision of whether to 'walk away or try harder', and I admire Ben for prioritising his own wellbeing.

### PAGE REFRESH

Finally, I've been hearing more and more that Substack is the place to be for informed conversation, and I have to say I like what I've seen so far. To get you started, they even have a handy guide to the [top 25 education newsletters and podcasts on their site](#). But be warned, it contains some adult themes and content.

Sarah Johnson's Substack page claims 'I generally have nothing to bring except for random musings' but I have always found Sarah's social media posts to be extremely helpful. Take, for example, her recent blog on the DfE's behaviour and attendance ambassador roles. Perhaps there is a real opportunity for fresh ideas.

Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts



# The Knowledge

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



## Uncovering the unknown unknowns of inclusion

**Nic Ponsford, Doctoral researcher,  
Bournemouth University and CEO,  
Global Equality Collective**

In education, we often focus on what we can easily measure: test scores, attendance and behaviour logs. But what about the “unknown unknowns” – the hidden barriers, subtle biases and lived experiences that deeply shape inclusion yet rarely appear in performance data?

Our new 26,000 Voices report – one of the largest inclusion studies in UK education – exposes a picture of inclusion that is more complex and more inequitable than many realise. The usually unheard voices we gathered shine a light on the invisible barriers still holding people back.

### The tipping point for retention

One of our most significant and timely findings relates to flexible working. It reveals not just a key policy issue in the face of our workforce crisis, but a deep cultural challenge for equity and dignity.

In our study, 62 per cent of staff reported feeling excluded due to pregnancy (including IVF and miscarriage experiences) or their current parent/carer status. This rose sharply among single parents, who consistently reported the highest levels of exclusion.

Among staff who requested flexible working, 41 per cent felt unsupported, and 38 per cent said they were denied access altogether. A further 35 per cent felt stigmatised for asking.

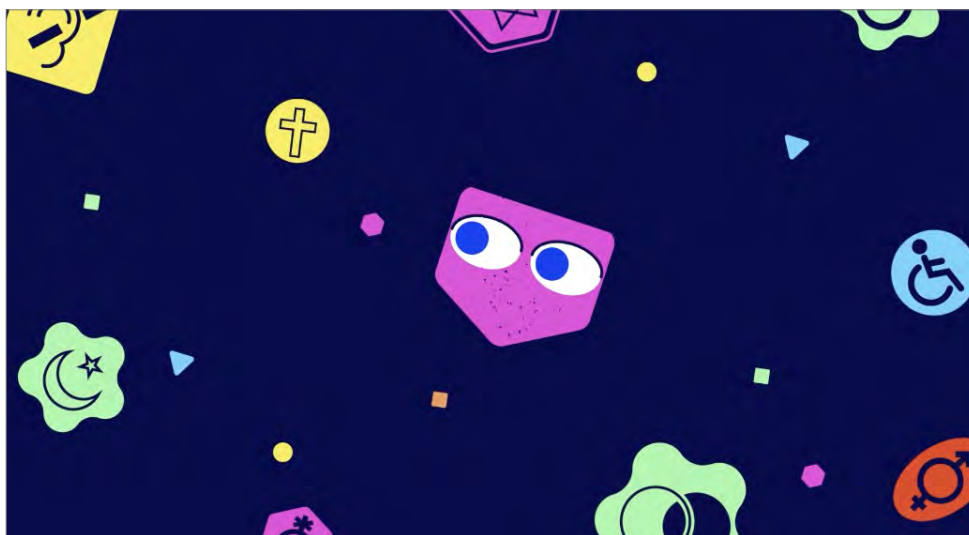
Our data makes clear that where flexible working is unavailable or stigmatised, staff feel marginalised – unable to progress or pushed out of the profession altogether.

### Beyond ‘tolerance’

Religious inclusion is another hidden challenge. While 55 per cent of non-religious staff report feeling fully included, the picture shifts dramatically for staff of faith.

Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh staff are 10 times more likely to feel excluded, with 13 per cent strongly agreeing they’ve experienced exclusion at work.

This exclusion often goes unspoken: lack of accommodation for prayer, discomfort around religious expression or a narrow cultural lens



that assumes a Christian or secular norm.

For meaningful belonging, schools must actively support religious diversity in day-to-day culture, not just on the calendar.

### Racial invisibility

One of the more unexpected findings relates to racial identity. When asked whether race had ever played a role in workplace exclusion, 26 per cent of staff responded ‘N/A’. These were almost exclusively white respondents.

This suggests race is not perceived as a factor in their identity, let alone their daily experience.

While those who experience racism often carry its weight silently, others may never even see it. Inclusion requires us to challenge this divide, encouraging all staff to critically reflect on how race shapes their assumptions, interactions and access to opportunity.

### Socioeconomic silence

Staff from lower-income backgrounds also reported greater difficulty speaking out. Among staff who have never experienced financial hardship, 72 per cent felt comfortable reporting exclusion. This dropped to 52 per cent among those currently facing economic stress.

This silence is its own kind of exclusion. When shame or fear prevents staff from sharing concerns, they become more isolated and less likely to receive the support they need.

### Student safety

Among students, the theme of invisibility

continues. Among our sample, 64 per cent of students said they do not feel safe at school.

This rises among those from single-parent households. Of these, 30 per cent said they had missed school because of safety concerns. They are also less likely to say teachers support them, with just 24 per cent strongly agreeing, compared to 31 per cent from two-parent households.

Students with self-identified mental health needs and invisible disabilities also reported low support. Just 18 per cent of students with mental health concerns said their teachers helped them do their best. By contrast, students with physical disabilities or EHCPs reported higher levels of support, suggesting visibility matters when it comes to receiving help.

Our data also shows young carers face similar challenges.

### Beyond engagement

These findings, and the unknown unknowns they reveal across our school population, show we need to move beyond ‘engaging’ students and staff as passive recipients of policies.

Inclusion means actively connecting with their lived realities. We need to surface what we don’t yet see, and listen deeply when we do.

Only then will we create schools where everyone truly feels they belong and are able to thrive

**Read the full report and  
explore the data [here](#)**



Week in

# Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

## TUESDAY

The government is on the lookout for leaders to join the next cohort of primary and secondary headteacher reference groups.

It wants to hear from leaders who are keen to be get "involved in shaping policy development and implementation".

Group members will be "empowered to share your views and experiences, offer constructive challenge and provide feedback directly to officials and ministers".

Applications close on Monday, June 16. [You can find out more here](#) or email [referencegroup.recruitment@education.gov.uk](mailto:referencegroup.recruitment@education.gov.uk).

\*\*\*

The DfE says it is "committed to a whole-system approach to embedding sustainability through the education system", with all schools expected to draw up "climate action plans" as part of its climate and sustainability strategy.

But has it been doing its own bit?

Children's minister Janet Daby said in a parliamentary question today that of the cars rented by the department over the past two years, a grand total of \*0.11 per cent\* were electric!

But it intended to update its car hire policy from next year to include an "electric [car] first strategy".

"This will direct our drivers to seek electric vehicles as a first option, hybrids as a second option and finally combustion

engine vehicles where there are no alternatives available," she said.

Better late than never, we guess.

## WEDNESDAY

Last week the government extended its programme to boost neurodiversity support in mainstream schools, but with less funding than its trial run.

The Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINS) programme supports neurodiverse students "by training teachers to identify and better meet their needs and improve parental engagement".

Projects are delivered by integrated care boards (ICBs), NHS bodies responsible for planning health services in local areas.

New guidance states those that took part in the PINS programme last year will now be expected to expand to work with 30 new schools in the 2025-26 financial year.

Given the extra responsibilities, it's probably really helpful that ICBs will lose half their staffing budgets by October as part of government cost-cutting!

\*\*\*

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson was up in the Midlands today, speaking to leaders about the importance of driving down school absence rates.

Given the event was held at Villa Park – the home of Aston Villa football club – Phillipson decided to deliver a rousing pep-talk in footballing terms. (And because her private secretary, James, is a "lifelong Villa fan".)

"James tells me that since Villa were promoted from the Championship to the Premier League in 2019, attendance at matches here in this stadium, as a percentage of max capacity, has gone from the mid-70s to the high-90s.

"Only two or three seats in every hundred sitting empty on match day. I want to see the same in our schools. And then I want to see even better.

"We need to go from Championship to Premier League."

Back of the net, Bridget.

\*\*\*

While BP was auditioning to be the next England manager for when we inevitably fail to win the World Cup next year, PM Sir Keir Starmer was meeting with Formula One star Lewis Hamilton.

Meeting a group of youngsters from Hamilton's Mission 44 – set up to advocate for a "fairer and more inclusive future" for young people – Starmer talked about the importance of hearing their voices.

He talked about the government's "opportunity mission", and Labour's education achievements so far, one of which was a "big increase in the schools budget which has been much overdue".

Errmmm... we're not sure that's entirely accurate, with most schools looking at more cuts just to make their budgets balance as they have to finance an unfunded teacher pay rise.





Bradford Diocesan  
Academies Trust

## HEAD OF INCLUSION

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

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. BDAT is looking to appoint a Head of Inclusion to support our central team to focus relentlessly on ensuring equality of opportunity for all.

The successful candidate will be responsible for the strategic leadership of inclusion and will be particularly focused 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. Some evening work is required and this role is office based.

**Location:** Bradford Diocesan Academies Trust office

**Duration of Post:** Permanent

**Closing date:** 9am Monday 23rd June 2025

**Interview date:** Wednesday 2nd July 2025

**Start date:** 1st January 2026 or earlier if available

If you would value an exploratory conversation, please contact Emma Williamson, PA to the CEO at [emma.williamson@bdac-academies.org](mailto:emma.williamson@bdac-academies.org) or by telephone on 01274 909120

[Click here to Apply](#)



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

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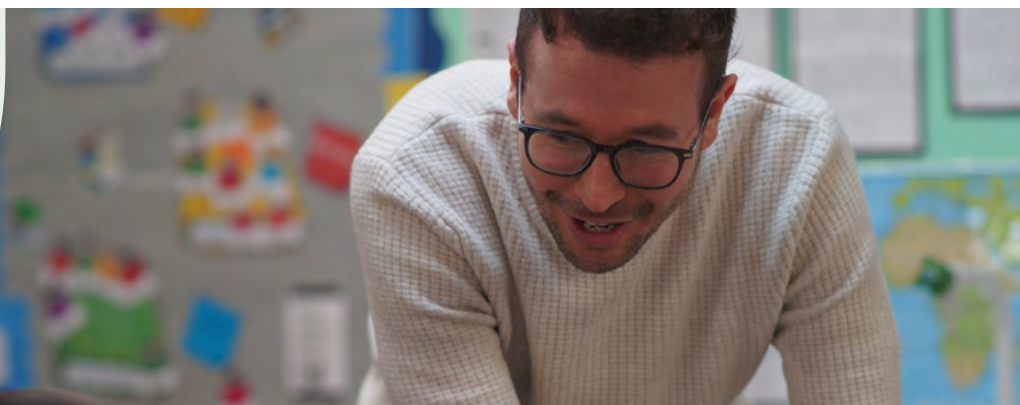
Organise your recruitment advertising for the year with an annual package. Providing unlimited listings, covering all vacancies including leadership roles.

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*Prices for Multi Academy Trusts can be provided*



## Active Learning Trust



# PRIMARY HEADTEACHER OPPORTUNITIES

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We're looking for hearts-led leaders who believe in the transformative power of education - and who want to be part of something much bigger. People who want to change lives and build brighter futures for children who deserve the very best.

This is a rare opportunity to make your mark in an organisation where values aren't wallpaper, they're the walls! You will be surrounded by team players and a people-first culture where support, shared purpose, and a joy in the work we do are central - and where the kettle is always on.

Get in touch today, and let's talk about the future you could help shape:

[recruitment@activelearningtrust.org](mailto:recruitment@activelearningtrust.org)

## ACTIVE LEARNING TRUST VALUES



- I aspire, we achieve
- We're curious, creative and bold
- A family, not a house share
- Comfortable being candid
- Humour, humility, humanity

### HEADTEACHER

at Red Oak Primary School



**Location:** Southwell Rd,  
Lowestoft, Suffolk, NR33 0RZ  
**Contract:** Permanent, Full-time  
**Salary:** L18-24 (£75,674 - £87,651)

Red Oak Primary is a two-form entry school with over 450 children, with Kirkley community at its heart. The school's ethos radiates throughout their classrooms, which offer a calm environment that's rich with inclusion, nurture and aspiration.

### HEADTEACHER

at Pakefield Primary School



**Location:** London Rd, Pakefield,  
Lowestoft, NR33 7AQ  
**Contract:** Permanent, Full-time  
**Salary:** L15-21 (£70,293 - £81,440)

Pakefield Primary is a wonderful vibrant school with hard working children, dedicated staff and a shared love of learning. The school aspires for all children to leave Pakefield as resilient, ambitious and active citizens, taking with them many marvellous memories and a desire to follow their dreams.