SCHOOLS WEEK

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The Leader

EDITION 397

As the dust settles on this week's spending review, the mood seems mixed.

The week started with national newspaper reports of what was billed as a hefty funding uplift for.

But now we have access to the small print, the week has ended with the strong prospect of a funding freeze in real terms.

Yes, schools have done better than others in what is a difficult financial outlook.

They have got an extra £4.7 billion. But this is quickly whittled down when costs pressures are factored in.

And the cold reality is that the next few years are still going to be incredibly tight financially for schools (pages 5 and 6).

One key factor affecting just how tight school budgets will end up being is the SEND reforms (page 4).

A white paper has been promised in the autumn (and it will include wider schools reforms, too).

Ministers want to improve outcomes and get soaring SEND spending under control. But the longer they take to do the latter, the more it eats away from funding increases announced this week.

Funding expert Luke Sibieta thinks the "most realistic expectation is for a real-terms freeze in existing school funding per pupil" (page 25).

Meanwhile, tensions between the Department for Education and Ofsted bubbled into the open this week (see page 7).

Ofsted's decision to delay revealing its plan for new inspections until September – but stick with a November roll-out – is, as leaders said, "reckless and nonsensical".

The appointment of ex-chief inspector Christine Gilbert to chair the inspectorate is also a sign that the DfE's patience may be wearing thin (page 8).

Gilbert has been appointed to provide a "strong challenge", education secretary Bridget Phillipson said.

She published a scathing governance review last year which concluded the role of Ofsted's board was "curiously limited" and gave the chief inspector a "degree of autonomy and entitlement [which] does not make for effective governance".

See story, page 7

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Heads' concern as budget boost includes cash for SEND reform

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
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EXCLUSIVE

A chunk of the extra cash promised to boost school budgets will actually go towards financing SEND reforms, *Schools Week* has learned, as leaders warn the settlement falls "well short of what is needed".

The chancellor announced in the spending review on Wednesday that the core schools budget will increase by £4.7 billion by 2028. However, this includes £615 million earmarked to go towards the teacher pay award next year, plus the £410 million cost of extending free school meals.

And it has now emerged that £760 million of this rise is actually due to be spent on "reform of the SEND system" in the next two years.

The government had said that the extra school budget funding worked out as a 3 per cent rise in real-terms funding per pupil by 2028. But the Institute for Fiscal Studies warned that ministers "may have to freeze spending per pupil in order to meet rising demand for special education needs provision".

Rachel Reeves

Budgets hinge on SEND reform

"The next few years are going to feel very tight for schools," Luke Sibieta told *Schools Week*.

"While schools did receive a relatively generous settlement compared with other areas of public spending, familiar pressures from rising costs of SEND, staff costs and falling pupil rolls will weigh heavily on budgets over the next few years."

Just how "tight" it will feel will "largely depend on reform of the SEND system", Sibieta added. The government has promised to set out its plans in a white paper in the autumn.

The government forecasts that spend on SEND will rise by over £2 billion in real terms by 2028. "If this occurs, then the best schools could hope for is a real-terms freeze in mainstream school funding per pupil between 2025 and 2028," he said.

Data published this week shows the number of education, health and care plans has soared again, rising 11 per cent in the year to January 2025. It means that more than one in 20 pupils now have an EHCP.

The spending review includes £547 million in 2026-27, and £213 million in 2027-28, for "reform of the SEND system". This is part of the government's public services "transformation fund".

But Department for Education told *Schools Week* this investment is part of the core schools budget cash increases.

However, they added the cash is just "one part of the investment the government will make in SEND reform, not the entirety".

Leaders report bleak outlook

While welcoming the increase in funding, leaders said the current outlook remains bleak. Julia Harnden, deputy director of policy at the ASCL leaders' union, said schools "are already having to make significant cuts".

"The spending review announcements will not change that situation in the short term and won't be enough to reverse this situation in the longer term either."

Dr Nicola Crossley, CEO of Liberty Academy Trust, said the settlement "falls well short of what is needed for a system that is both complex and under significant strain".

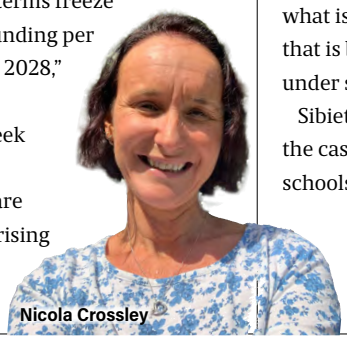
Sibieta estimates that the cash would allow schools to afford future teacher pay rises of "around 2 per cent". But, "if recommendations are higher than that, schools would either need to reduce non-staff spending or reduce staffing levels in the absence of extra funding".

David Clayton, CEO of the Endeavour Learning Trust, said schools were still "operating in an incredibly difficult funding environment and, if the government is not careful, this small increase will be swallowed up without alleviating the pressures that schools are facing.

"As such, it is vital these funds are distributed directly to schools – and towards the children who need it the most – if we're going to see the changes we all want to see."

Lee Mason-Ellis, CEO of The Pioneer Academy, agreed that the "lack of funding at school level is a great concern and the ongoing viability of many schools, especially smaller primary schools, is a grave concern".

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said the funding settlement was a "record per-pupil investment. Our plan for change is putting children, young people and families at the heart of Britain's renewal."


Nicola Crossley


Lee Mason-Ellis


Bridget Phillipson

EXPLAINER

How £4.7bn extra for schools could become a real-terms freeze

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
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The chancellor has set out government spending plans for the next three years, boosting the schools budget in cash terms, extending the rebuilding programme and increasing Ofsted's funding.

But the school funding increase will only amount to roughly a 1 per cent average real-terms increase to per-pupil funding each year. It also has to cover cash for SEND reforms, the free school meals expansion and next year's pay award.

Here's what school leaders need to know ...

1. £4.7bn for schools, but just 1% per-pupil funding rise ...

Documents confirm the core schools budget will increase from £64.8 billion this year to £69.5 billion in 2028, a cash-terms increase of £4.7 billion by the end of the spending review period.

However, this includes the £410 million annual cost of the recently announced extension of free school meals, and the £615 million allocated in the spring to contribute to next year's 4 per cent teacher pay rise.

Some of it will also go towards SEND reforms (see point 2 below).

Once schools' rising costs are taken into account, the injection works out as a 1.1 per cent average annual real-terms increase over the course of the spending review.

However, if you exclude the free school meals cash, which is effectively already ringfenced, the average annual per-pupil funding rise will be 0.9 per cent in real terms.

When looking at the schools budget overall, the rise equates to just 0.4 per cent extra in real terms over the spending review period.

Unions have welcomed the "small" increase, but said schools will still face difficult decisions in the short term.

The government has described the rise in funding as a £2 billion "real-terms" increase, but this is using 2023-24, the year before the election, as a baseline, so is misleading.

2. ... but SEND rise means this could become real-terms freeze

The Treasury documents also state that the government has set aside £760 million for "reform of the SEND system", with most of this falling in the 2026-27 year.

This comes from the £3.25 billion public services "transformation fund".

However, the DfE confirmed to *Schools Week* that this money is part of the increase in the core schools budget.

This, alongside the continued rise in the number of pupils with special needs, could actually mean "the best schools could hope for is a real-terms freeze in mainstream school funding per pupil", Luke Sibieta, from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said.

It is also expected that the government will need to provide more funding for its SEND reforms, with councils pushing for high-needs deficits to be wiped.

The DfE has said the £760 million is just "one part of the investment government will make in SEND reform, not the entirety".

3. Schools white paper in autumn – and not just for SEND

The government will set out its SEND reform plans in a schools white paper, to be published in the autumn.

The reforms will "make the system more inclusive and improve outcomes for all children and young people", the documents claimed.

"The government will also set out further details on supporting local authorities as the government transitions to a reformed system as part of the upcoming local government funding reform consultation," the Treasury added.

But *Schools Week* also understands that the white paper will be broader than just SEND, and include wider school reforms.

4. More rebuilding cash, and scheme extended ...

The government has already committed to ramping up the school rebuilding programme (SRP), which was slow in its first few years. Spending this year was due to be around £1.4 billion.

This week's documents show that the government expects to spend around £2.4 billion per year for the programme over the spending review period.

EXPLAINER

When the SRP was announced in 2021, it was due to be a 10-year programme to rebuild around 500 schools.

The government said that, as part of its 10-year infrastructure strategy, it will "also commit to expand the programme, providing long-term certainty out to 2034-35". However, it has not said how many additional schools will now be targeted.

5. ... and maintenance cash to rise

Spending on school maintenance and repairs will also rise by around £400 million to around £2.3 billion a year by 2029-30. However, the document said this rise was only "in line with

inflation".

Meanwhile, around £2.6 billion will be spent from 2026 27 to 2029-30 to fund "provision of mainstream school places needed to meet future demographic needs".

In 2021, the spending review allocated the same amount of money for new provision – which was focused on places for children with SEND.

Sibieta said the increase in school capital spending overall equated to a 7 per cent real-terms increase, which reversed real-terms cuts since 2015.

6. Ofsted funding boost for MAT inspections

Despite reports that Ofsted was unlikely to secure more cash at the spending review, documents show its budget will rise from just under £140 million in 2025-26, to nearly £159.4 million in 2026-27.

This will fund the inspectorate to "support the government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity, including developing and implementing multi-academy trust inspections to increase accountability of MAT leaders", the

Treasury documents stated.

It is not clear exactly how much extra this is, as Ofsted's budget was actually £148 million in 2024-25, and will also fall back down to £153 million in 2028-29.

No further details have been provided on what the cash will go towards. But Lynsey Holzer, CEO of The Active Learning Trust, said the choice of funding of projects "doesn't feel like it hangs together in terms of a well understood strategy from the government".

She said it "would seem interesting timing, since we still don't have clarity on the new schedule for school inspections, so funding a second stream may be a moot point".

7. No more info on 6,500 teachers pledge

Labour has pledged to recruit an additional 6,500 specialist teachers to shortage subjects by the end of this parliament and recently confirmed this would not include primary teachers.

Susan Acland-Hood, the DfE's permanent secretary, recently told an education committee that the "fine detail" of the policy would only be announced following the spending review.

Susan Acland-Hood

But the documents mention the pledge only once, stating that the settlement for schools and colleges "supports the government's commitment to recruit 6,500 more teachers over the course of this parliament across secondary schools, further education settings and specialist schools".

8. Nurseries and libraries cash

The government has also confirmed it has allocated £370 million across four years to deliver more school-based nurseries in spare primary classrooms. The DfE previously announced £37 million for the first tranche of projects.

Ministers have also allocated £132.5 million of "dormant assets" to invest in school libraries and facilities to "support disadvantaged young people to access music, sport and drama".

9. How did the DfE budget fare?

Overall, the DfE's total budget will increase to £109.2 billion by 2028, "equivalent to an annual average real-terms increase of 1.5 per cent", the documents show.

That 1.5 per cent rise puts the DfE behind most other areas of spending. For example, spending on energy security and net zero is rising by 16 per cent, the law officers' departments are getting a 6.2 per cent boost and business and trade is getting 5.8 per cent.

However, it is worth pointing out that the DfE has a much larger overall budget than many other government departments. Just looking at cash amounts, education got the fourth-highest increase of all departments.

But, according to the Treasury documents, the DfE's administration budget will drop by 15 per cent over the spending review period to £490 million.

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Ofsted report card plan delays 'reckless and nonsensical'

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Union leaders and headteachers have blasted a "reckless" move by Ofsted to delay revealing its report card plan until September.

The "woefully ignorant" decision will leave schools facing a "nonsensical" timeframe to get to grips with new inspections before they are rolled out, leaders said.

Ofsted had planned to publish its reforms consultation response this summer, before introducing new inspections in November. But the watchdog announced on Wednesday that its response will not be ready until "early September".

The watchdog considered delaying inspections, but has confirmed it will stick to its plan to roll out the new report card regime in November – leaving schools with potentially just weeks to prepare for the new-style inspections.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson told Ofsted chief Sir Martyn Oliver in a letter the delay was "disappointing". She warned him that he must "give education providers a comprehensive understanding of the new arrangements before they are introduced", and ensure "in-depth" training of the Ofsted workforce.

But Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders' union NAHT, said the delay will place "immense" pressure on schools.

"This decision is bordering on reckless and could do real damage to the health and wellbeing of school staff," he added.

Pepe D'Iasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "The introduction of a nonsensical inspection framework is now compounded by a nonsensical timetable.

"The idea that schools and colleges can prepare for a complete change in the inspection system on this scale in two months is, frankly, ridiculous."

Term's notice dropped

In its consultation document, Ofsted said its original timeline would ensure "a notice period equivalent to one term between the publication of our post-consultation response and inspection materials and the start of education inspections".

This would allow the inspectorate to "ensure that providers and inspectors feel well prepared for the new inspections".

But Di'Iasio said the delay means this "already ambitious timeframe has now been cut in half". He said it would "make far more sense" to postpone the new inspection system, and "even better" to start from scratch and create a new framework.


Sir Martyn Oliver

Ian Patterson, executive director at City of London Academies Trust, said that "good schools will crack on with doing the right thing by their children, irrespective of the framework".

September policy 'avalanche'

But Jamie Barry, headteacher of Yew Tree Primary School in Walsall, said Ofsted appears "woefully ignorant" of the "overwhelming demand" that schools face.

He cited an "avalanche" of changes including the ongoing curriculum and assessment framework, roll-out of the government's free breakfast clubs scheme, "huge" growth in SEND numbers, and the need for teachers to grapple with AI.

"There's so much we have to train our staff in. If a school is to have the fairest chance of success, they need to be aware of what the frameworks say and the implications of that."

Timeframe 'cut in half'

Barry said Ofsted should push back the roll-out of new inspections until January, to give both schools and inspectors a term to get to grips with the system. "If the current framework is sufficient to last us until November, why can't it be sufficient for just one month more?"

National Education Union general secretary Daniel Kebede urged Ofsted to delay inspection reforms until September 2026.

"Imposing a new model on the profession and failing to offer adequate time to digest what is now required is simply unfair," he said. "With teacher and leader retention still at such challenging levels, this is reckless."

Julia Waters, the sister of Caversham primary school headteacher Ruth Perry, who took her own life following an Ofsted inspection, said Ofsted "must use the extra time to make significant changes to their plans".

"If not, it will have created the worst possible scenario: a bad inspection system, with even less time for schools and families to adapt to it."

Oliver: Delay 'regrettable'

Oliver informed Phillipson of the "regrettable" delay in a letter on Wednesday. But he said it would "result in a better and more effective inspection regime".

Ofsted "fully intend to make improvements" to its proposed framework, but "need a little more time" to analyse the more than 6,500 responses it received to its consultation, and feedback from pilot inspections.

Oliver said Ofsted recognises it can "improve several aspects of our plans", including bringing clarity to the new inspection "toolkits" and grade boundaries, and "streamlining the number of evaluation areas".

After publishing its response in September, Ofsted says it will begin "a comprehensive training programme for inspectors and an extensive programme of engagement and preparation for those we inspect".

Phillipson said it was "important that Ofsted delivers to the expected timescales, to build confidence in the inspectorate and avoid additional challenges for headteachers and leaders".

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New Ofsted chair to provide 'strong challenge' on reform plans

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Sector leaders have welcomed the appointment of former chief inspector Dame Christine Gilbert, who will bring "strong challenge" to Ofsted as its new chair.

Gilbert, who served as chief inspector between 2006 and 2011, last year led the independent review into the watchdog's response to the death of headteacher Ruth Perry.

The review concluded Ofsted had been "defensive and complacent" in its response.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said Gilbert "will bring a wealth of experience, knowledge and skills" to the role, which she will take up in September.

She will "play a full part in ensuring the successful delivery of Ofsted reforms by bringing the strong challenge and support that all organisations need".

Gilbert, who spent 18 years working in schools, including as a head, said it was a "privilege". She is "looking forward to supporting Sir Martyn [Oliver, the chief inspector] and Ofsted in their determination to raise standards, increase opportunities and improve lives".

Gilbert has also worked in councils, including as chief executive of Tower Hamlets, and is currently chair of the Education Endowment Foundation.

NAHT general secretary Paul Whiteman said Gilbert had "a wealth of experience in the field of inspection and has shown a willingness to provide clear and constructive challenge to Ofsted".

Her review found Perry's death had "shone a light on a climate of fear and frustration around school inspection, which had been building for years".

She also said the Ofsted board's role "appears curiously limited" leading to a "degree of autonomy and entitlement for" the chief inspector that "does not make for effective governance".

She called for the board's role to be strengthened, to establish "constructive challenge to support Ofsted in its learning and reform".

Whiteman said it was "critical that the Ofsted board under Christine is now allowed to exercise the crucial leadership role required of it and provide the strategic oversight and direction that has been so clearly lacking".

Former senior HMI Adrian Gray said Gilbert would bring "rigorous self-challenge", which he feels remains "the big thing that's missing in Ofsted".

Gilbert has led and taken part in several service reviews, mostly in education but also including Baroness Casey's damning 2023 review of the Metropolitan Police.

Oliver said he looked forward to working with Gilbert "as we continue to develop Ofsted's vitally important role".

Previous chair Dame Christine Ryan left in March after four and a half years. Star Academies chief executive Sir Hamid Patel had been serving as interim chair.

Dame Christine Gilbert

NEWS: EXAMS

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GCSE entries fall in German, sciences and history

JACK DYSON
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GCSEs in German, the sciences and history have taken a popularity hit this year, sparking concerns that their plunging entries may be a consequence of the recruitment crisis.

The exams regulator has published provisional entry statistics for GCSEs and A-levels this summer. Here's what you need to know...

1. GCSE entries fall after 'steady increase'

GCSE exam entraies dipped 0.6 per cent this year, from 5.81 million in 2024 to 5.78 million. Ofqual said this "interrupts the trend of slowly but steadily increasing" numbers since 2021.

However, among year 11s only – who make up most of the entrants – the fall was higher, at 1.6 per cent.

Ofqual also pointed to ONS data showing a 0.2 per cent increase in the size of the 16-year-old population this year.

However, Dave Thomson, chief statistician at FFT Datalab, believes the "small drop" in GCSE entries "can be explained by a dip" in year 11 numbers shown in Department for Education data.

Latest DfE figures suggest 630,654 children are in this year's cohort, compared to 634,835 in 2023-24.

2. Big falls in German, physics and chemistry ...

The decrease in entries is driven by falls in both EBacc and non-Ebacc subjects.

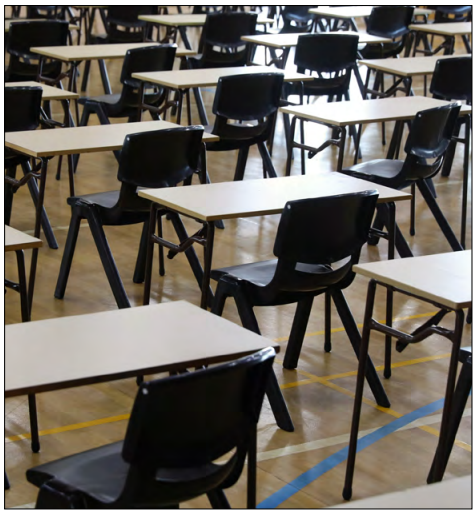
The overall entry for all EBacc subjects decreased by 0.5 per cent, with eight of the 15 subjects falling.

The largest fall among these subjects was in German (down 7.6 per cent). It was followed by physics (6.8 per cent), chemistry (6.7 per cent), biology (6.4 per cent) and history (5.9 per cent).

Ofqual added: "Like with GCSE entries overall, this decrease in entries for some EBacc subjects interrupts previous trends of continuing increases over the past five years."

The largest fall in subjects outside the EBacc was engineering (21 per cent).

Thomson added that the population dip "doesn't fully explain the drop in entries in some subjects like the triple sciences and German... Recruitment problems might be a factor here."



Teacher hiring targets have been missed in 11 out of the past 12 years.

Sarah Hannafin, of leaders' union NAHT, added that "with recruitment challenges really biting in schools, some simply don't have the teachers they need to offer courses in certain subjects".

3. ... but a rise in English language

Statistics (9.2 per cent up) and performing arts (7.5 per cent up) were among those that registered increases.

Of the EBacc subjects, English language saw the largest rise in entries (2.3 per cent up).

4. Fall in A-levels after teacher grades

The number of entries at A-level fell by 0.4 per cent from 825,355 in 2024, to 821,875 this year. This is despite the number of 18-year-olds in England rising by 3.8 per cent.

Ofqual stressed that AS and A level entry figures "were likely informed by [the] return to normal grading patterns of GCSEs in summer 2023".

Over the previous three years, data may have been "affected by the exceptional nature of GCSE awarding" during the pandemic and "a package of support available for students in summer 2022", it said.

This is because it could have impacted youngsters' "progression decisions" after year 11.

Pupils sitting A-levels this year would have taken their GCSEs in 2023, when grading standards returned to pre-pandemic standards after their rise during Covid.

5. A-levels: Language lose out, while big maths rise

Entries for more than half of A-level subjects (17) reduced this year.

The largest falls were in French (8.3 per cent), German (6.8 per cent) and English language and literature (6.8 per cent).

Of the 13 that saw increases, maths had the largest (7.5 per cent), while business studies entries rose for the fourth year in a row.

1 in 20 now have EHCPs

One in 20 children in England now have an education, health and care plan (EHCP) after another 11 per cent annual rise, new figures that will put more pressure on SEND reforms show.

The number of pupils with EHCPs is now 482,640 – the highest figure on record – and double the number in 2016.

There are now more than 1.7m pupils in schools in England with SEND. This equates to almost one in five pupils (19.5 per cent) and marks a 5.6 per cent increase on 2024.

Meanwhile, there were 24,000 SEND tribunal cases lodged in 2024-25, the highest of any year and up by a more than a third compared to the previous year.

The government is considering a shake-up of the system, including rationing plans so they are just for children in special schools.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said: "Behind each one of these figures is a family desperately fighting for even the most basic support for their child... this government will deliver the reform that families are crying out for."

NEWS

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Trust chiefs will not be 'support staff' under new pay rules

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Academy trust chief executives will not be defined as school support staff under plans to re-establish a national pay negotiating body, the government has said.

The Department for Education launched a consultation on Wednesday on the school support staff negotiating body (SSSNB), which is due to be reinstated under the employment rights bill.

The SSSNB will provide a dedicated forum for negotiating pay, terms and conditions for all school support staff in state schools, including academies.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said all support staff in state schools will "benefit from this core offer, while allowing schools the flexibility to respond to local circumstances above the minimum agreements reached".

But *Schools Week* revealed last year how chief executives and central team staff fell within the definition of support staff under the terms of the legislation.

Consultation documents acknowledged this "broad definition", but the government now plans to remove those roles. This means executive leaders at academy trusts will be excluded.

These positions normally include responsibility for planning, directing and controlling activities of the trust, the document said. Examples given include CEOs, COOs and CFOs.

Academy trust employees in support roles who work from locations other than academies, such as HR officers or administrative staff based at a head office, will be included, however.

Officials are also consulting to understand the "potential scale of change" that bringing agency workers into the SSSNB would have, the documents add.

Doing so could mean that agency worker contracts would have to change, entitling them to "at least the minimum pay and the core conditions agreed for support staff". They would also need to be represented on the body itself.

"We think it may only be realistic to include agency workers who have a contract with an agency and work only in school settings – like directly employed school support staff – in the SSSNB in future. We want to test this idea," the documents said.

The government has also launched a support staff pay and conditions "call for evidence" through the consultation. This will support the DfE's "understanding of current arrangements and inform the transition to the new system".

But the papers noted that the "precise way" in which the body will operate – including how it sets pay and the "content of any core terms and conditions" – will be determined by the SSSNB once it has launched.

INVESTIGATION: HEALTHCARE

‘An accident waiting to happen’: Schools forced to provide medical care for vulnerable

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EXCLUSIVE

The dwindling number of school nurses means junior staff are forced to undertake complex medical procedures on vulnerable pupils. The situation is so bad that one prominent special school trust may be forced to take legal action against its local health board. And new data reveals support staff feel pressurised into providing care without suitable training amid warnings of “disastrous consequences”. Schools Week investigates ...

‘The lack of these NHS services is creating significant risk to the health and life of these children’

School nurses disappear

The Eden Academy Trust used to have an NHS school nurse for each of its three special schools in Hillingdon. Now it has two nurses covering four schools, with two new schools on the way.

The schools have dozens of children with epilepsy, or who require respiratory management or enteral feeding. But, instead of properly funding clinical support, the local NHS body wants school staff to take on more and more medical roles.

“Over the last five years, there has been more emphasis on what can we do,” says Carley Holliman, deputy CEO of the Eden Academy Trust. “What can our teaching assistants do? Can we start recruiting therapy assistants or healthcare assistants?”

Last summer, a school nurse retired and was not replaced. The local NHS body, the North West London Integrated Care Board (ICB), asked the academy trust’s leaders to perform annual “competency” checks to ensure that school staff can correctly perform clinical procedures – checks the trust’s leaders feel they lack the expertise to carry out.

The trust’s CEO Susan Douglas wrote to the ICB in early March, urging it to replace the retired nurse and assess and meet the healthcare needs of the 170 pupils at the two schools opening next January – something it has not yet done.

“The lack of these NHS services is creating significant risk to the health and life of these children and an unnecessary burden on NHS acute services as a result of school staff contacting the NHS ambulance services on an increased basis,” Douglas wrote.

Her letter warned that the trust was taking legal advice. After a long delay, the trust finally received a response from the ICB’s chief nursing officer saying it was reviewing its services, but providing no timescale. The trust’s lawyers have now written to the ICB. A judicial review may be the next step.

The problems facing the Eden Academy Trust are a microcosm of those faced by schools up and down the country, as cash-strapped NHS bodies try and shift responsibilities – and their financial costs – elsewhere.

Carley Holliman

Susan Douglas

NHS data for England shows the number of full-time equivalent school nurses has fallen from 3,000 in 2010 to around 2,000 now.

The National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) annual conference in May debated a motion highlighting the problem. Proposed by Marijke Miles of the NAHT’s practice committee, the motion warned that Department for Education guidance is being misinterpreted and used to pressure schools into providing medical care.

According to Miles: “Clinicians up and down the land are quoting it as a requirement for schools to undertake clinical procedures, including ones that are quite invasive, when that is not what the guidance actually says.”

The NHS is meant to work with schools to ensure that needs are met but often delegates its roles to school staff instead, Miles adds.

Burden falling on lowest paid

And that burden is increasingly falling on the lowest-paid workers.

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: HEALTHCARE

More than two in five support staff say they have no option but to give injections and administer prescribed medication to pupils alongside their other duties, a Unison union survey of 4,000 workers found. The survey, conducted in April, has seen exclusively by Schools Week.

The clinical tasks and medical procedures undertaken by support staff included administering oxygen, changing feeding tubes, oral suctioning and dealing with seizures.

"Administering essential medical care in schools should be the responsibility of trained health professionals, not low-paid support staff who feel pressured to do it because there is no one else," says Mike Short, Unison's head of education.

"Teaching assistants, administrators and catering staff, who are already picking up the slack elsewhere in schools, should not be forced to act as nurses, physios and occupational therapists."

But two-thirds of respondents, mostly from primary and secondary schools, said the health support expected of them had increased since the pandemic. Scores of support staff said they had been involved in tracheostomy care or intermittent catheterisation.

"I think it's intensifying, and I think it's going to intensify further with the increasing inclusion into mainstream schools," Miles says, referring to government plans for more children with additional needs to be educated in mainstream provision.

'Accident waiting to happen'

Any delegation of tasks from healthcare providers should incorporate risk assessments and ensure the staff member is trained, insured and willing to perform the role and that it is in their job description, Miles adds.

"[But] we are encountering people who are trying to ask schools and school staff to basically watch videos online and then go off and do something that gets really quite invasive."

The Unison survey found just four in 10 staff polled were confident they could refuse tasks they were uncomfortable with.

Fewer than two-thirds felt they had received sufficient training for the healthcare tasks they undertake, mostly because of lack of time or funding. Many had only done a one-day first aid course.

Fewer than half of surveyed support staff had their training signed off by a healthcare professional. Training was often provided by other support staff or family members of the pupil.

One respondent said they "cannot remember the last time we had a school nurse in". Others said that, despite the services being vital, most contact was "via email" and it can be "months before we get a response" for help.

Nearly two-thirds cited the fear of making a mistake, with most concerned about being blamed should something go wrong.

"At one point I had an unconscious student, a hypo student, a head injury and a nosebleed that I was expected to deal with," one support staff worker, who did not want to be named, said. "All at the same time."

Another said: "I learned how to give insulin injections from another teaching assistant. It feels like an accident waiting to happen, even though we are all very careful and professional about our children's needs."

Unison's Short adds that any accident could have "disastrous consequences".

Calls for new laws

Support staff said leaders relied on terms such as "other duties" or "first aid responsibilities" in job descriptions to justify staff carrying out medical procedures.

But government guidance states that "first aid at work does not include giving tablets or medicine", apart from aspirin on occasions.

"This issue has been hidden in plain sight for about 10 years," Emma Smith, a consultant and expert in the law around medical practice, says.

Among the triggers for this shift, she pinpoints the transfer of public health school nursing services from the NHS to councils in 2013 without a nationally agreed service delivery model for clinical nursing services in schools.

"Because we've had this 10-year period of misunderstanding and misapplication of the law, we have this service delivery model that has become embedded, but it actually is divergent from the legal framework," Smith adds.

She also says the Department for Education's statutory guidance on supporting pupils with medical conditions at school, first published in 2014, contains "several missteps" around the delegation of NHS healthcare activity to schools.

"The hidden cost to special schools and the absence of health funding is criminal that it's allowed to happen, and it's not something that the DfE seem to acknowledge at all," says Warren Carratt, chief executive of Nexus Multi Academy Trust.

"Instead, we're inflicted with real-terms funding cuts year after year."

His trust pays for staff medical training from already-stretched budgets when the NHS does not have the

The medical care support staff say they now provide

Medical procedure	Proportion of support staff who have undertaken such procedures
Administering injections (including insulin pens)	54%
Physical therapy	24%
Tube feeding	19%
Oral/nasal suctioning	7%
Tracheostomy care	4%

Source: Selected responses from a Unison May 2025 survey of 4,026 school support staff

SCHOOLS WEEK

'This issue has been hidden in plain sight for about 10 years'


Mike Short


Warren Carratt

Continued on next page

capacity to provide it.

"Most of our special schools don't have a school nurse in full time, despite the fact that we support children with incredibly complex needs.

"I understand that the system's stretched. It can explain it, but it doesn't excuse it."

His teaching assistants regularly have to perform tracheostomies, plus "blue light" occasions when an ambulance has to be called because a child suffers an acute health incident.

"With these pupils, two or three times a day you are responsible for a child breathing. And that is just a very stressful responsibility that, technically, has got nothing to do with teaching and learning."

Kids miss school over missing services

One of the Eden Academy Trust's Hillingdon schools, Sunshine House, has children with very complex needs. The school has had to hire four healthcare workers from its own budget.

Andrew Sanders, executive head at Sunshine House, says classroom staff can feel vulnerable when, as often happens, there is no nurse onsite.

"If they are not sure about how a child presents – so they have a seizure or something like that – they will try and phone one of the nurses, but they can't even always get in touch with them," he says.

The ICB has advised the school to call 999 or ask the parents to pick the child up. "That either means they have got to go to hospital to be checked over and a member of staff has got to go with them, or parents have got to leave work to take them to the GP and so on."

These issues mean a "significant number of pupils are missing school because the NHS services are not in place," says Smith. "Which is an absolute travesty."

One in 10 support staff said pupils were absent from their school because appropriate health services were not in place, the Unison survey found, rising to one in five at secondary.

Smith gives an example of children who receive continuing care packages at home that don't extend to school, which can leave school staff to carry out that care activity.

"And if schools say they can't, or they're unwilling to do that, then it means that children can't go to school until the stalemate has been addressed."

Simon Knight

'With these pupils, two or three times a day you are responsible for a child breathing'

This very issue has arisen at Sunshine House. "We've drawn the line at deep suctioning," says executive head Sanders.

"We were asked to do deep suctioning, but we've said that we won't carry out those procedures. And there was one pupil who was supposed to be coming with a carer, but then the NHS withdrew that carer, and then we said that the child wouldn't be able to attend school because we were not qualified to carry out those deep suctioning procedures."

The North West London ICB responded by saying it would provide a carer, but funded from the child's home care budget. As a result, the parents have decided to home-school their child instead.

Elsewhere, playing hardball has paid dividends. When Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West ICB wanted Frank Wise School in Banbury to provide deep suction for a child with respiratory care needs, the school refused.

"We made it clear that that was a task that should be performed by a clinician because it required the interpretation of clinical information, and that's a line we won't cross," says headteacher Simon Knight. "So, if there's any element of clinical information needing to be interpreted, we won't do that."

The NHS agreed to fund a package of care that allowed the child to remain in school full time – and to go on residential trips. "That's a real win," says Knight, "because it means this child is fully included in the school community. But it required us to be really clear about what was reasonable and what was unreasonable in relation to delegation."

'We need new system'

The Department for Education referred Schools Week to the Department for Health and Social Care, which did not respond to a request for comment.

North West London ICB would only say it was "working" with Eden Academy Trust to "address the issues that have been raised".

The financial constraints on schools and the NHS are not going away anytime soon, so tensions are likely to continue.

ICBs have been told they must cut their running costs by 50 per cent by October. Eden, in its legal letter, said it had been told that no assessment of health needs at its new schools had taken place because of a "wider review of all school healthcare across the ICB".

But Unison is now calling for the government to review the legal basis for delegation of clinical tasks from the NHS into schools.

One solution could be an NHS-commissioned, needs-led clinical school nursing service for schools, alongside a public health nursing service commissioned by local authorities, the union added.

Smith wants to see a national delivery model for clinical nursing services in education settings. "And we also need compliance," she says.

"We need to ensure that everybody understands the legal framework, and that everybody is implementing the legal framework as well. And that's at every level."

"We are educators," Eden's Holliman adds. "We're there to look after the education. Medical needs need to be dealt with by medical teams."

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‘Most broken school’ rated ‘good’ in all areas

JACK DYSON
@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

The “most broken school in the country” which waited 11 years for a trust to take it on has been rated ‘good’ in all areas by Ofsted.

After being issued with an academy order in 2011, the Hanson Academy in Bradford was left to endure ‘inadequate’ inspections and saddled with a multi-million-pound deficit as no trust would sponsor it.

But, three years after it was taken on by Delta Academies Trust, the school has been issued with a rating ‘good’ in all areas. This would equate to a ‘good’ overall in the old Ofsted system – the first time the school has ever achieved such a grade.

“It was the most broken school in the country. No one would touch it,” said Delta CEO Paul Tarn. “It’s an incredible story. We take visitors there now as a showcase school.”

After being rated ‘inadequate’ in 2010, seven cohorts of 11-year-olds had started and finished at Hanson – then called Hanson Grammar – before it became an academy in July 2022. This roughly equates to 1,500 pupils.

Three trusts provided temporary support but then backed out.

The school was given another ‘inadequate’ rating at its last graded inspection in 2020.

Inspectors reported “a significant number of pupils still do not come to school often enough”, with “too many” youngsters “excluded on more than one occasion”.

It was also saddled with a £5.4 million deficit – which the local authority took on when the school converted. The council also paid a reported £1.3 million to end a problematic contract that had put trusts off.

In April, following the school’s first Ofsted visit under Delta’s stewardship, it was rated ‘good’ in all areas.

The report, due to be published this week, said pupils “appreciate that their experience of school has improved greatly in recent times”. They enjoy “an inclusive and aspirational environment”.

Attendance “has significantly improved”, with youngsters supported “to broaden their horizons”.

However, inspectors noted that some “older pupils’ gaps in knowledge from poor attendance or fractured experience in previous years persist”.

The curriculum was “ambitious”, but “published outcomes are low”, inspectors said.

Tarn said Delta identified “480 periods of surplus in the staffing structure”, which saved the school “about £1 million”.

It also spent around £400,000 a year to move children “who had never attended school before” into alternative provision. This gave them “an offer that met their need”.

He said the trust spent £1 million to improve Hanson’s IT and £340,000 on “fences and making the site secure”.

“It’s now a school of choice for parents, for the community,” Tarn added. “We’re a showcase for what can be done with a broken school.”

Paul Tarn

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS| @LYDIACHSW

12 ex-training providers on course for reaccreditation

Twelve teacher training providers that lost accreditation following a bruising market review are on course to be reaccredited.

The initial teacher training (ITT) market review in 2021 forced all teacher trainers through a controversial re-accreditation process, resulting in around a quarter of providers losing out.

Those that did were then forced to either “partner” with one of the 179 successful providers or quit the market.

But the Department for Education recently gave those who lost out an opportunity to reapply, through a “targeted accreditation round”.

Six universities and six school-centred initial teacher training providers (SCITTs) have successfully completed phase one, the DfE said on Thursday.

They are now set to be reaccredited to train teachers from September 2026 but must first complete “phase 2 of the process. This is called “accreditation to delivery” and will “ensure providers are prepared for delivery”.

They successful universities are the University of Greenwich, University of Cumbria, University of Sussex, University of East Anglia, Brunel University and the University of the West of England.

The SCITTs are Bradford College, Teach East SCITT, North East SCITT, Forest Independent Primary Collegiate, Yorkshire and Humber Teacher Training, and Prince Henry’s High School and South Worcestershire SCITT.

James Noble-Rogers, executive director of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET), said: “While we think it was wrong that they lost their accreditation in the first place, this is still a good step forward.”

It is unclear whether the providers that have been reaccredited were denied accreditation during the 2021 market review or chose to voluntarily go into partnership at that point.

“We are very pleased that… all six of the HEIs who applied to have their accreditation to deliver ITE programmes restored have been successful,” Noble-Rogers added.

“We would now like all previously accredited providers, including those who have chosen not to act as lead partners in the current year, to reapply. The process for reaccreditation has in our view been fair and robust.”

The 2021 market review was widely criticised for requiring a lengthy written application, which was described as “challenging” for providers.

Emma Hollis, CEO of the National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT), said she was “delighted” the SCITTs had been approved.

INTERVIEW: SOCIAL MOBILITY

‘Shut up’ complaining about poverty, social mobility chair tells heads

JESSICA HILL
@JESSJANEHILL

EXCLUSIVE

School leaders who complain about having to do washing and buying food for their pupils should “shut up”, the social mobility chair has said.

In an interview with sister publication *FE Week*, Alun Francis also fears Ofsted’s new focus on inclusion will lead to schools having to “bend over backwards to accommodate everybody”.

Francis, CEO of Blackpool and the Fylde College, took over the chair of the social mobility commission from headteacher Katherine Birbalsingh. She resigned in 2023 saying her controversial opinions were “doing more harm than good”.

Francis has been less outspoken, at least until now.

Alun Francis

‘Stop making out that your life is so difficult’

‘Shut up’ on poverty

“When I hear schools talking about how much they have to do the washing and buying people food, I think, ‘shut up’,” Francis says.

“Everybody's always done that. Be discreet about it when you need to do it. And, of course, everybody does it when you need to do it.

“But stop making out that your life is so difficult, because what they're saying is, ‘the results here are not that good, because look at the people that come here’. It's not an excuse.”

Francis asserts that “half of the education system is turning into a therapy centre. Our job is not therapy... People come to college to learn – that’s the best therapy we can give them.”

Inclusion push worries

Francis sits on Ofsted’s inclusion external reference group, but takes an opposing line to many of its members.

He believes the watchdog’s current focus on inclusion will mean schools and colleges having to “bend over backwards to accommodate everybody”.

“The inclusion I'm worried about is the poor kid that comes in wanting to work hard, but the rest of the class are messing about and won't let them. How is that inclusive?”

Francis claims there is “embarrassed silence” when he poses this question to Ofsted.

He is also concerned about “a lot of crackpot theories going around the inclusion world at the moment”. He claims that “trauma-informed practice” is one of these, which he says has become widespread in FE colleges.

Francis, who previously led Oldham College which sponsored two schools, says that “if you let [those young people] behave in daft ways, they’ll do that more”.

Mental health ‘snake oil’

He is also concerned about so-called behaviour management “experts” cashing in on young people’s perceived mental health problems. His inbox is “full of people writing to me with all kinds of snake oil”.

Francis is also concerned about a sense of “learned helplessness” among young people, particularly those who fail their English and maths GCSEs and falsely believe they are “rubbish” at them.

Francis shares Birbalsingh’s disdain for what they say is a national narrative of “victimhood”.

He gets “frustrated in education when everything's about disadvantage”. This is “so badly defined”, he adds, that most of the time people “never actually work with the most disadvantaged – very often it’s about the polite poor, who will do well anyway”.

He accuses some prominent educationists of caricaturing working-class kids in a negative way, without taking into account the children from those backgrounds who display “model behaviour” and “amazing attendance”.

“The flip side is an equally insulting argument that middle-class kids are bland and achieve only because of their parents’ privilege. They are all caricatures. We want a world where every individual has the potential to achieve.”

‘Bad behaviour’ contributing to SEND rise

Francis backs controversial government proposals to overhaul disability benefits, estimated to plunge another 250,000 people into poverty, including 50,000 children.

He says Personal Independence Payment (PIP) was a “very spurious system” with people “sometimes acquiring, sometimes seeking label[s]” to boost their benefits.

“You can’t blame people for doing that, if that’s how the system works.”

He says some of the rise in pupils being seen to have certain special needs is down to parents seeking “external explanations for bad behaviour”.

But “pouring money” into more welfare support would not “get to the root of the other things sitting behind disadvantage – a lack of skills and the need for family support”.

“Not all disadvantage is about money. It's about behaviour and being looked after properly.”

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NEWS

How schools should use AI (according to DfE)

JACK DYSON
@JACKYDYS

Schools could use AI to help write letters to parents, give feedback to pupils and come up with ideas for lessons, according to new government guidance.

The toolkits, published on Tuesday and drawn up by the Chiltern Learning Trust and Chartered College of Teaching, say schools should also plan for the "wider use" of AI – including to analyse budgets and help plan CPD.

Here's what schools need to know ...

1. Marking feedback and ideas for lessons

For teaching and learning, the documents state that generative AI may be able to support ideas for lesson content and structure, formative assessments, analysis of marking data and creating "text in a specific style, length or reading age".

On assessments, this could include quiz generation from specific content or offering feedback on errors. AI could also "support with data analysis of marking".

It can produce "images to support understanding of a concept or as an exemplar", exam-style questions from set texts, and visual resources such as "slide decks, knowledge organisers and infographics", the guidance adds.

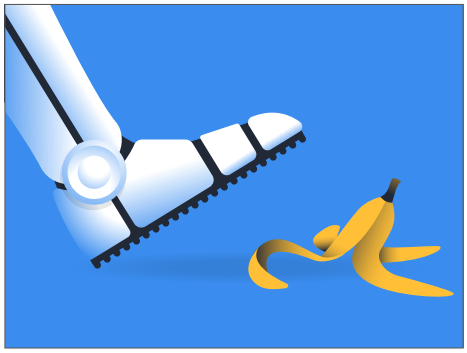
The technology could also help to adapt materials for pupils with special needs, for instance by taking a "scene and describing it in detail to those who are visually impaired".

2. Email writing and timetabling

The technology could cut down the time spent on admin, like email and letter writing, data analysis and long-term planning. One example is producing a letter home for parents about an outbreak of head lice.

Policy writing, timetabling, trip planning and staff CPD were other areas in which AI could be used.

In smaller settings, AI can "help streamline administrative tasks such as rota management and ensuring staff-to-child ratios are optimised in line with statutory requirements".



3. Plan for 'wider use', like budget planning and tenders

But leaders have been also told to plan for AI's "wider use".

The report says some "finance teams [are] using safe and approved" tools to analyse budgets and support planning. Business managers are using it to generate "tender documents based on a survey of requirements".

"By involving all school or college staff in CPD on AI, you can help improve efficiency and effectiveness across operations – ultimately having a positive impact on pupil and student outcomes."

The guidance suggests "integrating AI into management information systems". This "can give insights that may not otherwise be possible, and these insights could support interventions around behaviour, attendance and progress".

4. Critical thinking lessons, reconsider homework tasks

As the technology becomes more prevalent, "integrating AI literacy and critical thinking into existing lessons and activities should be considered". For example, AI ethics and digital citizenship could be incorporated into PSHE or computing curriculums.

Approaches to homework may also need to be considered, focusing on "tasks that can't be easily completed by AI". Many systems "simply provide an answer rather than explain the process and so do not contribute to the learning process".

5. Draw up an AI 'vision'

It is "essential" that schools "are clear with staff around what tools are safe to use and how they can use them". Those included on the list should "have been assessed" and allow schools "control over" them.

Writing "vision statements", created in consultation with "a wide range of stakeholders", is recommended, so "you can be clear on the benefits you expect to achieve and how you can do this safely".

Schools should be aware of two issues "inherent" in AI systems: hallucinations and bias.

It is also essential that "no decision that could adversely impact a student's outcomes is based purely [on] AI without human review and oversight".

The guidance says: "Transparency and human oversight are essential to ensure AI systems assist, but do not replace, human decision-making."

6. Beware AI risks: IP, safeguarding and privacy

There are also some broader warnings about using AI. Pupils' "work may be protected under intellectual property laws even if it does not contain personal data".

Schools should be certain that AI marking tools do not "train on the work that we enter" and have parental consent.

Copyright breaches can happen if the systems are "trained on unlicensed material and the outputs are then used in educational settings or published more widely".

Most free sites "will not be suitable for student use as they will not have the appropriate safeguards in place".

Newsletters and school websites could "provide regular updates on AI and online safety guidelines", the guidance says. Parental workshops "can extend the online safety net".

TESTBED AI SCHOOLS WANTED

Ministers want schools to volunteer to become edtech "testbeds" and help find scalable solutions to cut teacher workload and boost inclusion for children with SEND.

A nine-month pilot – for which expressions of interest opened this week – has been launched to "build the evidence base on the impact and scalability of promising technologies".

The Department for Education says its "edtech impact testbed pilot" will "identify and evaluate innovative educational technologies that can enhance teaching and learning and reduce workload in schools and colleges". Help is sought from up to 100 schools.

NEWS

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Ofsted visits over safety concerns at secure school

JESSIE WILLIAMS
@SCHOOLSWEEK

Ofsted has flagged safety concerns at the country's first secure school for young offenders, including increasing numbers of children making weapons out of everyday items.

Oasis Restore, which is classed as both a secure 16 to 19 academy and children's home, was found to be "not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people" after its first full inspection in February.

The institution, run by the charity that sponsors the Oasis academy trust, was rated as 'requires improvement to be good'.

However, inspectors conducted a monitoring inspection just two months later in April after "concerns were received by Ofsted about children's safety and wellbeing".

Oasis Restore said this was due to concerns over "one aspect of the building infrastructure", which was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and is now being rectified by the government department.

It led to doors being damaged and caused "anxiety" for some children and staff as it meant youngsters could move around "more freely" in some areas.

Inspectors found there had been "an increase in instances of children making weapons out of everyday items after the issue. Some children say that this is because they have not always felt safe recently," the report, published last week, said.

Ofsted Restore said the situation created an "initial, though short-lived, sense of vulnerability for some of our children and staff".

And inspectors said there have been no incidents of children harming others, and staff "respond without delay" to "behavioural incidents".

Staff also ran an "amnesty" to hand over weapons, increased searches and held more community meetings.

The school, in Rochester, Kent, is for children aged 12 to 18 who are on remand or sentenced to custody. It opened last year after a £40 million restoration of the former Medway Secure Training Centre.

It was supposed to open in autumn 2020 and cost £4.9 million, but was beset by delays and extra costs.

A spokesperson for Oasis Restore said the building issue was a "common occurrence when innovative refurbishments are tested operationally".

"Ofsted wanted to be assured that standards were still being met despite these challenges," they added. "The inspection report confirmed that Oasis leaders had implemented relevant mitigations to manage these unforeseen circumstances, it also stated that inspectors were satisfied that these actions had ensured the safety of children and staff."

They added that the secure school was still in the early stages, but "our impact is already clear – with young people and their families directly expressing newfound hope and seeing new possibilities."

They "continue to evolve our model" and wellbeing is "top priority – something positively reflected" in Ofsted's recent visit.

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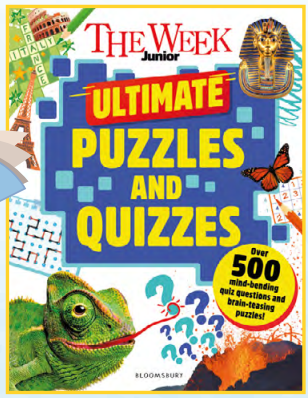

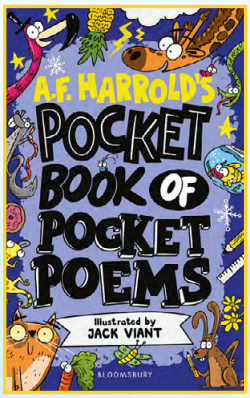

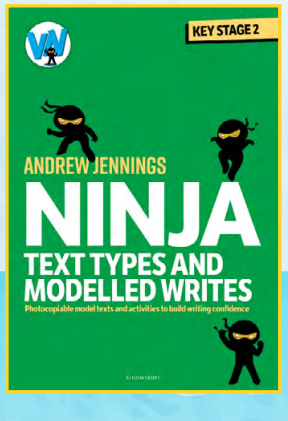

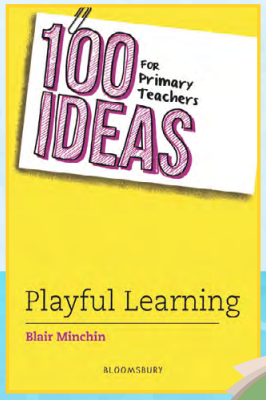

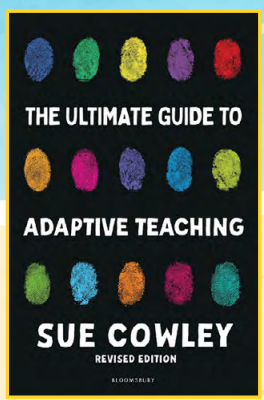

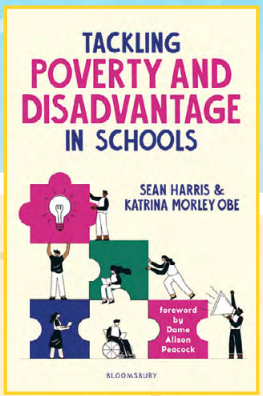

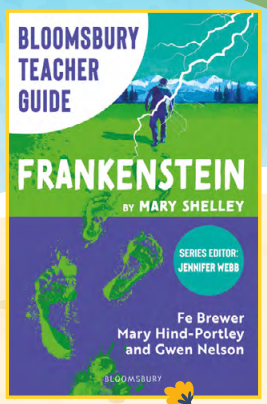

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Profile

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

The voice of the north east

Schools North East director Chris Zarraga is on a mission to persuade politicians to recognise the context of schools in his region

Every August, school leaders in the north of England brace themselves for the inevitable – yet misguided – comparisons.

News outlets bemoan the "north-south divide" in GCSE results. Former Ofsted chiefs criticise "miserable" outcomes. Headteachers prepare to be told they're letting children down.

But in the north east, those leaders have a powerful friend waiting to defend them.

Schools North East is the only organisation of its kind in England, in that it represents all 1,150 of the region's schools.

It's always been influential, but now it has the ear of education secretary Bridget Phillipson and schools minister Catherine McKinnell, both north east MPs.

As proliferation of academies has sometimes pitted different types of schools against each other, leaders in Newcastle, Sunderland, Darlington, Durham and their surrounding countryside speak with one voice.

The mission is important, as demonstrated in a recent Sutton Trust report which chronicled the "tale of two cities" threatening Labour's opportunity mission.

Poorer pupils in central Newcastle are over three times less likely to have a degree by age 22 than those in London's East Ham, despite very similar levels of free school meals eligibility.

Last year, only the north west performed worse than the north east in the proportion of pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths.

But in the pass rate among disadvantaged pupils, the north east came third, only behind London and the West Midlands.

It is this context – the impact of long-term economic deprivation and geographical factors that affect school performance – that Schools North East has sought to get politicians to take seriously since its inception in 2007.

'I find it really insulting'

Chris Zarraga, the organisation's director, tells me the "biggest bugbear I have, I find this really insulting, is that there's an assumption that north east school leaders and schools aren't as competent as other areas.

"When you look at what they're dealing with, you're talking about people at the cutting edge of education, who have been practising inclusion a long time before it became an Ofsted buzzword, and who have real skills in what they do."

The problem, he says, is that the "system hasn't adapted to them".

Profile: Chris Zarraga

'There's an assumption north east leaders aren't as competent'

Comparing the north east with London, for example, is "like a premiership team that has no budget" competing with Liverpool or Manchester City.

"We have the lowest number of subject specialists teaching things like maths and English in our most deprived schools, which, again, the research evidence shows has a huge impact on your exam results," Zarraga says.

"And we're never going to compete with London in terms of attracting people to come and work in the profession here."

One example where this penalises north east schools in league tables is the shortage of language teachers, which means take-up of the English Baccalaureate is lower.

"That's nothing to do with a lack of ambition in north east schools. That's just a structural issue that, again, there's been no real effort to address."

Schools North East was the brainchild of Les Walton, a former head, council education lead and government adviser.

He formed the group in the late 2000s after heads realised they had "virtually no voice in education whatsoever, in the policy debate", Zarraga says.

Since then, he believes there's been "tremendous progress" in persuading politicians to recognise the unique challenges the region faces.

'Context isn't an excuse, it's a reality'

"We are literally light-years ahead of where we were 10 years ago in understanding school performance and the support that schools need," he tells me, as we meet in the charity's offices, the former Lord Mayor's residence in Newcastle.

Phillipson, who represents Houghton and Sunderland South, and McKinnell, the MP for Newcastle North, have engaged "really strongly" with efforts to help politicians understand "nuances" around league tables since they were elected in 2010.

But he adds: "I think there's still some way to go to convince the very top echelons of the DfE that what we're talking about, about context, isn't an excuse, it's a reality that has a massive impact on the performance of our schools."

He believes the DfE still needs to "let go a little bit in terms of that centralising impulse that it has, and be less control freaky about it, and respond to the context of areas better".

The son of a well-known Gateshead headteacher father and a teacher mother, Zarraga attended what he calls a "bog-standard comp" in Newcastle.

His career was initially in finance, at Ernst and Young. But on a career break taking a master's degree in business administration in Durham, he realised he didn't want to return to the private sector.

After working on a Treasury-funded project on enterprise education, he applied for a job at the newly-founded Schools North East in 2008. He became its director in 2019.

The organisation started with a "very small" amount of funding from the then North East Regional Development Agency, with the expectation it would become self-sufficient, and fast.

Ironically, the RDA was subsequently culled in the coalition government's bonfire of the quangos. But Schools North East survived, and found its voice as the academies programme drew more divisions in the schools community.

Zarraga said regardless of school type, "the fundamental issues that you're struggling with around the development of policy and the impact on the north east, the way that policy often misses the mark in terms of the key issues that schools want addressed, those didn't change at all.

"Education got sidetracked. [It] went down a cul-de-sac with kind of a systemic debate, 'should you be an academy?' When really that school improvement agenda and the key issues facing schools were more important. There's more uniting schools than pulling them apart."

'One-size-fits-all policy'

Schools North East works hard to draw attention to the greater challenges its schools face.

"There's been a massive shift over the last 10 or 15 years in the understanding of what school performance is and why," he adds.

"But the problem is we still have a one-size-fits-all policy approach that doesn't really suit areas like the north east.

"And it's not just the north east. It's just that in the north east we have the greatest number of the most serious issues concentrated into the same area."

Zarraga brings up the National Tutoring Programme as an example. Schools North East raised capacity issues from the start.

"There isn't the infrastructure of tutors," he says. "Virtually no capacity compared to London."

As a result, take-up was inevitably lower, and noted in the national press, including this publication.

Zarraga is worried this is happening again with Ofsted reform.

In the early years of Schools North East, chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw strengthened

Profile: Chris Zarraga

the link between outcome data and inspection grades. The north east was "heavily penalised".

"You'd look at the data and you'd have a pretty good idea of what was going to happen."

The region fared better under Amanda Spielman's new framework in 2019, focused more on the curriculum schools taught, not their results.

But under proposals put forward by Sir Martyn Oliver – which include giving schools a grade for achievement – there's a "real worry that we go back to a more data-led system than we've had".

Leaders also fear the proposals are a foregone conclusion, despite a recent consultation, and are concerned about how you get consistency across inspections with even more grades.

The Sutton Trust's recent report showed the "massive" barrier facing the Labour government in its mission to break down barriers to opportunity, Zarraga says.

He points out the Conservatives also had the levelling-up agenda, which finally acknowledged that "London, and certain areas of the south have massive advantages just by dint of location and the structure of industry, society, businesses, etc".

But even then, the north east was shunned in the original "opportunity areas" programme. Zarraga says the DfE acknowledged it hadn't factored-in long-term disadvantage when selecting the original areas.

A special side-project, Opportunity North East, was formed, but it launched just before the pandemic, and was short-lived.

Zarraga acknowledges there are some "really deprived areas" in London, but the structure of poverty is "very different to the north east".

"Families tend to be in poverty for a much shorter period of time than they are in the north east because they have greater labour opportunities around them. Transport infrastructure is much, much better, enabling them to seek work further afield."

'Kicking the can'

Zarraga also acknowledges a "sense of disappointment across the sector" that after such a long period in opposition, Labour didn't have "more, bolder and fully formed ideas.

"We've gone straight into three major reviews, SEND, Ofsted and the curriculum, which is a little bit like kicking the can further down the road for another year or two.

'We're never going to compete with London in attracting people'

"I think the sector had expected more fully fleshed out ideas. We'll have to see what comes from the various reviews. [But] It has increased uncertainty in the sector... I don't think it's been ideal."

Much of the criticism has been levelled at Phillipson, with reports she could be demoted in an upcoming reshuffle. Zarraga says: "It's always been seen as a junior role, as a temporary position for very ambitious ministers.

"You march boldly up the hill, and then you stop halfway, and then you march back down. It's been the 'Grand Old Duke of York', lived out in schools, which is not fair on school leaders. It's not fair on teachers, staff, and particularly on children and families."

He hopes for a "period of stability where someone like Bridget, who does understand those underlying issues has an opportunity to bring some coherence and some actual strategic planning to education, which has been lacking for as long as I've been involved".

The government has ambitious goals for education, particularly the early years. Prime minister Sir Keir Starmer recently announced he wanted 75 per cent of pupils "school-ready" by 2028.

But Zarraga says he "would be very surprised, without very significant investment", if that target was met. He cites three-year waiting lists for assessment for autism as an example.

"The services around schools have been so horrifically strained that in some places, they just don't exist."

Schools North East will soon celebrate its 20th birthday. What does he want to see in the next 20 years?

He wants to have "some kind of policy unit of the DfE based in the north east". The regional director and Darlington office regularly interact with schools. But he adds: "I think it goes up the chain, and it hits a ceiling, and then you go to a much smaller group of people who are predominantly south east-based and south east-experienced, and they're not as receptive.

"I would like to see that devolution, a greater DfE manpower in the region, and a greater devolution of decision-making around funding and the policies that support [schoo's]. I think that would make a huge difference."

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Curriculum Conversation

DIANA OHENE-DARKO
Headteacher, Elmtree Infant and Nursery School

How the curriculum review can deliver its diversity goal

The Francis review cannot diversify the curriculum all on its own – but it can create the momentum for teachers to take the lead

The curriculum review's ambition of ensuring "the curriculum (and related material) is inclusive so that all young people can see themselves represented in their learning" is bold and welcome.

But what should it mean in practice?

Breaking ground

First, 'tolerance' (as referred to in the fundamental British values) isn't enough; it hasn't driven the change we need. A true culture of belonging means actively celebrating everyone for who they are.

This requires us to address unconscious biases before we even begin work on diversifying the curriculum itself. This groundwork needs to happen as part of initial teacher training and continuing professional development.

These will need to include anti-racism and inclusive practice for all nine protected characteristics, most importantly race, gender, disability, sexual orientation and religion or belief.

Laying foundations

Although politically neutral, a richly diversified curriculum could prove controversial, especially where personal views do not align with inclusive pedagogy.

Therefore, beyond bias, diversification requires staff to be familiar with content, in terms of subject-specific knowledge and skills as well as different perspectives.

Currently, best practice relies too heavily on independently motivated teachers and leaders. This means it is least likely to take place in the least diverse communities, where it is arguably most needed.

A new national curriculum must represent a whole-sector commitment to addressing racial discord in our society.

The 2021 *Black Curriculum report* highlighted many drawbacks of our current model. Its focus was specifically on history, where it found a broad failure "to reflect our multi-ethnic and broadly diverse society".

The review is an opportunity to, finally, properly embed its several recommendations (which build on those of the 1999 Macpherson report that followed the murder of Stephen Lawrence).

But it can't be just about history. There are countless opportunities across subject domains to diversify perspectives and content to ensure children and young people are equipped to think critically, appraise information and draw their own conclusions.

Nor can it be just about race. We live in a multi-national society with a vast array of languages, cultures and ways of being. That means there is simply too much for the curriculum review to provide an exhaustive content list for schools. It would be a mistake to try.

> "It must offer more than belonging; it must offer hope

Instead, it should look to encourage and support more teachers to exercise their freedoms in this direction. To that end, there should be a presumption of diversity embedded in curriculum documents and accountability measures to ensure all schools are following best practice.

School-to-school support and sector-wide leadership will quickly arise to help schools meet these requirements.

Building blocks

Children invariably do not 'see' difference until around the age of seven. Therefore, early education is vital in shaping responses to all kinds of uniqueness so inclusivity and acceptance become the norm.

Amid a mental health crisis among our young people, their psychological safety must be a priority for the curriculum review. What comes out of it must offer more than belonging; it must offer hope.

To bring that about, its recommendations will need to ensure that throughout their education, every child in every classroom has access to a rich diet of content and experiences that represents them and all their ambitions – not just back at themselves but to all of their peers.

While the curriculum review can't prescribe all of the content required to do this, it can and should provide subject-specific examples to raise the baseline.

There is excellent practice to draw on across the country, and Becky Francis has the experience from working with the EEF to bring about some useful toolkits.

Delivering a genuinely diverse curriculum will be hard work for many. It will require us all to make the uncomfortable comfortable and to brave being vulnerable.

But the prize is a big one: not just children's greater wellbeing but our own, as we are supported to embrace a renewed sense of collective purpose.

To be working towards greater happiness and a more cohesive society almost feels counter-cultural today. That is all the more reason for the review to be bold here.

Diana Ohene-Darko was a co-author of the NAHT's *You are not alone* and a reviewer of the 2021 *Black Curriculum report*

Opinion

LUKE SIBIETA
Programme director for education and Skills, Institute for Fiscal Studies

What the spending review means for schools (you've probably guessed)

The next few years are going to be very tight for school budgets, writes Luke Sibieta, and forecasting anything more than a real-terms freeze is highly optimistic

The next few years are going to feel very tight for schools. While schools did receive a relatively generous settlement compared with other areas of public spending, familiar pressures from rising costs of SEND, staff costs and falling pupil rolls will weigh heavily on budgets over the next few years.

Day-to-day spending through the core schools budget is set to increase by £4.2 billion in cash terms between 2025-26 and 2028-29.

The eagle-eyed reader will note that this is less than the £4.7 billion rise the government claims. This is because the government did not include the £600 million teacher pay grant going to schools this year in its baseline for school spending.

To calculate the planned change over time in spending, it seems natural to compare the money the government plans to spend in 2028 with the money going to schools this year. So, leaving this out of the baseline is an odd decision – and one that allows the government to claim a bigger funding rise than schools will end up feeling.

The planned rise in spending – based on a more sensible baseline – amounts to the core schools budget being held constant in real terms, with an extra £400 million to cover the costs of the planned expansion of free school meals.

Because pupil numbers are expected to fall between 2025 and 2028, a real-terms freeze in the schools budget equates to a 3 per cent rise in spending per pupil over the spending review period. Taken together with past rises in spending per pupil since 2019, this more than reverses past cuts.

The underlying picture will likely be a lot tighter than that though.

There has been a near 80 per cent rise in the number of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) since 2018, including an 11 per cent rise in the latest statistics for January 2025.

This has led to rapid increases in the costs of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision. Indeed, about half of the overall increase in school spending since 2019 has been absorbed by rising SEND costs.

This extra spending is clearly going towards extra provision. However, its overall quality is unclear and its cost-effectiveness very doubtful. Such rapid increases in spending also constrain the resources schools have to deliver their other responsibilities.

The future is likely to be no different. Indeed, the government forecasts that spending on SEND will rise by over £2 billion (in real terms) between 2025 and 2028. If this occurs, then the best schools could hope for is a real-terms freeze in mainstream school funding per pupil between 2025 and 2028.

> "Much will depend on reform of the SEND system

The government plans major reforms to the SEND system. It has allocated £760 million across 2026 and 2027 to help smooth any reforms. This money will be coming from within the core schools budget.

Things are likely to move slowly. The first proposals won't appear until the autumn, while actual changes are unlikely before September 2026. Even that is incredibly optimistic. As such, it still seems reasonable to expect large increases in spending on SEND up to 2028.

The most realistic expectation is for a real-terms freeze in existing school funding per pupil. This would likely equate to 2 per cent increases in most funding rates in the national funding formula.

As such, schools would be able to afford pay rises of around 2 per cent. If recommendations are higher than that, schools would either need to reduce non-staff spending or reduce staffing levels in the absence of extra funding.

In the long run, it seems reasonable for school costs to broadly fall in line with pupil numbers, undoing the budget increases from the 2010s (when pupil numbers rose).

In the short term, though, managing this process will be far from straightforward.

Schools, trusts and local authorities will need to work carefully through this challenge over the next few years.

Falling pupil numbers and less need for new schools does mean less need for new school buildings, freeing up more of the schools capital budget for refurbishing or improving existing buildings.

That will be helped by a 7 per cent real-terms increase in school capital spending (rising from £6.8 billion in 2025-26 to £7.7 billion in 2028-29 in cash terms), taking capital spending back to the same real-terms level as in 2015.

Few expected anything other than tight finances moving forward, but just how tight will largely depend on reform of the SEND system. We will have to wait until the autumn to find out more about that.

Opinion

KEVIN BUCHANAN

Education director, EdStart Schools

How we're managing to beat the NEET challenge

Our focus on relationships, readiness and real-world support means we don't just help young people leave school, writes Kevin Buchanan; we help them land

EdStart Schools is a group of specialist alternative provision (AP) and special schools in the north west. Sadly, we're quite used to hearing the word "unlikely".

Unlikely to sit GCSEs. Unlikely to attend college. Unlikely to last a week in a workplace. But the word that often comes next is the one that matters most: until.

Until they find a school where their challenges aren't a barrier to support. Until they are met with understanding, not judgment. Until someone walks with them, not just through Year 11 but as they take their next steps, ensuring they have the tools and confidence to thrive beyond school.

The national picture makes for sobering reading. Among those leaving in 2022/23, 28.5 per cent of students in alternative provision didn't sustain a post-16 destination for six months, five times higher than students from mainstream schools.

These are young people falling through the cracks at a critical juncture in their lives. Our response is to do everything we can to make sure that doesn't happen. In fact, we've achieved zero NEETs – no students not in education, employment or training – across multiple Year 11 cohorts.

This is a statistic we're incredibly proud of, and it doesn't happen by accident. It happens because we treat destinations not as a final box to tick but as a core part of the curriculum.

From the moment students arrive, we begin building a picture of their strengths, interests and challenges – academic, emotional and practical. Each student receives one-to-one careers guidance, and by the start of Year 11 they're working towards three viable post-16 offers.

We go with them to college open days. We call ahead to prep tutors. We rehearse interviews, plan travel routes and help budget for meals and transport. If needed, we walk through the first day with them until they feel confident and comfortable.

Alongside this, we run skills-focused sessions on CV writing, time-keeping and communication. We also tackle life scenarios like how to handle a missed deadline, repair a broken relationship or navigate conflict. We don't just prepare students to get a place. We prepare them to keep it.

We do the same with families,

> "Zero NEETS doesn't happen by accident

many of whom have had years of fractured experiences with education.

We run parent workshops, explain how college systems work and keep up consistent contact by phone, message or visits. We even offer parents support with CV writing and filling in applications to help their child get back into work. It's a powerful way to build a culture of progression throughout the family.

To us, destinations and transition out of our school are a long-term commitment, well past July. If something wobbles in September, we step back in and help them pivot, or simply hold the safety net.

Take Ben. He joined EdStart after repeated suspensions from mainstream school. With ADHD and a history of low attendance, he (and his mum) had given up hope that he'd even sit GCSEs.

But in our smaller classes and with a more personal approach, he re-engaged, passed his GCSEs and discovered a love of cooking. Now, he's studying for a professional chef foundation degree at University College Birmingham, with plans to open his own restaurant one day.

His mum was so inspired, she joined EdStart as an attendance officer.

Ben's story may seem unlikely to many, but it isn't unusual to us. Through opportunities like volunteering, work placements and real-world experiences such as budgeting or using public transport, we skill up our students to navigate past the barriers in their paths.

Succeeding after school isn't just about ability. It's about confidence, connection and continuity. It isn't just about walking into a college, training course or job. It's about feeling like you belong there.

A zero-NEETs approach takes high adult input and long-term persistence, but it works. Beyond the headline figure, it is transforming families' and whole communities' aspirations and prospects.

And the first step to achieving that is to transform our expectations of what is likely and what isn't.

Opinion

MARK GROGAN
Head of film studies, Alleyn's School

AI should be the making of coursework – not its breaking

The argument that AI spells the end of coursework is short-sighted and ignores opportunities to improve processes and enrich provision, writes Mark Grogan

The rise of tools such as ChatGPT has rightly prompted concern about how we might continue to assess secondary school students as fairly as possible. The interim report of the curriculum and assessment review notes these concerns, but how should it respond?

Some commentators argue we must now move more exclusively to nationally standardised, timed, terminal assessments to guarantee reliability at key assessment points.

Daisy Christodoulou, who recently wrote for this publication's Curriculum Conversation feature about assessment reform, has claimed on social media that "AI is making all forms of non-exam assessment totally obsolete".

I have sympathy with fears over AI's impact on fairness and rigour in student assessment, yet the more alarmist reactions risk throwing away the baby (non-examined assessment in subjects like art, design technology, drama, and film studies) with the AI bathwater. Doing so would only narrow opportunity.

Non-examined assessment (NEA) refers to coursework or project-based tasks completed over time, often incorporating stages of research, planning, practical execution, and evaluation. It is especially valuable in more typically creative subjects where process and iteration can be as important as outcome.

Until recently, its critics focused on its workload implications. Now, those same critics have seized on the advent of AI to precipitate its downfall – often conveniently ignoring that AI also makes assessment itself (examined or otherwise) quicker and more efficient.

It is true that student work completed outside of the classroom is increasingly likely to be influenced in part or in whole by AI. That is an argument for building more regular, in-class assessments into our teaching practice.

In addition, together with parents, we have a role to play in educating ourselves and our pupils about the risks of cognitive off-loading (letting AI do our hard thinking for us). End-of-unit tests, unseen response tasks, timed essays under controlled conditions and 'old school' handwritten terminal exams are part of countering that negative influence.

But that is more relevant to university assessment reform than to schools. Meanwhile, properly administered NEA encourages difficult thinking as much as unchecked AI use undermines it. Indeed, asserting that NEA is 'totally obsolete' is short-sighted.

> "We can't safeguard creative learning by eliminating it

In truth, carefully structured NEA, particularly when integrated into classroom practice and accompanied by regular formal checkpoints, allows students to apply their learning practically, reinforces process-based thinking and encourages creative engagement.

Christodoulou agrees, qualifying her remarks by saying that it is 'unsupervised writing assessments [that] are no longer viable'. The emphasis here should be on 'unsupervised'.

I can only speak to my subject, film studies. In my experience NEA has oversight built into the process. For example, the OCR specification explicitly states that "work must be undertaken under direct teacher supervision".

Teachers must monitor key production stages and authenticate all submitted materials. This is definitely not '*unsupervised writing*' — but it also isn't a timed exam. It is scaffolded, stage-based, and pedagogically integrated coursework.

NEA in this context becomes a space where academic and creative knowledge intertwine. Theory is not only something to be remembered and examined in formal conditions, it is also something to be tested and challenged through practice.

Of course, there are other concerns about NEA, not least school-level dishonesty and teacher bias (as well as workload). But we can't safeguard creative learning by eliminating it, and we can't preserve humanity (or children's future prospects) in the age of AI by retreating into exam halls.

Instead, let's take this opportunity to adapt. In film studies, this might include viva-style discussions about a student's production decisions, with peer feedback built into the assessment, as well as honest reflection on where AI was (or wasn't) used and why, promoting transparency.

In fact, there is a strong case for reinstating the heavier weighting of NEA within the qualification as a whole (as was the case before the last curriculum reforms).

We don't have to choose between the rigour of the final exam and creative practice. What we need is non-examined assessment that rewards hard thinking and hard work.

Perhaps AI can even help us devise it.

SEND Solutions

SARAH SCOTT
Head of literacy, Ambition Institute

How to answer parents' questions about dyslexia

Jamie Oliver's new documentary is likely to spark questions from parents. Sarah Scott looks at the most common and how best to address their concerns

As a teacher with 17 years of experience and a literacy specialist, I was particularly interested in watching Monday's Channel 4 documentary, *Jamie's Dyslexia Revolution* and reading his article in these pages.

As this week is phonics screening check week, the focus on literacy and SEND is heightened, and the documentary has become part of a wider discussion.

The documentary does a great job of provoking a conversation about how we best meet the needs of pupils with dyslexia. It was heartening to hear Jamie say that schools fill him with hope. His call for more and better professional development for teachers on SEND, especially regarding literacy, is encouraging.

It is likely that as a result of this documentary schools might see an increase in parents asking how their child's literacy needs are being supported in school.

So, what questions are parents likely to ask and how might we respond?

What can I be doing as a parent?
First and foremost, reassure parents and carers that they play an essential role in supporting you to understand their child as an individual. This includes children's engagement in learning and attainment, but just as importantly, their lives out of school.

Making time for these conversations underscores your commitment to each child's success and fosters a strong partnership between home and school.

How do you identify literacy needs?
It's helpful to explain how your school's assessment of their child's literacy needs covers speech, language and communication, and phonological awareness, in addition to reading and writing.

Parents might be unsure of the role of external experts, and how collaborating with specialist services like educational psychologists and speech and language therapists supports understanding of their child's specific needs.

Reassure parents that these assessments are designed to support their child's development and are conducted with their child's best interests at heart.

When should we seek a formal assessment?
We need to support parents to understand that children develop at different rates and that a certain level of maturity is required before a formal diagnosis.

For this reason, the British Dyslexia Association recommends against formal dyslexia assessments before age seven.

Meanwhile the Driver Youth Trust, another dyslexia specialist organisation, emphasises the importance of high-quality provision in every classroom.

> "Focus on literacy and SEND is heightened

How do you support a child in the classroom?
Take the time to explain your school's commitment to high-quality, evidence-led teaching.

Delivering high-quality literacy instruction, supported by adaptive teaching and ample opportunities for practice and repetition, creates an environment where every pupil can thrive, including those with dyslexia.

Describe the adaptations their child receives, how these meet their needs, and the ways in which they are supported to work with increasing independence.

What if it isn't working?
Support parents to understand that while many children's additional needs can be addressed through skilful whole-class teaching, in some cases focused support may be required.

Take the time to share with parents how interventions are tightly matched to need, led by highly trained staff, and reviewed regularly to ensure they work.

It is also vital to identify how you ensure that interventions do not limit their child's engagement with the broader curriculum or negatively affect motivation and self-belief.

During this discussion, explain how they can adopt similar methods to support their child at home.

Beyond these conversations, take time to reflect on how your school develops teacher expertise, both to gain deeper understanding of dyslexia and to deliver high quality teaching that is inclusive of all learners.

The current focus on equipping trainee teachers with the skills to support children with dyslexia confidently and effectively is a crucial part of educating the next generation of teachers.

However, established teachers and leaders also need continuous training in typical literacy development, including recognising dyslexia symptoms, and supporting dyslexic pupils.

As this new documentary brings dyslexia into the spotlight, let's seize this moment to focus on supporting pupils with all kinds of literacy needs.

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THE CONVERSATION

LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM

Sarah Gallagher

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

CONDITION RED

In her fourth blog on AI in education, June O'Sullivan, CEO of the London Early Years Foundation, this week asks us to open our eyes to its risks.

The blog is inspired by a cybersecurity course that clearly shook her. (The blog's title is inspired by nuclear doomsday satire, Dr Strangelove.) But rather than a panicked response, what we get are a series of wise suggestions for how to use AI with caution.

As O'Sullivan points out, the more we click/engage/input data into systems, the more we open ourselves up to cyber attacks. She also notes that we already live with AI (whether or not we actively use ChatGPT and other tools) so we need to get savvy.

This is certainly something schools need to be extremely mindful of. Just like the message we teach our pupils, technology can be amazing, but we must learn how to navigate around its pitfalls. Especially as most of the time, it's their data we're inputting.

POST-NUCLEAR FAMILIES

Another pitfall of technology is the demise of personal interactions – a worrying trend I see playing out all the time.

As teachers, we all know what conversation can do for language acquisition, and what language acquisition in turn does for wider learning.

Whether it's the walk to primary school or the car journey to secondary (a perfect neutral setting for insightful chat), any work we can do to promote quality conversation - over and above practicalities like remembering homework and water bottles - can have a big impact. (And it can also be fun!)

And if you want help with that, then this lovely piece by Chris Britt-Searle offers a wealth of ideas to deploy for parents on their way to school. Underpinning all of them is the all-powerful role of conversation. A timely intervention for our time-poor times.

ATOMIC TEACHING

No, we're not back to Dr Strangelove, but this week's discussion on Mr Barton's podcast focuses on atomisation and the segue was too good to pass up.

Crudely, atomisation is the part of direct instruction that involves breaking things down into very small steps but, as Mr Barton puts it, "taken to the extreme". In conversation with him are Kris Boulton, a leader in the field of direct instruction, and Lee Wheeler, a secondary maths teacher.

His is the second episode on the topic, so I've come to it mid-way, but it was nonetheless a powerful listen. Wheeler's informed practice input (around early impact and pitfalls) was particularly insightful.

A strong take-away was around the power of belief in classes' ability, buying into the idea that if pupils don't understand something it's up to the teacher, not down to the pupils. There's a really interesting point about the pressure it releases when the teacher can honestly say "I can see you didn't get it and I'll think again".

In order to do this, you have to be a certain kind of teacher – and certainly not the kind who goes nuclear when plans go awry.

DROPPING BOMBS

As we are coming to the end of the school year and the stressful build-up to results day begins, it seems timely to have Adrian Bethune as a guest on Andy Mellor's podcast. Bethune has been championing teacher wellbeing in speeches, books and CPD sessions for years and here, he is on top form.

What struck me was his compassion for leaders in ensuring they are able to fulfil their roles as humans, and often as parents.

Citing the ludicrous and sadly too-real example of a colleague who was asked to stay and teach despite her child needing to be picked up from another school because they were unwell, Bethune is categorical that we shouldn't be sacrificing our lives for more time in school.

Nobody wants to think they are replaceable, but the idea that we are indispensable can be desperately detrimental. It is our families and friends we are indispensable to.

Modelling that is how we will shine brightest for our pupils, even if it means we're not in school from time to time.

Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts

The Knowledge

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

Is trust centralisation delivering its promises?

Elizabeth Robinson, PhD researcher, School of Business, University of Leicester

Schools Week readers will be no strangers to teaching's recruitment and retention crisis or to the causes of this attrition. What we didn't know – until now – is whether teachers working in one trust experience different levels of satisfaction to those working for another, and if they do, then why.

On paper, trusts offer a number of advantages when it comes to job satisfaction, among them increased development opportunities, access to centralised resources and opportunities to collaborate with a wider network of professionals.

Utilised successfully, this kind of centralisation has the potential to create a significantly improved work environment for teachers. However, 'horror stories' are well known, as are tales of teachers scrambling for places in good trusts.

Previous research has shown that teachers' sense of professional autonomy is an important part of improving retention and reducing attrition, as autonomy has been found to positively impact teachers' commitment and satisfaction.

Trusts risk leveraging their built-in advantages for efficiency at the expense of this autonomy.

Other research has shown that this sense of autonomy isn't just about curriculum; it pertains to values too. Alignment (or lack of it) between personal beliefs and the educational practices teachers have to implement can also affect job satisfaction.

This research explored these factors with teachers from three trusts in the Midlands. The aim was to learn more about their experiences of these factors.

Classroom leadership

In all three trusts, teachers commonly responded that they were 'dissatisfied' when asked about the sense of achievement they get from their work.

In two of them, teachers were also 'dissatisfied' with their scope for using their initiative at work. At one, teachers tended to express dissatisfaction with their level of

influence over their job. At the other, they were more dissatisfied overall with their amount of involvement in decision-making.

These findings suggest that teachers value the ability to manage their own work, use their initiative and have influence in their roles. Therefore, trusts keen to hang onto their teachers and keep morale high should look at ways to seek their views and encourage their feedback on decisions.

Teacher resourcefulness

In principle, centralised resources like lesson plans and materials for schools in trusts have the potential to enhance teaching and learning, reduce teacher workload and boost the sharing of expertise across schools.

However, this research found that access to and the impact of centralised resources varied between trusts.

Teachers in two of the trusts mostly agreed that their trust provides access to centralised resources, while those in the third largely disagreed. But regardless of their access to centralised resources, teachers across all three trusts were rather sceptical of their value.

In one of the two trusts with high levels of resource centralisation, a greater emphasis on their mandatory use was linked with lower job satisfaction.

These findings suggest trust leaders need to find a careful balance between providing centralised resources and allowing teachers to exercise their professional autonomy.

Fostering creative adaptation of the resources, for example, can nurture a sense of professionalism s*and* ultimately lead to a wider range of better materials.

Only connect

Trusts' capacity to improve under-performing schools is often attributed to the high levels of collaboration within and between schools they enable. However, when we asked teachers about their experience of this, we found that such collaboration was in short supply.

Teachers in all three trusts mostly disagreed that their trust encourages collaboration between teachers in their school. Similarly, while there is some variation in responses, most teachers in all three also disagreed that their trust encourages collaboration between teachers in the same specialism across the different trust schools.

This suggests that trust leaders need to actively facilitate collaboration rather than assume that it will happen organically within and across the schools in their network.

Nothing in this research negates the promise of trusts to create a positive work experience and high levels of job satisfaction for their teachers.

Ultimately, however, this research shows that trusts that foster teachers' initiative, creative adaptation of centralised resources and collaboration among their trust networks are likely to be more successful in delivering on that promise.

Week in Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

WEDNESDAY

Chancellor Rachel Reeves unveiled her much-anticipated three-year spending review today (hence our SPENDING REVIEW WEEK IN WESTMINSTER SPECIAL!).

Budget-related speeches are always full of government spin. But, in this instance, said spin also made it into the Treasury's actual spending review budget. The documents stated that the government's £4.7 billion school funding rise equated to a £2 billion real-terms rise in budgets.

However, this real-terms rise was actually based on comparing the school budget in 2023-24 (before Labour even came into power) with 2028!

Academy boss Sir Jon Coles flagged the "Treasury spin" on social media platform X.

***

Elsewhere, despite it being not far off a year since Labour won the general election, we're still awaiting the actual substance of one of their biggest education promise: 6,500 more teachers.

This hit a new low (or perhaps high, if you like watching mandarins get skewered by parliamentary committees) when the DfE's top civil servant, Susan Acland-Hood, was unable to answer basic questions on the pledge for education committee MPs.

She said the "fine detail" will only be announced after the spending review.

So, did the spending review contain anything? Nada, only that the review "supports the government's commitment to recruit 6,500 more teachers over the course of this parliament across secondary schools, further education settings and specialist schools".

***

Meanwhile, parents had always been promised that the hugely controversial VAT tax on private schools would raise cash to invest in state schools.

Don't just take our word for it, this is what the Labour party's 2024 election manifesto said: "Labour will end the VAT exemption and business rates relief for private schools to invest in our state schools."

So, some surprise today when prime minister Sir Keir Starmer said, because of the VAT policy, "we have announced the largest investment in affordable housing in a generation".

Kemi Badenoch, leader of the Conservatives, said on X: "You said 'every penny' would go into state schools... but now it's housing?" D'oh!

Shadow education secretary Laura Trott was also quick to point out the apparent change (and even managed to shoehorn immigration into her argument!).

"So, let me get this straight," she said. "We are now taxing British children's education in order to build houses that will be given away to illegal migrants? Madness."

Private schools AND immigrants! Expect to see it on the front of the *Daily Mail* this week.

***

Delivering her spending review, Reeves said she joined Labour nearly 30 years ago because she "knew, growing up, that the Conservative Party did not care much about schools like mine". Not quite the mic drop she was hoping.

Reeves attended Cator Park School for Girls, which in 2011 became Harris Girls Academy Bromley.

And it was former education secretary Michael Gove who quickly pointed out that the Conservatives made the school into an academy, which is now rated 'outstanding'.

***

As all eyes were on the Commons, Ofsted announced it will now not be publishing a formal response to its consultation on its reforms until September, leaving schools bugger all time to understand how the inspections will work before inspectors arrive at the school gates.

Bridget Phillipson swiftly expressed her dismay and announced that she has appointed Dame Christine Gilbert as new chair of the Ofsted board. Gilbert, she said, would bring "strong challenge".

Just a bit. It was her governance review last year which basically concluded that Ofsted's board did feck all and had no power to hold the chief inspector in check. Sir Martyn Oliver must be delighted with the appointment.

Week in Westminster will be getting its popcorn ready for September, when Gilbert takes over.

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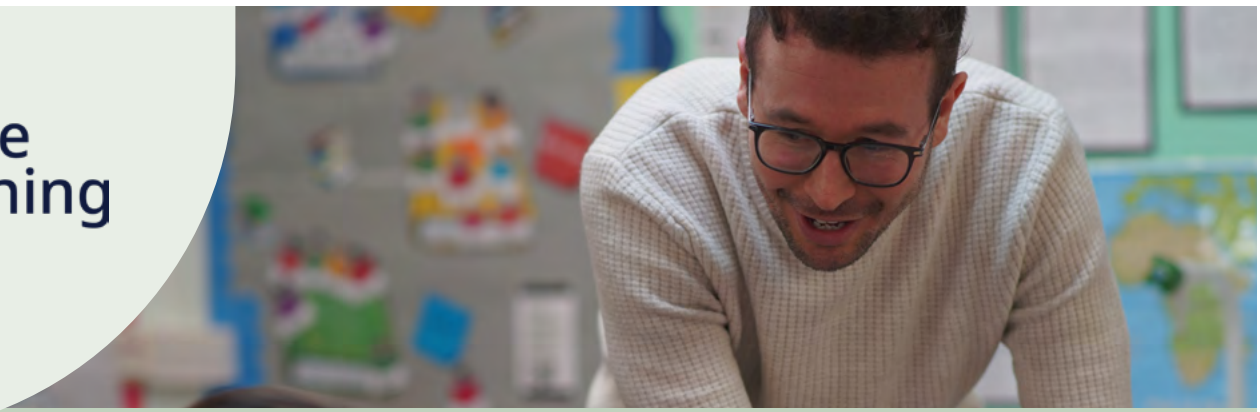

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Due to internal promotions, Active Learning Trust now have two Headteacher opportunities available in North Suffolk. Whether you are an experienced Headteacher or stepping into headship for the first time, we want to hear from you.

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recruitment@activelearningtrust.org

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- A family, not a house share
- Comfortable being candid
- Humour, humility, humanity

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at Red Oak Primary School

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

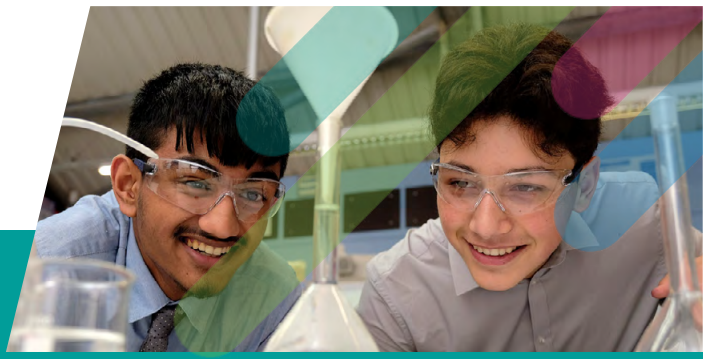
Red Oak Primary is a two-form entry school with over 450 children, with Kirkley community at its heart. The school's ethos radiates throughout their classrooms, which offer a calm environment that's rich with inclusion, nurture and aspiration.

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.

bdat
Bradford Diocesan Academies Trust



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