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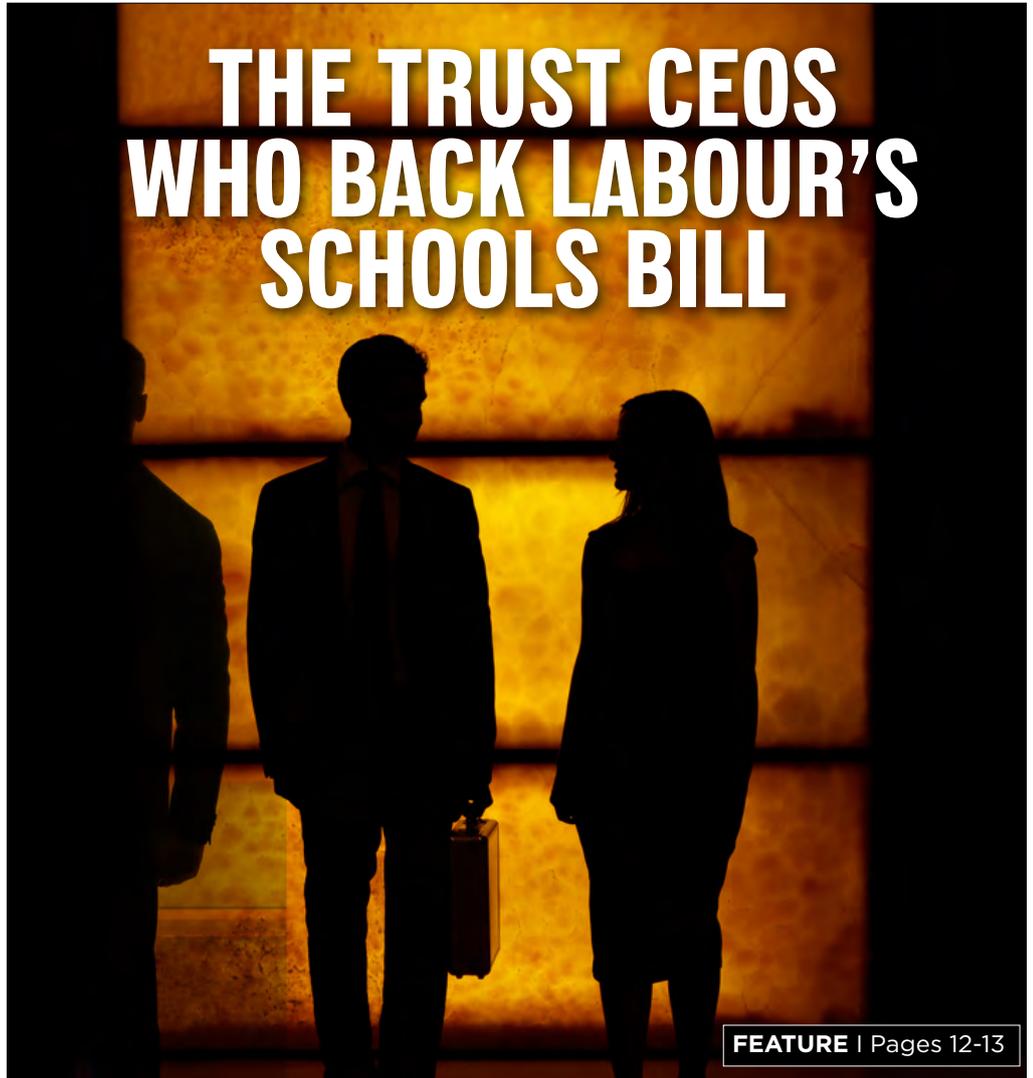
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# Watchdog saves falling roll schools after councils' 'shortcomings'

- Two primaries will no longer close after admission body ruling
- Watchdog found 'serious' issues with two councils' decisions
- Warning for sector amid falling rolls, as schools rue 'untold damage'

# SCHOOLS WEEK

## Meet the news team



**John Dickens**  
EDITOR

@JOHNDICKENSSW  
JOHN.DICKENS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**Freddie Whittaker**  
DEPUTY EDITOR

@FCDWHITTAKER  
FREDDIE.WHITTAKER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**Samantha Booth**  
CHIEF REPORTER

@SAMANTHAJBOTH  
SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**Lydia Chantler-Hicks**  
SENIOR REPORTER

@LYDIACHSW  
LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**Jack Dyson**  
SENIOR REPORTER

@JACKYDYS  
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



**JL Dutaut**  
COMMISSIONING EDITOR

@DUTAUT.BSKY.SOCIAL  
JEAN-LOUISDUTAUT@EDUCATIONSCAPE.COM



**Nicky Phillips**  
HEAD DESIGNER

@GELVETICA  
NICKY.PHILLIPS@FEWEEK.CO.UK



**Shane Mann**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

@SHANERMANN  
SHANE.MANN@EDUCATIONSCAPE.COM

Got a story?

Get in touch.

Contact [news@schoolsweek.co.uk](mailto:news@schoolsweek.co.uk)



THE TEAM

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

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Many schools are the beating heart of their communities. Some have steadfastly stood, gates wide open, for scores of years, even while other public sector facilities shut theirs.

But that's changing. The falling rolls crisis is ripping schools away from the communities that cherish them.

It is pitting councils, tasked with place planning, against headteachers, tasked with acting in the best interests of their pupils and parents.

While nobody wants to do it, school closures are inevitable.

But given the heartache of such decisions, it is imperative they are made fairly, transparently and follow the rules.

Our front page story today (see page four) shows that is not happening. And the consequences have, as one head says, caused 'untold damage'.

The two decisions this week by the admissions watchdog to quash planned school closures due to 'serious' shortcomings in councils' decisions

should be a wake-up call to others.

While two schools that were set to close will now stay open, it's a hollow victory. One of the schools has just five pupils starting in September.

Councils across the country are grappling with these difficult decisions. They must take heed of both these cases and ensure the failures are not repeated.

Elsewhere this week, we have the latest attempt from Ofsted to assure the sector it is possible for inspectors to judge schools in up to 11 different areas consistently (page 8).

We also reveal that the government is making progress on its pledge to help schools deal with a surge in parental complaints, with new guidance being drawn up (page 5).

And we've written a lot about potential issues with the schools bill, but who are the leaders coming out to bat for Labour's key education reforms? We found out this week (pages 12 and 13).

## Most read online this week:

- 1 [Exam boards consider 'action' over social media predictions](#)**
- 2 [Trust legal challenge over child in isolation for half a year](#)**
- 3 ['Delay new Ofsted inspections until September 2026', demand unions](#)**
- 4 ['I'm a champion for teachers': How Mr P got his MBE](#)**
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See story, page 12 and 13

# Watchdog saves two falling rolls schools from closure

ELLA JESSEL

@SCHOOLSWEEK

Two primary schools set to shut over the falling rolls crisis have been saved after the admissions watchdog found “serious” shortcomings in councils’ decisions.

But leaders have hit out at the “untold damage” caused by the proposed closures – with one school having just five pupils down to start this September.

Robbie Cruikshanks, senior researcher at the Education Policy Institute, said councils “must carefully consider how school closures or amalgamations will affect their local communities and, of course, ensure that they follow the statutory process”.

“As pupil numbers continue to decline in many parts of the country, this issue is likely to become increasingly prominent.”

## ‘Serious shortcomings’

The Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) this week squashed Lambeth council’s plans to close St John the Divine Primary School, in Camberwell, from next September, citing “notable deficiencies” in the process.

Lambeth is one of the worst affected boroughs in the country on falling rolls, with 1,000 fewer children starting at primaries than a decade ago.

The borough predicts it will have a £23m deficit across its 68 maintained schools by 2026-27.

Government data forecasts that unfilled primary spaces will rise to 36.9 per cent in the same period.

Last year it launched plans to close or merge six primaries, including ‘good’-rated St John the Divine, a voluntary-aided school which at the time had 120 on its roll out of a possible 210.

It was to join with another nearby CofE school to strengthen numbers across both sites. The Southwark Diocesan Board of Education supported the plan.

But parents opposed it and the school’s governing body referred the decision to the OSA.

In a ruling yesterday, the adjudicator Clive Sentance quashed the closure, citing “serious shortcomings” in the council’s consultation.

Officers had misunderstood “how amalgamations work” and concerns were raised over financial modelling of the merged school becoming “strong and sustainable”.

Meanwhile, Arreton St George’s C of E Primary School, on the Isle of Wight, will no longer close this



August after the OSA found flaws in its council’s decision-making.

It had been selected for closure, along with five others, due to its “low and falling pupil numbers”. Last year the school was just over a third full when only six children joined in September.

The council has 2,500 surplus primary school places this year.

But the OSA overruled the council after the Diocese of Portsmouth appealed. The adjudicator reportedly found “serious procedural flaws and insufficient justification for closure”.

The process to select which schools closed was not transparent and lacking in evidence, the report, which is yet to be published, said.

## ‘Untold damage’

Arreton St George’s headteacher Nicky Coates said that while they were “pleased”, the mood was not one of “pure celebration” given the “untold damage” the closure order had done.

In Lambeth, Peter Truesdale, a governor at St John the Divine, said the “whole community welcomes this result and we are glad we have finally been listened to”.

“Our school will continue giving better and better education. We look forward to hearing how Lambeth intends to help with that.”

However the school has just five children starting in reception this September, which governors say is a “consequence of the uncertainty surrounding the school”.

Sentance agreed that St John the Divine was “undoubtedly vulnerable” to falls in pupil numbers. Lambeth said the school’s future deficit could be higher than the £600,000 estimated cost of closing it now.

But Sentance rejected Lambeth’s view that the school was unviable just because it had 100 pupils and said the school could save money by using mixed-age groups.

## More closures needed

A Lambeth council spokesperson apologised for the “uncertainty this decision now creates” and said they would “fully consider what it may mean for our approach in the future”.

In a statement, Isle of Wight council said it would ensure the adjudicator’s findings were “properly considered”.

Three of the other schools initially proposed for closure on the Isle of Wight were dropped from the plans in March, but the remaining school, Cowes Primary, will close as planned at the end of this academic year.

Jeff Williams, the Diocese of Portsmouth’s director of education, added it was “imperative” that the council “carries out the process in the right way, or else we’ll be back in this situation again”.

And Lambeth has already said it will now have to consult on more closures later this year.

Swathes of primary schools across the country have already closed over falling rolls, especially in London where a falling birth rate and an exodus of families has led to a collapse in pupil numbers.

Despite strong opposition from communities, closures show no sign of abating. In London, Southwark council confirmed last week it was closing two more primaries, taking its total to eight since 2022.

Meanwhile Westminster City Council is set to merge five schools into two this September while Hackney is closing four more schools, having already closed four last summer.

NEWS

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# Ministers drawing up complaints guidance for schools and parents

**JACK DYSON**

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE



Catherine McKinnell

The government is drawing up new guidance for schools and parents over complaints to “reduce the burden on leaders”.

Ministers have said the advice will be published “shortly”, amid concerns over the “increasing number of complaints” and the toll on heads.

The Department for Education will also conduct research, involving teachers and parents with “experience” of the process.

In a letter about rising parent complaints, seen by Schools Week, schools minister Catherine McKinnell told Tory leader Kemi Badenoch: “We are engaging with schools and organisations representing both the education sector and parents to consider what more we can do.

“[This includes] exploring options to improve the complaints process and reduce the burden on schools and leaders whilst also maintaining parents’ rights to raise concerns.

“We take the wellbeing of staff



Kemi Badenoch

very seriously. We will shortly be publishing updated guidance for schools on managing complaints, as well as updating guidance for parents and carers.”

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson has also “acknowledged the concerns being raised about parental complaints”, including the increasing number “received by schools and the impact it is having” on leaders.

A seven-day research project, beginning on Monday, will be led by Policy Lab, a team within the Department for Education. Its aim “is to better understand the school complaints landscape and

generate ideas for how to reduce them”.

As well as schools, parents who have experience with the “complaints process, whether they have initiated a complaint or been involved in resolving one”, will be involved.

The research will take the form of a “debate”, during which parents and teacher will be able to support or disagree with statements and anonymously submit their own views for others to vote on.

Headteacher support service Headrest’s latest wellbeing report showed 56 per cent of leaders and 40 per cent of teachers witnessed an increase in vexatious complaints from parents and guardians.

Leaders’ union the NAHT has called on ministers to review “complaints procedures to deter vexatious use of the existing system by parents”, involving referrals to the misconduct agency and Ofsted before school processes have been followed.

The Confederation of School Trusts last year urged the government to create a “single front door” to “triage” complaints and ensure they are not investigated multiple times.

The DfE did not respond to a request for comment.

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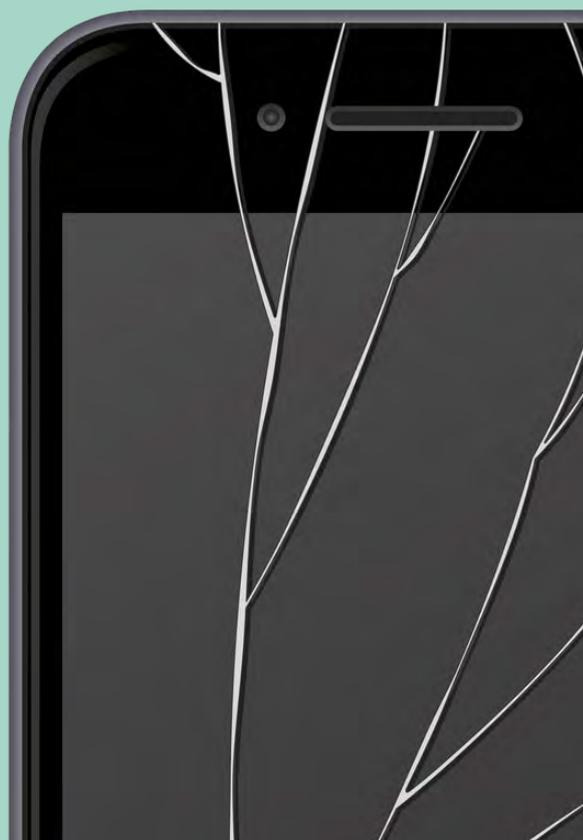
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# New compliance checks to spot schools flouting Baker clause

**JACK DYSON**

**@JACKDYDS**

The government will launch compliance checks next year to find out whether schools are meeting requirements to let further education providers talk to their pupils about future study options.

However, secondaries flouting the rules will not be named and shamed – with anonymised national data published annually from next year instead.

Skills minister Jacqui Smith told MPs this week that the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) will chart whether youngsters are getting informed about technical training and apprenticeship options at school.

She said: “One of things we’re going to do next year is... ask [CEC] to map the compliance with that particular requirement so that we can be confident that students are getting the ability to be able to see what the options are for them.”

Statutory guidance states that schools must provide “at least six opportunities to meet providers of technical education or



Lord Kenneth Baker

apprenticeships during years 8 to 13”.

The requirement, called the Baker clause, is designed to give them the chance “to consider how studying or training in different ways, and in different environments, might suit their skills, interests and aptitudes”.

A CEC spokesperson said the “published data will be national, aggregated and anonymised”. Institution-level information gathered by the quango will be shared with “local careers hub partners on a confidential basis”.

The Department for Education said the annual national-level compliance data will “shine a light on progress and identify where there is more to do to meet the requirements”.

Guidance beefed up in 2023 said targeted

support would be offered “if there are concerns about a school’s adherence to the provider access legislation. Concerns can be raised through DfE monitoring, Ofsted reports or a complaint from a provider.

Should a school continue to fall short after receiving the support, a minister will write to it, setting a deadline by which to comply, “to avoid moving to formal intervention”.

After this, a legal direction could be issued. Schools may also lose out on government careers funding.

The changes came after criticism of the lack of enforcement of previous rules. A 2019 Institute for Public Policy Research study found two-thirds of secondary schools were still flouting the Baker clause a year after it was introduced.

A DfE spokesperson said the government has “provided clear statutory guidance to support schools to comply with the provider access legislation”. It will continue to work with the CEC “to ensure all pupils are given information on the range of technical and vocational options that are available to them”.

**ANVIKSHA PATEL | @ANNIESEATING**

## Critical mass of students still needed to make T-levels a ‘force for good’

T-Levels may remain a “minority pursuit” if the government does not reach a “critical mass” of student enrolments by clarifying career pathways and improving employer engagement, MPs have warned.

Parliament’s influential public accounts committee (PAC) has recommended that the Department for Education (DfE) enters “campaign mode” and sets out “publicly” how its flagship qualification fits with other funded qualifications and career routes.

In a report published today (Friday), the PAC urged the DfE not to “lose focus” and detail a plan to improve employer awareness of T-levels through local skills plans after finding just one-third of businesses know about the qualification.

A National Audit Office report in March questioned the scalability of the qualifications for 16 to 19-year-olds after finding that student number forecasts were missed by three-quarters.

PAC chair Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown said: “T-levels have the potential to be a significant force for good in equipping young people with everything they need for their burgeoning careers.

“But, without the wider awareness in industry and critical mass of student enrolments, T-levels may remain very much a minority pursuit when they could become a natural and enriching step in many students’ lives.”

A DfE spokesperson said it will consider the PAC’s recommendations “carefully” and respond in due course.

The PAC made six recommendations, including speeding up updates to teaching content to “meet evolving skills gaps” and understanding better how exam board fees and costs impact the T-level related funding pressures on schools.

It also recommended that the DfE examine how to tailor the curriculum to appeal to a “diverse student group” after it found

that women were under-represented on engineering T-level courses.

The report concluded that T-levels also have a “risky” all-or-nothing assessment approach, where failing one part of the course leads to overall failure, deterring enrolments.

The PAC also recommended that there should be a workforce strategy to support schools and colleges recruiting and retaining T-level teachers, especially given the qualifications “themselves are addressing areas of skills shortages”.

Top education civil servants told MPs in April that T-levels needed 60,000 to 70,000 students enrolled on courses each year to be viable.

But the report also pointed out a risk of schools and colleges not being able to secure enough industry placements for more students to complete the qualifications. Placements of 315 hours, or 45 days, are a mandatory part of T-levels.



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# Ofsted pledges specialist inspectors for most visits

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

Ofsted has pledged that “most” inspections from November will include at least one inspector with experience of working in the type of setting they are visiting.

The watchdog says it will “make the best use” of the “current sector knowledge and experience” of Ofsted inspectors – who are often serving staff members in schools – by “placing greater emphasis on matching their expertise to specific types of provision”.

Meanwhile, all inspections of schools and colleges will also be led by either a current HMI or an inspector with “recent HMI experience”.

During its recent consultation on inspection changes, schools told Ofsted that inspectors “do not always have the necessary expertise or experience in the specific types of provision they inspect”, such as primary schools or special schools.

This “makes it harder for them to understand the context the provider is working in”, Ofsted was told.

The watchdog announced on Thursday that “most” school inspections “will have at least one inspector on the team with previous experience of working in a similar type of provision”.

This will be implemented from November, when new report cards are due to be rolled out.

Ofsted told *Schools Week* it aims for “all” inspection teams to have such expertise, but there may be circumstances where that is not possible. In those cases, an inspector with relevant



expertise will carry out aspects of the post-inspection quality assurance.

Ofsted does not publish details of its 2,000 OIs, and said it was working to collate information on their specialisms and experience before November.

But analysis of “pen portraits” – brief professional summaries – it publishes about its HMIs reveal that few appear to have direct experience in settings outside of primary and secondary.

The Ofsted website suggests there are more than 200 HMIs but only 21 – roughly 10 per cent – are credited with having worked in special schools. Just 16 work in AP. More than 400 special schools were inspected last year.

## Inspection to be led by current or recent HMIs

Ofsted also announced that “all” inspections of schools and colleges will be led by either a current HMI or an inspector with “recent HMI experience”, to draw on their “more in-depth inspection expertise”.

Ofsted told *Schools Week* it is yet to establish what will constitute “recent HMI experience”, but it will probably mean having worked as an HMI

within the past three years.

HMIs are civil servants who often work for Ofsted full-time, whereas inspectors (OIs) work for the watchdog on a freelance basis and usually hold other positions in the sector.

Analysis by Education Datalab has previously shown that, between 2011 and 2019, 80 per cent of primary inspections and 55 per cent of secondary inspections were led by an OI, rather than an HMI.

OIs led around 40 per cent of all short inspections.

Ofsted told *Schools Week* that “about two-thirds to three-quarters of inspections” are led by HMIs.

The watchdog says the changes to inspections will help to deliver “more insightful, context-aware inspections that will better serve children, learners and education providers”.

## ‘Positive step’ for consistency

Chief Inspector Sir Martyn Oliver said the changes were a “significant step forward” to ensure that inspections “are as consistent as possible”.

He added: “All inspection teams will have the right blend of inspection expertise and current sector insight. This will help us better understand the context of the schools and colleges we inspect, to provide a fair and accurate report for parents.”

Steve Rollett, deputy CEO of the Confederation of School Trusts (CST), said that “having the most experienced inspectors lead inspections should support consistency”.

He added: “We know Ofsted has also committed to making improvements to its proposed toolkits and methodology, and we hope these changes will provide further reassurance on consistency.”

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## Unions plan inspector protests over Ofsted reforms

Leaders’ unions will consider the “unprecedented step” of asking their members to quit as Ofsted inspectors unless the watchdog delays roll-out of new inspections and ditches plans for five grades.

In a letter to chief inspector Sir Martyn Oliver and education secretary Bridget Phillipson, the two headteacher unions said the proposed action “underlines the strength of feeling about the proposed reforms”.

Proposed new report cards would see schools given one of five grade ratings across up to 11 areas.

But the ASCL and the NAHT said they “do not believe it will be possible” for inspectors to make “many finely-balanced judgments during

the course of a single inspection in a way that is reliable and consistent”.

Despite Ofsted delaying publication of its consultation response – which will confirm how report cards will work – until September, the watchdog has insisted that the new inspections will be rolled out in November.

The unions said this leaves leaders with an “unfeasibly narrow window of time in which to prepare for a completely new and radically different inspection framework”.

They added: “It will significantly add to workload pressures, negatively affect leaders’ and teachers’ wellbeing and mental health, and further undermine trust in the proposed

framework.”

Unless there are “changes to both the timeframe of implementation and to the five-point grading scale”, the unions will consider “encouraging members to withdraw their service as Ofsted inspectors in the autumn term”.

Just over two-thirds of Ofsted’s contracted inspectors are serving teachers or leaders in schools.

In response, Ofsted said that it “exists to keep children safe and raise standards” and inspectors do “vital work to improve children’s lives”.

A spokesperson added: “It is disappointing that unions are taking legal action and using disruption tactics to frustrate our vital work.”

# Headteacher associations join forces in national network

JACK DYSON

@JACKDYDS

EXCLUSIVE

Local headteacher associations have joined forces to launch a national network to ensure that leaders have a stronger voice over policymaking.

The National Headteachers' Associations Network (NHTAN) wants to "mobilise" leaders to lobby politicians on issues such as funding and the impact of rising parental complaints on those running schools.

Launched in January, NHTAN consists of 20 regional headteacher organisations, but it is looking to take in more. Its chair Jess Balado believes there is a heads association in most local authorities.

"There are headteachers organisations all over the country," she said. "[But] we're not yet working in a coherent manner so that, when there are big-agenda items that affect all schools, we can exercise one consistent voice."

Balado and Kirsty Savage, the chair and co-ordinator of the Norfolk School Leaders' Association, invited headteacher groups to join the national network at the start of the year.

NHTAN will hold termly meetings to share best practice from each region and air solutions to common challenges faced by headteachers. The first of these was held in January.

It aims to use "our powerful, apolitical voice to ensure that the government hears directly from headteachers collectively representing the interests of schools, staff and pupils". It is now drawing up a survey for each association to share with heads.

Balado said this will examine the "pressure" of the school funding crisis, how it is affecting reserves and the reasons behind this. Heads will also be asked if they are carrying out restructures or making redundancies.

The latest report by the Kreston network of accountancy firms warned that academy trusts could be on the verge of going bust. It found the proportion of trusts racking up in-year deficits had more than trebled since 2021,



Jess Balado



from 19 per cent to 58 per cent.

"What we're doing is trying to get the voice of as many school leaders in the country to have more clarity over that so we can go to our local MPs and lobby around that as a collective," Balado added.

Pam Langmead, of the Essex Primary Headteachers' Association, which has joined the network, said that a "really effective way of lobbying is for individual headteachers to hassle their own MPs".

The group is also prioritising work around rising parental complaints. Teacher Regulation Agency (TRA) misconduct referrals leapt by more than 60 per cent to almost 1,700 in 2023-24. This was "largely driven" by an increase in the number of complaints from members of the public, the TRA said.

The network will "gather best practice from across the country to ensure that school leaders are advised and supported when they manage complaints". It will "feedback to local authorities and the DfE the impact" on heads.

NHTAN vice-chair Dave Lee-Allan, of the Suffolk Association of Secondary School Headteachers, said: "The idea is that, by paying into my local headteacher association, I know

it's connected into a national group where intel is going to be of a greater depth, and influence reassures heads that we've got their back during a really difficult period."

According to Langmead, another function will be to support regional groups to help leaders in a more organised way, as some new heads may not even know about their local association. To aid this, groups will share best practice through the network.

One of the things the network has noticed is that associations are "structured and funded in a variety of ways", with some led by headteacher volunteers and others employing professional officers to manage them.

Some are funded by local authorities, others receive subscription fees from members and "a few" get their cash through a top slice of budgets, determined by schools forums.

"It's not about making every headteachers' association an identikit. Each one is run really differently, funded really differently, able to offer more or less," Langmead said.

"We're pretty sure there probably is a headteacher association in every local authority area, but there is no directory... and that is part of the reason [for the group]."

To add your association to the network, email Balado at [head@thurlton.org](mailto:head@thurlton.org).

NEWS

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# 6,000 youngsters wait over a year for EHCPs

**JACK DYSON**

@JACKYDYS

Over 6,000 youngsters are now waiting more than a year to obtain education, health and care plans (EHCPs), as the number issued within the 20-week legal deadline falls to a new low.

The news comes after it was revealed this month that one in 20 children now have an EHCP – the highest figure on record.

The figures again underline the urgency of reforms to the SEND system, which is collapsing amid soaring numbers of pupils seeking plans and leading to even more unacceptable waits for support.

National Association of Headteachers general secretary Paul Whiteman said: “Families can face long waits for plans, then often a postcode lottery in support depending on how much funding their local authority offers schools.

“The increasing numbers of pupils with additional needs, coupled with shortages of funding and specialist staff, mean that despite their best efforts schools sometimes struggle

to provide the level of support outlined.”

Legislation states the time between an EHC needs assessment request and a plan being completed should be no longer than 20 weeks. But, in 2024, the number of plans issued in that timeframe tumbled to its lowest level (46 per cent), government figures released on Thursday show.

This is around 14 percentage points down from the 2019 peak of just over 60 per cent. These figures exclude cases where exceptions applied.

The data also shows 7 per cent – equating to 6,230 plans – took more than 52 weeks to be completed in 2024. Forty-six per cent were issued in between 20 and 52 weeks.

Separate DfE figures released two weeks ago showed 482,640 pupils now have EHCPs – the highest on record and double the number in 2016.



The proportion of schoolchildren with a plan has now topped 5 per cent for the first time – rising from 4.8 per cent to 5.3 per cent in the past year.

The government will set out its SEND reforms in a white paper this autumn. As part of this, it is considering rationing EHCPs and wider reform.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said she “inherited a SEND system on its knees, and at the heart of these figures are families fighting for support that should just be readily

available... We’ll set out our full plans to improve experiences for every child and family in the autumn.”

Whiteman added that the government’s “promised reforms of this broken system will see more children with SEND being educated in mainstream settings”.

But he said: “Schools and families will need to be confident that support for their children is far more easily accessible without the need for a formal plan, before the incentive to seek an EHCP is reduced.”

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## Behaviour survey delay leaves minister ‘frustrated’

A minister has said she is “frustrated” with her own government’s delay at publishing a national survey on behaviour in schools.

The government has published an annual “national behaviour survey” since 2023. It gives an insight into the level of disruption in England’s classrooms.

However last year’s report, due to be published in the spring, has not yet surfaced.

Speaking in the House of Lords on Monday, Conservative peer Baroness Penn said the report would be a “key milestone” in reviewing the effect of the previous government’s mobile phone restrictions.

The Conservatives introduced guidance last year which asked schools to ban mobile phones, but they refused to make the advice statutory – which would have enforced such bans.

However, Penn said the previous government planned to “keep the approach under review” and “move to introduce statutory guidance if the situation had not improved”.

Now in opposition, the Conservatives are

pushing for an enforceable ban on phones in schools.

While nearly all schools now restrict the use of mobiles, the vast majority of secondaries do not ban them altogether on the school site, data suggests.

In response to Penn’s question, skills minister Jacqui Smith said: “I share her frustration about when the survey will be published. That is all I can say about it.”

The Department for Education said it had nothing further to add to Smith’s comments.

Last year’s survey, published in April 2024, found schools were losing almost a quarter of lesson time to poor behaviour, as leaders warned of worsening issues and a growing impact on their wellbeing.

The survey revealed that 76 per cent of teachers reported that misbehaviour “stopped or interrupted teaching” in at least some lessons in the past week, up from 64 per cent reported the year before.

The comments were made in the latest schools

bill debate, which is now moving through the House of Lords where amendments are being discussed.

Monday’s session saw an amendment tabled by former academies minister Lord Nash to ban under 16s from accessing social media. He pointed to many countries already implementing or planning bans.

“We take children’s safety seriously in areas such as smoking and alcohol; now is the time to step up to the plate on social media,” he added.

But Smith said that, while there is an “enormous amount of evidence in this area ... overall, the scientific evidence on the impacts of social media and screen time on children and young people is mixed”.

The government has commissioned a “systemic review to understand the impact of smartphones and social media on children’s wellbeing” and will “monitor and learn from wider developments internationally”. The policy will “remain agile in light of this emerging evidence base”, she added.

## ANALYSIS: TEACHER RETENTION

## Retention payments make little difference, research finds

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

Some teacher retention payments made no difference to retention rates, according to new analysis which suggests the schemes are less effective than previously thought.

But the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER), which ran the study, said payments should still be used to boost teacher numbers “as part of a wider strategy”.

The research, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, examined the effectiveness of five different government schemes piloted since 2018 and aimed at improving teacher retention with financial incentives for early career teachers.

The schemes evaluated are: the maths and physics retention payment (MPRP), the teacher student loan reimbursement (TSLR), the maths phased bursary (MPB), the early career payment (ECP), and the levelling up premium (LUP).

Each provided additional payments to teachers in shortage secondary subjects, with direct payments for teachers in their first five years and loan reimbursements paid to those in their first 10 years.

**Evidence on retention payments ‘mixed’**

Previous studies have suggested positive impacts from retention payments. But NFER said its new analysis shows “weaker and often not statistically significant improvements in teacher retention”.

However, Jack Worth, school workforce lead at the NFER, and co-author of the study, said “an underlying level of uncertainty” means “the findings from any one study should be interpreted cautiously and within the context of the wider literature”.

The levelling up premium (LUP), which launched in 2022 with £60 million funding, included payments to new teachers initially of up to £3,000 a year.

But NFER analysis found it led to a “modest” reduction in leaving rates, of around one percentage point.

“The effect is not statistically significant – suggesting more data would be needed before firm conclusions could be drawn.”

Meanwhile, analysis



Jack Worth



suggests the early career payment and teacher student loan reimbursement schemes “may have been associated with a slight worsening in retention”.

Overall, the study found the schemes led to a 0.7 percentage point reduction in the rate of teachers leaving, which was deemed “small” and not “statistically significant”.

The report added: “Overall, this means our study provides some weak evidence that retention payments improve retention, but it is far from conclusive.”

“Viewed within the wider literature, it suggests retention payments may be an important tool for improving teacher retention, but the evidence is somewhat mixed.”

Ian Hartwright, head of policy at school leaders’ union NAHT, said retention payments, bursaries and other initiatives “have failed to deliver sufficient new entrants... or act effectively to retain serving professionals”.

**Bursaries more cost effective**

The analysis simulated the long-term effect of retention payments versus bursaries, if the same amount of money was spent on each. It showed bursaries were “considerably more cost effective”.

The NFER report predicted that every additional “teacher year” secured through teacher retention payments would cost around

£20,000, compared to between

£9,000 and £13,000 through bursaries.

The report suggested retention payments could be a “useful additional lever” once bursaries had “reached their practical maximum”, such as matching teacher starting salaries.

There was no strong evidence that retention payments work better for certain teacher groups or schools.

**Calls for policy rethink**

The NFER said its findings show retention payments should be “carefully targeted” and used alongside high bursaries to get “best value”.

Worth added that they could “focus on subject shortages” or target schools with more disadvantaged pupils, which often struggle to recruit and retain teachers.

The NFER also called for the government to gather more evidence on the impact on recruitment and retention interventions.

Julie McCulloch, senior director of strategy and policy at school leaders’ union ASCL, said that, in order to improve retention, the findings show pay “must remain competitive throughout a teacher’s career and steps must be taken to dial down the accountability system and workload pressures that are driving many teachers away from the profession”.

Hartwright said that incentives on top of pay such as “fully funding teacher training, waiving student loans and long-service awards” are more like the “cherry on the cake, not its main ingredients”.



Julie McCulloch

## FEATURE: SCHOOLS BILL

## The academy trust CEOs battling for Labour's schools bill

JACK DYSON

@JACKDYDS

Labour's schools bill has been heavily criticised by many, but who are the CEOs who support the bill – and why? *Schools Week* spoke to the leaders battling for Labour ...

Labour's schools bill reforms which propose rolling back academy freedoms have been heavily criticised by many, including high-profile trust bosses and former ministers.

The issue has dominated national newspaper coverage and parliamentary committees. But who are the trust leaders fighting for the government's reforms?

We asked the Department for Education for the names of CEOs who supported their bill and would be happy to talk about it. They provided us with six names. We also tracked down some others. Here's what they had to say ...

**Reforms 'prevent race to bottom'**

Labour's wellbeing and schools bill is one of two halves. The first, covering safeguarding and social care, is widely welcomed.

But the other half – which focuses on the schools system and rolling back academy freedoms – has caused the government no end of grief.

After a concession on pay, trusts will now have to follow a national pay "floor, but no ceiling". But freedoms over curriculum and employing unqualified teachers will be revoked.

Some CEOs have said this will stifle innovation. But Exceed Learning Partnership CEO Beryce Nixon said critics "don't represent all the voices in the system".

She suggested that some may opt to have a "narrower curriculum so their assessment models show they're high performing in terms of outcomes".

Sir Paul Tarn, of Delta Academies Trust, added: "What if you've got the next Lennon and McCartney going to a school that doesn't have any music?"

And E-ACT chief Tom Campbell stressed that the changes do not "prevent innovation or excellence... [they prevent] a race to the bottom".

Beryce Nixon



Hamid Patel



## 'It doesn't dilute the central role of academies in raising standards'

Campbell said the change to pay also establishes "minimum standards [and] protects the profession". He added: "We're seeing a recruitment crisis partly because some academies have eroded terms and conditions.

"Setting a floor doesn't prevent us going above it, and it helps create a more sustainable workforce across the system."

**'Competing with trust down the road'**

A poll conducted by Edurio for *Schools Week* showed that almost 70 per cent of chief executives think the implementation of the national curriculum in all academies will have no impact on their work.

Almost 80 per cent gave the same answer when asked about plans to make academies follow a pay "floor, but no ceiling".

Star Academies chief executive Sir Hamid Patel, another name provided by the government as someone in favour of its reforms, stated: "Many trusts already exceed these expectations, and the majority follow national frameworks while continuing to innovate – particularly in

response to the current recruitment challenges."

Some also want Labour to go further. Nixon, whose trust consists of 10 schools in Doncaster, said no pay ceiling leaves trusts like hers in a "challenging position" as others with "lots of different income-generation arms", like teaching schools, will be able to offer higher wages.

"Because I'm serving the most challenging areas across the country, I'm looking at that resource deployment and want that to go straight back into the children," Nixon said.

"I don't then want to be feeling I've got to be paying more money for roles because I'm just competing with somebody down the road."

Tarn also called for "recruitment allowances" and "finders' fees" to be stamped out of the profession. Getting into "a bidding war" to take "a teacher from one classroom and put them into another" is a "nil-sum game" and "not a sensible use of public money".

**'Structures don't raise standards, people do'**

The bill says schools rated 'inadequate' won't automatically be handed an academy order. This will now be at the education secretary's discretion, with support offered through RISE improvement teams in cases where academisation "isn't necessary".

Last month, former academies minister

Continued on next page

FEATURE: SCHOOLS BILL

Lord Agnew warned that “ambiguity” over academisation for failing schools will “present a get-out-of-jail card for the incompetent management of those schools”.

Others have said it will lead to more judicial reviews over academisation cases.

But Lift Schools CEO Becks Boomer-Clark said: “Structures don’t raise standards – people do. Strong schools, working together in strong partnerships, will continue to make the difference.”

And many of the bill’s supporters argue that the current system already leaves some in the cold. Nixon noted that “nobody’s been wanting schools in financial deficit”, meaning some have been left “without a trust for too long”.

Schools Week analysis from January showed the 310 sponsored academies which opened since 2022 waited just over 18 months on average to convert after an ‘inadequate’ rating – way longer than the government’s six-month target. Two were waiting for more than five years.

**LA improvers ‘locked out’**

Jonny Uttley, of 12-school MAT The Education Alliance, said having a “more flexible model” gives the “opportunity to get more timely support in” through new RISE teams, without the costly rebroker process, which straight away includes £150,000 in sponsor fees.

It also “locked out a lot of talented people from school improvement”, particularly those in council-run primaries and secondaries, Uttley added.

Vanessa Ogden, of the Mulberry Schools Trust, said the “sense of the bill is to ensure [schools go to] the best provider”, rather than “ruling out a local authority just because it’s a local authority”.

And Patel said he was “heartened by the government’s clear expectation that academisation will remain the route for the majority of underperforming schools”.

He added: “Discretion allows for more tailored decisions, but it doesn’t dilute the central role of academies in raising standards.”

**‘The market hasn’t been successful’**

In the Edurio survey, 39 per cent of polled CEOs said the proposed duty that all new teachers have qualified teacher



**‘The idea that it will ‘set us back years’ is not only wrong, it’s unhelpful’**

status would negatively impact them – the highest proportion of the four academy reform policies included in the survey.

Currently academies can employ unqualified teachers. However, the bill makes clear this requirement will only apply to new teachers, not those already in the profession.

Seamus Murphy, chief executive of Turner Schools, said the policy was “sensible”.

He added: “We want really expert teachers. Having untrained people joining the system is reliant on individual institutions that they have quality [to train them up] – and I worry about that. The market has not been successful in education in many areas.”

Despite many leaders saying that the reforms would make no difference to their provision, few said they would actually deliver a “positive impact”.

But Uttley said the bill was trying to “rationalise a very fragmented system” and tackle “some of the more egregious things that had gone on” around

some trusts’ admissions.

Another bone of contention for some is councils getting more powers on admissions over academies – including a new duty for both to collaborate, and for councils to direct an academy to admit a child.

“When you look across the system, there are real disparities between the proportion of children with EHCPs in different schools and the proportion of local children who actually attend those schools,” Uttley said. “That has a negative impact on the system.”

Murphy added that the admission and safeguarding changes will “tighten some of the gaps in the system. It will definitely improve the way people operate and keep everybody honest.

“The schools bill isn’t a call to arms piece, but maybe this isn’t a call to arm government?”

“If you talk to staff, would they even be able to tell you if there was a schools bill? It seems to have attracted a certain type of anti-Labour contingent who enormously benefited from the previous administration.”

**Critics ‘protecting legacies’**

Uttley said the “tone” of criticisms was “out of kilter with what is actually a very measured and moderate bill”. He accused some former ministers attacking the legislation of attempting to protect “their political legacy”.

Campbell claimed this also stemmed from “a fundamental misunderstanding of what good academy leadership looks like”.

The “strongest” MATs “operate with high transparency, collaborative approaches and commitment to serving their communities”.

Boomer-Clark added: “Let’s be clear: the children’s wellbeing and schools bill is not going to upend the education system.

“The idea that it will ‘set us back years’ is not only wrong, it’s unhelpful.”

Many leaders have questioned why Labour has pushed forward its legislation agenda before publishing a white paper setting out its vision, but the latter is due in the autumn.

However, Murphy added: “Our current school system is beneficial for schools and leaders, but less so for children. This legislation is going some way to challenge that, but we need the vision to see that technicolour now.”



Becks Boomer-Clark



Jonny Uttley



Seamus Murphy



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## INVESTIGATION: PENSIONS

# Thousands of retired teachers still waiting for promised pension payments

BILL CURTIS

@SCHOOLSWEEK

EXCLUSIVE

Just two of the thousands of retired teachers who could be due compensation after a landmark pensions court ruling on age discrimination seven years ago have received the money so far.

The 2018 McCloud judgment declared that previous changes made to public sector pensions treated younger workers unfairly. To fix this, the government promised to pay back more than £17 billion to those affected.

This involved issuing “remediable service statements” to retired teachers, asking whether they would like their pension entitlement to be calculated based on their current scheme, known as the “legacy” option, or the new “reformed” scheme.

Teachers who choose the reformed scheme could have their annual pension bumped up or be due backdated payments.

Data obtained by *Schools Week* shows that 15,362 retired teachers have so far made a decision after getting detailed statements from the pension scheme. But only two of those have received the money or pension increases they were promised, a freedom of information request has found.

The government said the majority of retirees are choosing to maintain their current pension benefits, saying younger teachers are actually more likely to be impacted.

They said most adjustments to payments will also be “relatively minor”, but would not say how many teachers chose the reformed pension scheme.

Kate Atkinson (pictured), national secretary at school leaders’ union NAHT, said it was “simply unacceptable” that retired teachers “whose pensions have been paid on a discriminatory basis are still waiting to receive the pension to which they are entitled and have paid into throughout their working lives”.

Some retired teachers are also still waiting for their statements to be issued.

In April, the Teachers’ Pension Service (TPS), the management of which is outsourced to



## ‘I want a timetable, and someone held accountable’

Capita, said that, while 500,000 statements had been issued, some “complex cases” were still being worked on.

Atkinson said the “delay and backlog ... isn’t an issue that can continue to be ignored”.

She added: “The Department for Education should look into these issues as a matter of urgency as they impact professionals who have devoted their careers to improving the lives of children and who shouldn’t be ignored in their retirement.”

The TPS is not the only scheme affected. NHS staff, firefighters and civil servants are also caught in the wider McCloud remedy rollout, which the Office for Budget Responsibility estimates will cost the Treasury over £17 billion.

Affected former school leaders have warned the issue has the same dynamics as the Post Office scandal, with the government “turning a blind eye” as it is not “high on the priority list”.

Alison Aylott, a retired school leader, has been battling to access a pension lump sum she was promised as part of the government’s remedy scheme.

Despite submitting her decision in February to accept a payment worth significantly over £20,000, Aylott says she is still waiting, nearly four years after she retired.

“I missed out on the opportunity to invest that money, whether in an ISA or something else,” she added. “They say interest will be paid, but at what rate? For how long? That’s not really good enough.”

One official link they gave her for further guidance led to a pensions advisory agency that has been defunct since 2018.

Another retired school leader, who left the profession in August 2023, says ongoing delays in implementing the McCloud pension remedy have left them around £40,000 short.

“I retired knowing what those numbers were likely to be because I’d used the calculator and saved the figures. But I’m now down about £5,000 a year, and short between £30,000 and £40,000 in a lump sum. I can only just manage and I’m seriously considering returning to work.”

The former teacher, who does not want to be named, claimed initial assurances that the issue would be resolved by March 2024 were quietly pushed back, with no firm update since.

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: PENSIONS

When they checked the TPS website, it stated that 125,000 remedy statements for retired members to have the conversation started on compensation would not be issued in full until September 2025.

“It’s my money, and I need it now... We’re being dealt with like the Post Office scandal. Brushed aside because we’re not shouting loud enough. The judges and firefighters got sorted.

“But we’re told the teacher cases are too complicated. I want a timetable, and someone held accountable. This is money I’ve paid in. How legal is it to withhold it?”

The backlog in dealing with cases appears to have overwhelmed the TPS, and is also affecting current teachers who have wider questions about their own pensions.

Aylott said attempts to get updates on her case have involved multiple waits of longer than an hour on the TPS helpline.

Freedom of information figures show average waiting times for the helpline in the week commencing February 17 this year were 49 minutes. During a week in May, the average wait was 19 minutes.

‘I can only just manage and I’m seriously considering returning to work’

The delays in remedial service statements have also stopped teachers getting a divorce, as a pension valuation is needed by the courts to decide whether it should be shared with an ex-partner.

More than 3,000 people were waiting for valuations as of October last year, but that was down to 620 in March, the BBC reported.

Melanie Moffatt, pensions specialist at the Association of School and College Leaders, said: “While we understand that the complexity of the remedy means this is far from a straightforward

process, we are hearing too many examples of members being adversely affected.”

The DfE and Capita did not want to provide an on-record comment, but they said it was “always planned that the issuing of payments would be made some time” after statements were issued.

They said the Teachers’ Pension Scheme has “begun issuing payments to members this month”.

The two payments already made were “on an exceptional basis due to the particular circumstances involved”.

“To unpick seven years of pension accrual is extremely complicated and is an unprecedented administrative task for the public service pension schemes,” they added.

Capita has lost its contract to run the scheme, which it held for more than 25 years. It is due to be taken over fully by Indian IT company Tata Consultancy Services in October.

A Schools Week investigation in 2020 found that teachers’ pensions could be tens of thousands of pounds short because of administrative failures – with the government admitting it has no idea how big the problem is.

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

£1.7m scheme will take assistive technology to 4,000 schools

New “lending libraries” of assistive technology for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are set to be launched under a government pilot.

The facilities will be set up in up to 32 local authorities, allowing as many as 4,000 schools “to borrow and trial a range of devices to suit their pupils’ needs”.

They will be stocked with tools including reading pens which scan text and read it aloud, dictation tools which convert spoken word into text, and tablets which help non-verbal pupils to communicate.

The Department for Education is partnering with assistive technology (AT) specialists CENMAC to deliver the £1.7m scheme, which it says will help schools to support a wide range of needs, including dyslexia, autism and ADHD.

Local authorities taking part in the pilot will be confirmed over the summer.

The government is working to boost inclusion in mainstream settings and improve early intervention as it tackles the SEND crisis.

The lending libraries will let schools “try before they buy”, meaning they can measure the impact of different devices on pupils before purchasing them outright. The scheme will also help to raise awareness among schools of the AT now available.

Just 13 per cent of mainstream school leaders surveyed had heard of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, which enable a child to click images or words on a touchscreen that the device reads aloud. And only 6 per cent have introduced them.

The education secretary announced in January that, from this year, teachers will receive mandatory training on the use of AT to support pupils with SEND.

Schools minister Catherine McKinnell said AT can help to ensure “attention difficulties, communication issues or struggles with literacy don’t stand in the way of children learning with their friends at their local school”.

She added: “We’re committed to driving inclusivity across all schools and this pilot is a brilliant step towards making that happen, supporting teachers and giving all children the tools they need to achieve and thrive.”

AT might also help to free up time for teachers and support staff. “Pupils will still receive the additional assistance they need, while staff can focus on what they do best – the face-to-face teaching that transforms pupils’ life chances,” McKinnell added.

The government pointed to a survey which showed that 86 per cent of staff in schools where AT had already been introduced had observed a positive impact on behaviour.

## LONG READ

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# Children's social care crisis forces thousands to move school during exam years

CHAMINDA JAYANETTI

@CJAYANETTI

School students in exam years are missing coursework, dropping subjects and facing disrupted preparation because of changes in their care placements amid a national crisis, according to new research.

Children's care charity Become found that one in three children in care in school years 10 to 13 had to move home during that period of their education in 2023-24, with more than one in ten having to move school or college – a figure that excludes planned school moves after GCSEs.

The figures, sourced from freedom of information responses from 80 per cent of local authorities in England, also highlight the impact of the "care cliff" when young people turn 18 and are often hastily pushed out of the children's care system by councils.

Thirty percent of young people in care moved home or left care during their A-level exam period – between April and June.

Thousands of students have been forced to move more than 20 miles from their home or their previous placement, with some being moved across the country, forcing them to change school.

## Crisis undermined children's act

The figures show how the crisis in the children's care system undermines the Department for Education's Children Act guidance, which says that "everything possible" should be done to maintain a child in their existing school in years 10 and 11.

Moves should only happen in "exceptional circumstances".

Become's research found that 2,817 children in care moved school in years 10 and 11 in 2023-24, representing 17 per cent of all care-experienced students at key stage 4.

"Teachers will know better than most how stressful those exam periods can be for all



## 'I would move so many times, I just started losing interest in things'

children," Katharine Sacks-Jones, chief executive of Become, told Schools Week.

"But, if you imagine your whole life being uprooted in the middle of that, having to move to a new home where you don't know anyone, get settled, sometimes into a new town, to move school – obviously that has an impact on your wellbeing.

"But it also has a very practical impact on your ability to engage with your schooling. You might miss coursework, you might not be able to meet deadlines.

"You might be out of school altogether for a period, or you might be having to travel very long distances back to your old school. And, obviously, all of that has an impact on your ability to focus on your studies, to finish your coursework, to do well in your exams."

Sacks-Jones added that school moves can break up students' relationships with teachers, who can be one of the main points of stability in their lives.

Become held focus groups in which young people spoke about their experience of having to move home or school.

One 16-year-old currently in care told the charity: "The main thing for me was going into school every day and acting like everything is OK. It meant acting like all of my clothes aren't in bin bags, like I haven't just fished them out, or like I haven't been moving till 9pm to get where I need to be."

## Schools 'must make allowances'

While some schools go "above and beyond to really look out for those children", others lack understanding, such as "not making allowances", Sacks-Jones said.

Become is calling for the national roll-out of trauma-informed training so that staff can better respond to care-experienced students dealing with disruption in their lives – a call echoed by school leaders' union NAHT.

The report also calls on sixth form colleges,

## LONG READ

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universities and vocational courses to make more use of contextual admissions, which take account of applicants' background and circumstances as well as academic achievements.

Rob Williams, senior policy advisor at NAHT, said: "When children in care have to move – sometimes to entirely new schools or areas – this disruption can often add to previous traumatic experiences, affecting their wellbeing, ability to attend school, focus on their learning once there, and to form and maintain friendships."

But this "cannot be left to schools to navigate in isolation" and wider services should be better aligned with education, he added.

The situation is particularly acute for children with SEND, who already face additional barriers and for whom relationships with teachers who understand their needs can be vital.

"If a child needs a specialist school place, that can be very, very difficult if they move to secure it," said Sacks-Jones. "It can take significant periods of time, which can mean long gaps out of school. And that happens frequently to young people who have SEND who are in care."

Become's report, *Moved During Exams*, features testimony from young people who felt their education had been damaged by care moves.

A particular problem is that the lack of suitable school places can mean a lag time between students moving to a new care home or foster home and starting at their new school.

### From top of the class to bottom

"I was out of school for three months and went from the top of the class to the bottom of the class when I first went into care," one person told the charity's focus groups.

Iesha Christopher, who is now 21, was moved from her family home in Bognor Regis in West Sussex to a foster placement in Orpington, Kent, at the age of 13.

Uprooted from her friends and siblings, she kept running away back to Bognor Regis, triggering a series of 13 care placements around London and the South-east – plus a week-long



## 'I went from the top of the class to the bottom of the class when I first went into care'

foster placement hundreds of miles away in Grimsby – before she left care.

After a spell in two pupil referral units, West Sussex council simply stopped enrolling her in school, meaning she received no education for around three years until she took her GCSEs on her own initiative aged 17.

"Because I was so young, I was just seeing it as extra time to spend with my mates who are off bunking," she told Schools Week. "When it got to that point I would move so many times, I just started losing interest in things."

She is now going back to college to study barbering. Looking back, she is unhappy at how her education was managed and feels that tutoring – at least – should have been arranged for her.

"I am now paying the price for a mistake that was never mine to pay," she said. "The fact that we're already disadvantaged kids who have come from bad backgrounds, and for whatever reason we are in care, that should make us more privileged to get in that education, helping lift ourselves up, because we're never going to have those people there behind us to help us."

The frequency of care moves is a result of a nationwide shortage of suitable care placements and foster carers, while foster placements can swiftly break down.

A Local Government Association spokesperson said councils were doing "everything they can to ensure children in their care are placed in the right home".

Securing a "stable placement should help to limit the upheaval" of having to move schools. But the record number of children in care has put "real strain" on provision.

Become's report calls on the government to review why so many children in care move school or college during their exam years.

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "For too long, vulnerable children across the country have been let down, placed far away from vital support networks at a massive cost to their stability and life chances."

The children's wellbeing and schools bill "represents the biggest overhaul of children's social care in a generation and is a key step towards delivering the government's mission to break the link between young people's background and their future success".

# 'Defensible' pay, hackers and tech targets: new trust rules

**JACK DYSON**

@JACKYDYS

Trusts rocked by cyber-attacks have been barred from paying ransoms to hackers and CEO pay must now be "defensible", new academy funding rules state.

The latest version of the academy trust handbook, released today, also states that chains should hit government tech targets by 2030 and that they will no longer be slapped with notices to improve (Ntis) for educational performance.

Here's what you need to know...

## 1. 2030 tech target

Last year, the handbook told trusts to "refer" to the DfE's digital and technology standards, which "were developed to support trusts in making more informed decisions" about tech.

But now, leaders "should have an understanding of the extent to which they are meeting" the standards.

They should also be "working towards meeting the following six core standards" for broadband, network switching, wireless networks, cyber security, filtering and digital leadership and governance "by 2030".

Currently, just 16 per cent of schools meet them, the government has said.

## 2. Executive pay must be 'defensible'

In a letter to leaders this morning, DfE funding director Andrew Thomas said the new handbook provides "greater clarity about the process for trusts determining executive pay".

The tweaked guidance states that boards must document how they ensure their approach to CEO wages is "transparent, proportionate and defensible" in an "agreed pay policy".

Among other things, it will include "robust decision-making that demonstrates justifiable pay" and approval by the board.

Decisions over executive salaries "may be challenged by the DfE", the new guidance adds.

This is a change from the 2024 handbook, which said "inappropriate pay and benefits can be challenged by ESFA, particularly in instances of poor financial management of the trust".



## 3. Don't pay ransomware demands

Previous guidance said trusts had to secure "permission from ESFA to pay any cyber ransom demands". Now they have been told they "must not pay any cyber ransom demands".

The updated handbook notes that such payments have "no guarantee of restoring access or services and is likely to result in repeat incidents".

A new point added to the handbook also confirms that the department "may recover funds where there is evidence of irregularity or fraud".

## 4. No Ntis for educational performance

In previous years, trusts could be slapped with Ntis on governance grounds if board members lacked "the skills, knowledge and experience to exercise effective oversight of... performance, including educational performance".

This has been removed from the new funding rules.

Notices can now only be issued on governance grounds if boards are not "properly constituted", trustees fail to comply with "safeguarding duties" or if bosses do not "manage their school estate and maintain it in a safe working condition".

The government has also published new guidance today covering "financial support and oversight for academy trusts".

## 5. No news on EV schemes

A pause was placed on electric vehicle salary sacrifice schemes 12 months ago following cross-government discussions. The DfE said this would be in place while "we clarify our approach and gather data on how trusts are planning to implement them".

Thomas revealed that talks remain "ongoing. We are committed to informing you when a decision has been made and the handbook will be updated accordingly."

## 6. Repercussive payments definition expanded

The handbook also expands the definition of what constitutes a "repercussive" payment to include if it could "cause additional costs to arise for other parts of government".

All novel, contentious and repercussive payments must be referred to the DfE for approval before money changes hands.

It is not known what prompted this change, but some have speculated it could be linked to the ongoing teacher pensions row between the DfE and United Learning, the country's biggest academy trust.

The trust wants to offer its teachers the option to have a less generous pension for an increased salary. But the government has opposed this amid concerns over the initial loss of revenue to the Treasury, particularly if other schools follow suit or the proposal is introduced in other public sectors.

# Rise in internal AP risks creating 'costly holding pens', charity warns

ELLA JESSEL  
@SCHOOLSWEEK

Internal support units inside mainstream schools risk serving as "holding pens" that unintentionally reinforce cycles of exclusion, an education charity has warned.

According to a report by The Difference, a growing number of English schools are setting up internal alternative provision (IAP) for pupils struggling in the classroom, as they grapple with a "crisis of lost learning".

IAPs aim to provide on-site support for pupils and reintegrate them into mainstream education. But the charity, which works to prevent exclusion in schools, said a lack of clear guidance means some could "unintentionally cause harm".

According to the report, the expansion of IAPs is part of schools' attempts to get a grip on record rates of exclusions and absences, and an escalating number of children with special educational needs. But there is little guidance on what good practice looks like, or how many schools have such units.

The research points to government figures showing that 93,700 (5.6%) more children were identified with special educational needs (SEN) in the last academic year than in the year before. This includes over 34,000 more children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

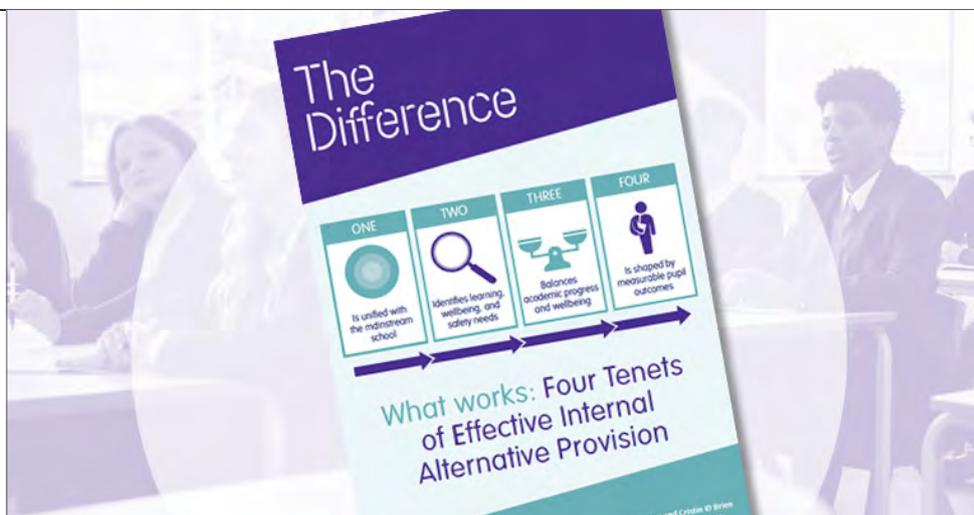
## IAPs 'now the norm'

"This shift is happening fast. Internal alternative provision is no longer the exception – it has become the norm," said senior policy advisor at The Difference Cristin O'Brien, who co-authored the report.

Yet, schools are often "navigating this important work in the dark". O'Brien added: "Without the right support, there's a risk they end up inadvertently creating an exclusionary space that can function a bit like a holding pen."

John Pickett, head of Morpeth School in east London, set up its IAP in 2021 in a bid to take away some of the stigma surrounding offsite external provision. The House usually has around six pupils at risk of exclusion and has been designed as a secure but also "celebratory" space, with teaching facilities, a kitchen dining room and outdoor areas.

"We wanted to rid of the idea that this was a punishment, or somewhere you went where you



were naughty," Pickett said.

Sam Strickland is principal and CEO of The Duston School in Northamptonshire, which set up its own IAP in 2020. He said the units were becoming "not a luxury but a necessity" amid a growing number of children presenting as SEND and "behavioural drift".

The increased demand coincides with a lack of available places in high-quality registered external alternative provision, Strickland said.

## Not a 'dumping ground'

According to The Difference, the type of in-school support previously put in place for children at risk of exclusion has ranged from short-stay "punitive spaces", such as isolation rooms, to longer-term "remedial" spaces such as behaviour support units.

In contrast, IAPs aim to provide high-quality teaching alongside attention to pupils' social and emotional needs and are embedded in the mainstream school community.

According to The Difference's best practice guidance, IAPs should not be seen as a place to "fix" the child, and success is more likely if provision is underpinned by "strong whole-school inclusion".

Steve Howell, who runs Birmingham City Council's pupil referral unit and sits on the board of the National Organisation of Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provision, said the concern with IAPs is that they can become a form of "internal exclusion" where students are separated from their peers to avoid permanent exclusion.

He backs the report's call for schools to "unify" the main school with IAPs – with pupils sharing social time with mainstream peers, attending assemblies and wearing the same uniform.

The study also recommends that IAPs are seen as "a place of support not sanction" which balances academic progress and wellbeing, rather than a "fluffy place" where no serious learning takes place.

## Calls for more oversight

The report urged schools to dispel the notion that an IAP is a last-chance saloon before exclusion, or a place for "naughty children".

"The challenge for schools creating their own AP is to ensure that it does not become a dumping ground and that the culture of the AP is positive and aligned to the main school," Strickland said.

While the number of IAPs is growing, there is no data on how many exist. Unlike other specialist units which require education health and care plans or high-needs funding, schools are not required to report their use.

Howell called for greater oversight and monitoring of how many children are attending IAPs, as well as a "detailed description" to define what the provision is.

Kiran Gill, CEO of The Difference said: "Schools are operating under crisis conditions ... But too often, these efforts are unfolding without clear guidance and, despite best intentions, some risk replicating the very exclusions they aim to prevent, creating costly holding pens rather than inclusive support."



Kiran Gill

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# Lessons from a ten-year turnaround

Declan Linnane took Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School from 'inadequate' to 'outstanding' with a mission to focus on inclusion. Here's what he learnt ...

When Declan Linnane left his school in London to join Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School in St Albans, he feared it was "professional suicide".

He recalls joining in 2013. "I was told if we don't turn the school around, they're going to close it. The county had already started making movements to reassign the children to different schools. That's how close it was."

Linnane walked in on his first day to find pupils in "short skirts, no ties, trainers, litter everywhere", and staff "blind to it, because it was just normalised".

The school was at well below half-capacity, with fewer than 500 pupils. Its reputation locally was poor, and many parents had pulled their children out.

It was rated 'inadequate' just over a year after choosing to become an academy.

"What have I done?" Linnane thought. But 10 years on, the former sink school is now 'outstanding' and oversubscribed. Inspectors said pupils receive an "exemplary education".

Linnane will be leaving NBS next year to become head of the Trinity Catholic High School, in Woodford, north London. But he spoke to Schools Week about the lessons learned from his ten-year turnaround ...

## **'If they look smart, people will think they're smart'**

Linnane said his philosophy focused on "strong pastoral care, firm boundaries and high expectations".

It led to "students who had been written off beginning to thrive. Our core message became clear – at this school, every student is valued and supported, regardless of their past.

"Many schools in a similar position might have improved performance metrics by restricting admissions or filtering for high achievers," Linnane said.

But "we chose an inclusive approach. It became a sanctuary for students facing exclusion from other schools, including those with behavioural or academic challenges. This decision was not charity but a statement of principle: that every child deserves a chance to succeed."

There was an early crackdown on uniform. Those not following rules were hauled into the hall.

"I walked in and there must have been 300 people. I stood on the steps and said, 'my job here is to protect your integrity. At the moment you come in not having any respect for yourself... so I said, 'tidy yourself up.'"

NBS remains strict on uniform today. Most pupils look fresh from a prospectus photoshoot, in

# Profile: Declan Linnane

blazers and ties.

As Linnane walks the corridors he greets pupils by name, asking about their week, cracking jokes, and reprimanding those with shirts untucked, whom he seems to spot out of the corner of his eye.

He describes NBS as “a strict school”, but most pupils “understand why we’re big on uniform. If they look smart, people are going to think they’re smart and they’ve got smart values, smart attitude.”

But while pupils were relatively quick to respond, Linnane had a harder time winning over some staff.

He said: “We introduced a teaching and learning briefing, where things were shared regularly. Insets had a big teacher learning focus, and once [staff] saw the results of their work there was a big buzz for me.”

But in his first year, 23 staff left.

Linnane had to “beg and borrow” teachers from other schools, but managed to find “the right staff” – those willing to “take a risk” on NBS, who “had faith in its journey”.

Parents were told to have “trust and faithfulness” too.

“I’d go around all the primary schools to speak to them, and sometimes no one would turn up,” Linnane recalls. “I just kept being persistent and saying ‘this is a school that’s going to change.’”

### ‘Rejecting the narrow grades focus’

Another key focus has been inclusion.

“The school’s guiding ethos, “Nurture, Believe, Succeed,” rejects the narrow focus on grades,” he adds.

“Instead, it prioritises holistic development, ensuring that all students feel seen, challenged, and empowered to reach their full potential.”

Linnane says this vision aligns with that of the current education secretary, Bridget Phillipson.

“Unfortunately, many schools continue to prioritise performance metrics over inclusion, subtly excluding those deemed unlikely to achieve high scores,” he says.

NBS is Catholic school, but a decade ago, in a bid to fill its roll, it welcomed pupils of all religious and



Linnane outside the school and with a pupil

## ‘It was a statement of principle: every child deserves a chance’

secular backgrounds.

However, now the school’s popularity has improved and it is oversubscribed, Catholic families are now the lion’s share – meaning local families may not be able to attend.

“I don’t agree on our admission policy, but it’s not governed by me. It’s governed by the diocese,” says Linnane. Turning away non-Catholic families that believed in the school when it was at its lowest ebb makes him “uneasy”, he said.

Research has suggested faith schools tend to have fewer disadvantaged pupils on their roll.

NBS has fewer poorer youngsters than other local secondaries. Just under 12 per cent of its pupils are on free school meals, below the county-wide average of just under 17 per cent in Hertfordshire.

But 3.6 per cent of pupils have an EHCP, above the 3.1 per cent national average for all secondary schools. Meanwhile 16 per cent of pupils have SEND, just below the 16.5 per cent average.

Linnane says the school is committed to “including everyone”. It has a “reputation for SEND children” and they do not “play games about selecting children”.



Ofsted’s report last year said pupils with SEND “are supported to thrive in lessons” and staff “are fully informed as to how best to help them succeed”.

“The high expectations of all pupils’ learning are the same...all pupils, including those pupils with SEND, achieve exceptionally well.”

Linnane explains how NBS staff are urged to constantly keep in mind “Alice” – a fictitious marginalised child, adding: “If we get it right for Alice, we get it right for everyone.”

Staff are trained in the ‘stepped’ approach, which helps de-escalate situations and “keeps the whole community very nurturing”.

NBS takes pupils from almost 50 primary schools, and has a strong transition programme for new year 7s.

“We will go to every single primary school or

# Profile: Declan Linnane



setting, we'll meet the child, meet their teacher, meet the SENCO, and we'll say, 'right, tell us about this child.'

All pupils are interviewed by staff about their hobbies, favourite subjects and friendship group.

He recalls his own schooling. "You didn't have anyone to fight your corner, there was no accountability for poor teaching."

NBS' progress 8 scores are well above average (0.75), with almost 60 per cent of pupils achieving a grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs, compared to a national average of around 46 per cent.

The school was rated 'outstanding' in January last year, after being rated 'good' in 2016 and 'requires improvement' in 2014.

## Confiscating games consoles

Linnane said the school's non-teaching pastoral team is also central to its success.

They drive attendance, parental engagement, and do everything from investigating bullying concerns and social media problems reported through the school's anonymous reporting system, to handing out period products and school uniform.

Today, absence at NBS is 5.1 per cent – well below the national average of 8.9 per cent – while persistent absence sits at less than half the national average, at 10.5 per cent compared to 25.6 per cent.

The high standards aren't just for pupils. Linnane says parents also "have to work hard. There's an expectation that you turn up for parents' evening. You turn up for events."

If parents do not participate, the pastoral team make phone calls, send out letters.

During our visit, Linnane has two confiscated



## 'I said 'my job here is to protect your integrity''

Xboxes in his office.

He chuckles as he recalls turning up unannounced at a pupil's home one Friday evening, on his drive home from work.

The pupil had been "pushing boundaries at home", and fled through the back door when Linnane arrived. The head asked his mum to get the boy's PlayStation and said he would confiscate it until after exams.

"I put it in the boot of my car, had a cup of tea, and I drove off." Linnane says the boy was initially "upset", but later thanked him.

"He said 'thank you. I get why you did it.' He's now gone off to do high-end mechanics. He wants to work in Formula 1."

## A strong mission

Ofsted inspectors last year found pupils were "cared for deeply by all school staff" and "show high levels of mutual care and respect for one another".

"All pupils are unwaveringly polite, kind, confident and thoughtful," they added.

Linnane puts this down to the school's

"mission", which is constantly drummed into pupils: "Empowered by the presence of God and each other, we nurture our unique gifts to build a better world."

A large billboard outside the gates even asks passers-by: "What are you doing to build a better world?"

The school's curriculum is also designed around the seven strands of Catholic Social Teaching, with every topic linked back to these principles.

As we drop into classes – geography, drama, music – pupils tell Linnane what they're studying, and how it relates to these strands, such as the importance of caring for the environment, and the "poor and vulnerable".

"We're not trying to brainwash anyone," says Linnane later. "But I think our values are quite strong. Peace, justice, truth and love. Our mission is about building this better world."

He says NBS' journey to 'outstanding' has not been one of overnight success, but of consistent "hard work. In that 10 years, we found the formula that works."

## Opinion

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## LOUIS DONALD

Executive director of safeguarding and personal development, Creative Education

## Ministers must fix AP's safeguarding blind spot

**Even with the best will in the world, unregistered alternative provisions operate in a regulatory grey area that leaves vulnerable children at risk, explains Louis Donald**

I spend considerable time reviewing the files schools hold on external providers. When it comes to unregistered alternative provision (AP), we have a systemic blind spot that represents a fundamental safeguarding failure.

To begin with, unregistered providers operate not in a legal framework so much as a patchwork of 'expectations'. They are encouraged to work towards Ofsted's pre-registration standards, but they aren't legally required to maintain a single central record and can't access the Department for Education's teacher services portal to conduct mandatory pre-employment checks.

Without that access, many resort to third-party providers. But some of these claim to deliver instant prohibition checks and DBS checks "in minutes". When an enhanced DBS check takes seven to 14 days on average, this alone should raise eyebrows.

Meanwhile, the education act's definition of a 'pupil' applies only to registered schools. Yet these registered schools use unregistered providers to teach children whose needs they can't meet.

For all practical purposes, these

young people remain pupils of the referring school. But are they still legally a 'pupil', or does their placement strip them of the safeguards attached to that status?

And if unregistered providers lack formal recognition, are they even entitled to conduct prohibition checks?

Here's the really alarming part. Section 128 of the 2008 education and skills act does not prevent disqualified individuals from managing unregistered providers. Someone barred from running a registered independent school today could legally open an unregistered AP tomorrow.

Similarly, while the law prohibits certain individuals from teaching, unregistered providers have no official way to verify whether those they are employing to teach have a prohibition order.

In April, I submitted a freedom of information request to the DfE asking how many unregistered AP providers are using the official system to check teachers against the prohibition list.

The response was telling: they "do not typically" do so. "Desk research has shown that currently, one unregistered AP provider has access to [it]."

"We do not record the precise reason why a user is viewing a teacher record [...]. We cannot therefore say whether an organisation's use of [this service]



“ The gap in oversight is deeply unsettling

is definitely a check against the prohibited list.”

We know from Schools Week's investigation that thousands of children are being educated in unregistered APs.

Without a formal list of unregistered APs, and with no requirement for them to log or justify the purpose of status checks, no one knows how many providers there are, what vetting is being done or if it's being done at all.

The DfE's ongoing call for evidence only reinforces concerns. While unregistered APs are expected to have safeguarding measures, there is no formal mechanism to ensure compliance.

Safer recruitment processes are, to some extent, an indicator of the quality of wider safeguarding culture. Weaknesses in one often indicate weaknesses in the other. The lack of expectation, oversight or inspection means such weaknesses will be missed.

Recognising the significant safeguarding limitations faced by unregistered APs, our trust works with them to ensure essential pre-employment checks are carried out through legally compliant routes. In essence, we facilitate these through our registered schools.

But this is not and cannot be a substitute for a regulatory framework; it is a practical and legally sound solution to bridge the gap in oversight which, even with our vigilance and overreach, remains deeply unsettling.

Unregistered AP can be a lifeline for excluded or at-risk pupils, but it must not be a blind spot for safeguarding failures.

The DfE should mandate safeguarding compliance for all schools using unregistered APs, placing the onus on them to verify providers.

Ultimately, we need:

- explicit guidance on how unregistered providers must vet staff, including mandated access to the DfE portal (possibly via sponsoring schools or local authorities)
- to close the Section 128 loophole to prevent disqualified individuals from operating AP settings
- transparency from third-party vetting services: what data are they using, and how it is validated

The DfE, Ofsted and schools must work together to tackle this untenable grey area. Vulnerable children deserve systems that protect them, and we can't rely on goodwill to provide that.

# Opinion

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## AMELIA KING

Director of digital transformation,  
Dulwich College

### 'Your Brain on ChatGPT': How to mitigate AI's effects

**A recent study has caused panic about its effects, but here's how we can ensure the day never comes when students can't spell brain without AI**

A recent MIT study titled *Your Brain on ChatGPT* has been making waves, once again leading to panic about what AI is doing to our students. But is the study really as shocking as all the hype is making it out to be?

The research followed 54 students from elite universities in the Boston area who were assigned to three groups: ChatGPT users, search engine users, and the 'brain-only' group. Students wrote essays on SAT-style prompts, and researchers measured brain activity using EEG before interviewing students about their work.

The findings seem alarming at first glance: 83 per cent of the AI-only group couldn't accurately quote from essays they'd just written, compared to near-perfect performance from the brain-only group.

In addition, brain scans showed reduced neural connectivity in

the former compared to the latter. (Though, to be honest, you could probably use brain scans to show reduced neural connectivity in folk who don't read a study in its full context too.)

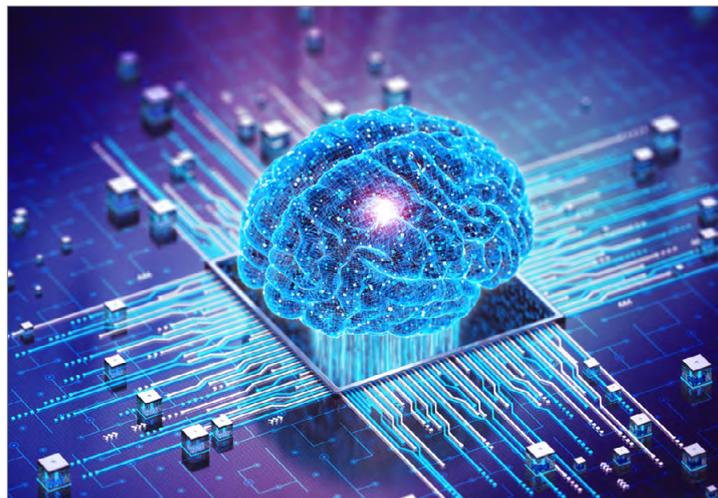
That aside, in a nutshell the brains of AI users were not engaging nearly as much as the non-AI groups.

Ignoring the weaknesses of the study (an extremely small sample group from an elite background working on a single task within a time constraint), its findings shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone working in a classroom today.

**Don't panic!**

That the vast majority of the AI-only group couldn't remember their essay content makes perfect sense when you consider that these students did very little actual thinking. Of course students can't discuss content they never actually processed!

The brain scans are also unsurprising. According to some, these show that ChatGPT literally changes how we think. But if you're not doing cognitive work, your



“ These are predictable outcomes of cognitive offloading

brain doesn't activate cognitive networks.

The researchers also found that AI users seemed to skip the deep processing that builds lasting memory. Again, this is entirely predictable when students are asked to use AI as their primary writing tool rather than as a strategic support. If you're not wrestling with ideas, you're not encoding them deeply.

None of this is unique to AI. They're just predictable outcomes of cognitive offloading. In reality, researchers simply observed what happens when students fully hand over their thinking to an AI system – or indeed any over-helpful partner.

The fundamental issue isn't that AI is destroying our brains, but that complete delegation of our thinking to any external tool can undermine learning. Instead of feeding AI panic, the study should act as a reminder that we need to be strategic about

cognitive offloading.

**Your class on ChatGPT**

As teachers know, reducing cognitive load can enable students to engage in deeper thinking. So it makes sense to do so with AI too, provided we're being intentional and not lazy.

Here are three types of cognitive offloading and what they might look like when used strategically in an AI-empowered (not AI-powered!) classroom.

**External normalisation**

This is when you physically arrange your environment or tools to make thinking easier.

Teachers already do this when they ask students to highlight key passages in a text, put sticky notes on specific book pages or colour-code their notes. These are ways of creating 'visual landmarks' to make information retrieval easier.

Continued on next page..

# Opinion

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External normalisation is generally a 'safe' form of cognitive offloading because students are still doing the thinking – they're just making it easier for their brains to manage.

Positive external normalisation alongside AI might look like this:

- Demonstrating how to use AI to reorganise information you already understand, not to learn new content
  - "Organise my notes on [topic] into bullet points under clear headings"
  - "Format this information I've gathered into a comparison table"
- Encouraging AI use for visual organisation, templates and formatting while students provide the actual information
  - "Create a template for comparing [concepts I've studied]"
  - "Generate a blank framework for organising my ideas about [topic]"
- After using AI to organise, requiring students to explain the content in their own words to ensure comprehension.

### Intentional offloading

This is when you create external systems to remind you to do something later.

For students, this already includes activities like writing homework assignments in their planners, creating to-do lists for multi-step projects and bookmarking websites they need to return to for research. Similarly to external



“ None of this is unique to AI ”

normalisation, intentional offloading is also a relatively safe form of cognitive offloading. In fact, when students get better at this type of offloading, they often become better learners because their cognitive resources are focused on learning rather than admin.

- AI can support here too:
  - Students can self-assess their knowledge gaps first, then direct AI to create a to-do list based on the gaps they've identified.
  - "Produce a study checklist for the topics I've identified as challenging, to be completed over the next six weeks"
- "Create a to-do list addressing these knowledge gaps I've discovered"
  - You (or your students) can structure AI support to decrease systematically as student

self-regulation skills develop, ensuring offloading builds rather than replaces learning capabilities.

- And don't forget to regularly discuss when and why to use external reminders versus developing internal memory strategies.

Transactive memory systems These are when you rely on other people (or technology) to remember certain types of information because you know you can access it when needed. You don't store the information yourself; you store knowledge about where to find it.

For example, students might use classroom displays to help remember systems (like AFOREST in English classrooms), or bookmark a list of the best websites to find certain information so they don't

have to search from scratch every time.

Transactive memory systems with AI are where things can get a little tricky. Students need to be strategic about what they're choosing not to remember themselves. In other words, they need to think about when it's right to use AI and when it isn't.

This might look like:

- Designating specific times, assignments or assessments where students must rely on their own memory rather than an external tool
- Explicitly discussing how over-reliance on AI can erode our own abilities and our confidence in our abilities
- Modelling appropriate boundaries and demonstrating when it's reasonable to look something up versus when you should know it from memory

### Credit where it's due

In sum, *Your Brain on ChatGPT* doesn't prove that AI is dangerous; it proves that thoughtless use of AI is counterproductive.

The study's full title mentions "cognitive debt". Perhaps what we really need to focus on is building "cognitive credit", strategic approaches to AI use that enhance rather than replace human thinking.

It could even help us to come up with more approaches to do this. Like using it to help structure your ideas and then proofread your article entitled 'Your Brain on ChatGPT: How to mitigate AI's effects

# Opinion

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## QAISAR SHEIKH

Legal director in the education team, Winckworth Sherwood LLP

### How Labour can reform SEND tribunals and avoid backlash

**Holding local authorities to account for repeatedly abusing the tribunal process (and bad faith engagement in mediation) is key to reducing demand for this vital service, says Qaisar Sheikh**

Controversy was sparked earlier this month when the official magazine of the Law Society, *The Gazette* reported that “SEND tribunal judges have been told their services will not be needed in future”.

The Department for Education responded immediately, saying: “We do not recognise these claims and are clear that there are no plans to abolish SEND tribunals”. This led to speculation that the rumour had been deliberately floated by the government to ‘test’ the public’s reaction.

This is not the first time the tribunal has come under fire. In July last year, the County Councils Network and Local Government Association commissioned a report by ISOS Partnership to explore fundamental reforms of the SEND system.

The report proposed several solutions, including replacing the tribunal with a non-judicial dispute mechanism. This was met with alarm by parent groups and legal experts.

The tribunal, despite being in very high demand and under pressure,

does its job well. It doesn’t always get decisions right. That’s why we have the Upper Tribunal where decisions that are unlawful can be challenged. But for the most part, it applies the law, weighs expert evidence and makes decisions centred on what the child or young person reasonably requires.

In my experience, and for context I have acted for parents, carers and young people in SEND appeals for close to 15 years, I can say with confidence that judges are also mindful of public cost. They have to be. Legislation requires it and it is reinforced by case law.

By and large, most legal experts agree that the appeals process works. While there is certainly room for improvement, taking it away would be a fundamental mistake. Parents will turn to more complex judicial review proceedings or flood local authority complaints systems, which helps no one.

That said, the SEND tribunal is facing record numbers of appeals. In 2023/24, 21,000 were registered, a 55 per cent increase on the previous year. The backlog of cases now means that if you lodge an appeal today, you could be waiting a year or more for a hearing.

During this time, children with significant needs may go without essential support, be placed in inappropriate settings, or worse, be without a school placement at all.

This rise in appeals reflects deeper



“ Greater accountability for LAs is a must

issues in how local authorities (LAs) assess and make decisions about SEND.

The majority of appeals that proceed to a hearing are decided in favour of the appellant, yet there are limited consequences for LAs, as costs are rarely awarded in the SEND tribunal.

While mediation is promoted to reduce demand, it often fails in practice. On occasion, LAs either do not attend or send representatives without the authority to make binding decisions, leaving families frustrated and forced to continue to tribunal.

To reduce delays, targeted reform is essential. This includes increased resourcing and staffing, such as additional judges and specialist panel members. The former would facilitate the early evaluation and case management of appeals, helping to identify appeals with procedural issues sooner and encourage parties to resolve disputes.

But what would likely have the greatest impact would be greater accountability for LAs that repeatedly lose appeals where they

have limited evidence to support their position. Indeed, this is an absolute must.

This could include financial penalties and mandated improvement plans. There might even be an argument for Ofsted and CQC to strengthen their joint SEND inspections by reviewing an LA’s rate of SEND tribunal losses as an indicator of systemic failure.

The DfE is currently working on a white paper to reform SEND. This process must neither overlook nor overstate challenges in the SEND appeals process.

Only time will tell whether these changes will truly ease the burden on families, making the system less adversarial and more accessible.

A DfE spokesperson recently tried to reassure stakeholders, saying that “any changes we make will improve support for children and parents, stop parents from having to fight for support, and protect provision currently in place”.

Limiting access to the tribunal or redirecting disputes to LA internal resolution mechanisms are unlikely to deliver this, and are certain to be poorly received.

## Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UKLORD GUS  
O'DONNELLFormer cabinet secretary and  
Honorary president,  
Pro Bono EconomicsThis is Labour's chance to get  
the measure of kids' wellbeing

**We must finally develop the systems to measure young people's wellbeing, not to judge those on the frontline but to support them to tackle this crisis, writes Gus O'Donnell**

A proposed amendment to the government's schools bill presents a timely opportunity to ensure we finally develop a system to measure young people's wellbeing. I will be supporting it in the House of Lords, and here's why you should too.

New YouGov polling shows that 66 per cent of parents consider pupil wellbeing an important factor when choosing a secondary school, more so than school location (62 per cent), facilities (61 per cent), school culture and ethos (56 per cent), or Ofsted rating (52 per cent). Notably, only 43 per cent cited exam results.

They're right to prioritise this, because the facts are alarming. In the latest PISA survey, our pupils ranked 70th out of 73 for life satisfaction. One in five reports low wellbeing, with serious implications for learning, mental health, and our economy.

An annual survey co-developed with young people, schools, local government, the voluntary sector and public health teams is an essential first step. Indeed, 75 per cent of parents agree that measuring young people's wellbeing is essential if we want to improve it.

We don't need to start from scratch. England has already taken steps in this direction.

The Office for National Statistics regularly gathers headline data and has developed indicators to explain why children and young people feel the way they feel. And a government-led attempt to create a Child Wellbeing Index in 2013, while short-lived, provided valuable insights.

But these efforts remain partial. They don't offer the breadth, consistency or local granularity needed to inform action.

Meanwhile, examples from The Children's Society, #BeeWell and Coram Voice's work with care-experienced young people show what's possible when data is gathered with care and purpose. But these efforts cannot gather all the data, and many fall through the cracks.

What we need is a national wellbeing measurement programme that is consistent and inclusive.

This isn't about adding more burden onto schools. It's about equipping them, communities and policymakers with the insight they need to improve children and young people's lives: a tool for support, not a stick for accountability.

Schools are already responsible for many aspects of children and young people's wellbeing: safeguarding, mental health and a



“ This isn't about adding more burden onto schools

rich curriculum. But each school context is different, and the current system rightly allows leaders to make their own decisions about how to meet these responsibilities.

That's why a national wellbeing measurement programme must be voluntary for children and young people, for parents and for school leaders. This approach respects local autonomy and builds mutual trust.

It also works. In Wales, the School Health Research Network survey is voluntary, yet more than 90 per cent of secondary schools and 75 per cent of pupils take part.

That's because the data is useful. Schools can see value in the insight they receive and use it to guide their practice.

Confidentiality and data protection are vital, of course, not just for their own sake but to encourage honest responses and high engagement. They also mean that wellbeing data should not – and cannot – be used as an accountability tool.

Instead, the focus should be on the actions schools and others take in response to what they learn. A national programme would

enable cross-sector collaboration – from health to youth services to education – around the needs of children and young people.

Because wellbeing isn't just built in schools. It's shaped at home, in youth clubs, playgrounds, and online.

And because better data leads to better decisions, but incomplete or inconsistent data risks doing harm. As Baroness Louise Casey warned recently when reflecting on the failure to collect ethnicity data on grooming gangs: “Don't half collect it. That's a bloody disaster, frankly.”

When it comes to wellbeing, the stakes are just as high. If we want to shift from firefighting crises to offering earlier, more effective support, we need better information to guide schools, inform local services and shape national policy.

With careful design, we can ensure the programme supports schools, empowers young people and delivers better outcomes.

If we treasure children and young people's wellbeing as parents do, we must start to measure it.

Not to judge, but to improve.

## Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UKDR HERMINDER  
CHANNARegional director,  
Oasis MidlandsRegional improvement starts  
and ends with local leaders

**Our experience in the Midlands shows that once a destination is set, the best way to get there is to support local leaders at the helm, writes Herminder Channa**

The Labour government have made it their mission to break down barriers to opportunity. To achieve it, they have pointed education towards greater inclusion and locally-led solutions to national challenges. In the Midlands, we are already well on our way.

Oasis Community Learning in the region took a bold first step: we translated the African philosophy of Ubuntu ("I am because we are") into meaningful action. That action has inspired a region-wide commitment to equity and inclusion.

Faced with rising SEND demand, widening attainment gaps and sustained staffing pressures, our regional leaders asked a simple question: what if every child who needs more (more time, more care, more connection) had access to just one more trusted educator in school?

As a trust, we responded swiftly. We pooled resources and supported our leaders to deliver their vision. Quickly, every Oasis primary academy in the Midlands received funding to appoint one additional trained educator.

Regional funds were reallocated

and distributed equitably. Recruitment has remained school-led, supported by regional finance and HR teams. And we are tracking impact through existing attendance, behaviour and learning systems.

This initiative was not a grand gesture or top-down initiative. It was a deliberate act of regional unity, designed to meet need with compassion and build capacity for the long term.

Nor was it prompted by a national directive, or supported by ring-fenced government funding. It began at our regional conference last October, under the theme of Ubuntu.

All the leaders in that room committed to act together so no academy would be left behind in their efforts to strengthen support for vulnerable learners.

We have employed MI teachers, level 3 teaching assistants and specialist SEND support workers among others, all based on local need. This flexibility was intentional, because school leaders know their communities' needs best.

Crucially, this initiative is not a temporary fix. It's a strategic investment in workforce development. By embedding staff now and training them in the Oasis way, we are developing a talent pipeline ready to transition into permanent roles by 2026/2027.

This approach reduces future recruitment costs, builds internal



“ This is not a grand gesture or a temporary fix

capacity and, most importantly, preserves consistency for children who rely on stable, trusted adult relationships.

From a funding perspective it represents excellent value. Instead of reactive agency spend, this two-year investment builds capability and continuity. For children with SEND and other additional needs this consistency is critical to long-term progress.

Of course, there were challenges. Gaining national MAT approval required rigorous business planning. We needed to make the financial case while retaining educational integrity.

Meanwhile, some school leaders raised concerns around recruitment timelines, while others questioned whether one additional educator would be sufficient.

But a shared belief in acting early rather than waiting for system failure kept us focused.

And early indicators are promising. Leaders report improved capacity to support complex needs, smoother transitions during the school day and a boost in staff wellbeing. One principal described it as, 'Not just a person, but a presence. And our children feel it'.

The national picture on SEND is

deeply concerning. Yet this regional initiative offers a practical, scalable model. It blends strategic foresight with local autonomy, demonstrating what's possible when trusts empower their leaders and invest in long-term solutions.

For policymakers, local authorities and other system leaders, the message is clear: Effective system change isn't always about scale; it's about coherence, consistency, and collective courage.

Build on what works regionally, trust local leaders to lead, and act early to prevent avoidable crises.

When a child needs help regulating their emotions, toileting or communicating, what they need most is time. And time requires people.

'One More Educator' is more than a staffing solution; it is a declaration of collective will to support vulnerable children.

Labour's mission is based on values we all share: every child in every community deserves to be seen and supported so they can achieve and thrive.

Now, it's time to empower regional collaborations to deliver it with purpose. Because putting community over competition shouldn't feel like a radical act.

# Solutions

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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## MIKAELA SHALDERS

Clinical operations director and occupational therapist, Momenta Connect

### What to do now to prevent September no-shows

**For some students, the summer break can create a chasm between home and school they can't easily cross come September. Here's how to start bridging it right now**

For children experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), the groundwork for a successful return to school in September starts now.

New data from the Department for Education shows over 18 per cent of pupils are persistently absent. For many, absence isn't rooted in defiance or disengagement but emotional overwhelm.

In these cases, summer (often framed as a time to reset) can in fact deepen this distress. Loss of routine, predictable adult support and peer connection can cause anxiety to soar and heighten feelings of disconnection – all of which can turn the September return into a mountain they simply can't climb.

EBSA is not about unwillingness. It is an emotionally driven difficulty attending school that often affects neurodivergent pupils or those with sensory processing needs, trauma histories or heightened anxiety.

These children are not 'refusing' school. This is beyond their control. They want to engage but can't without the right emotional and practical scaffolding.

School is not just a place of learning; for many children, it offers

stability, social connection and a sense of identity. For pupils with EBSA the summer break can strip away these important anchors.

Using the 'three Cs' framework to support children and families over the summer can mitigate this.

#### Connect

Teachers and TAs often tell us they feel unsure how to help over the holidays, but small, consistent efforts at personal connection can help children maintain a sense of belonging and have a big impact.

For example:

- Send a short email or message acknowledging the child's progress this year
- Share a familiar routine or classroom photo to remind them of positive experiences
- Include parents in brief planning calls to discuss September transitions

Parents can also reinforce a child's sense of connection, but may need help to do so.

Remind them to be curious about and engage in their child's world. Encourage them to practice what they preach, for example with regards to screen time. And support them where possible to organise playdates before the holidays begin to keep social ties alive.

#### Co-regulate

Helping children regulate their emotions is not about fixing their



### “ Personal connection can maintain a sense of belonging

distress but meeting it calmly and consistently. Parents can prepare over the summer by creating "calm kits" with sensory tools, visual timetables, or breathing strategies.

Schools can support this by:

- Sharing personalised regulation strategies with parents before the term ends
- Offering advice on re-establishing sleep-wake routines
- Encouraging families to explore quiet spaces in the school during open days or holiday clubs

At home, encourage parents to create familiar, predictable routines, similar to the school day (including mealtimes) and to prioritise time together to reduce anxiety and build emotional safety.

#### Co-reflect

For children with EBSA, planning should feel collaborative, not imposed. Schools can help families identify what support works best by creating one-page profiles, using strengths-based language, and taking a flexible approach to reintegration.

In doing so, ask reflective, open-ended questions like "What parts of the day feel hardest?" and "What do you need to feel safe enough to try school again?"

And at home, encourage gentle problem-solving conversations

like "What do you find difficult at school?" and "Could we practice it together?"

Avoid rigid timelines. September doesn't have to mean full-time from day one. A phased return, with flexible starts and named adults on hand, often results in better long-term outcomes.

It can be challenging to recognise when a child may need specialist support. However, panic, shutdowns or meltdowns at the mention of school, frequent physical complaints with no known medical cause and marked differences in behaviour between home and school can be early signs.

In these cases, early intervention is key. Involving a multi-disciplinary team including psychology, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy can provide the therapeutic support needed to bridge the gap back to learning.

July is a great time to start building that bridge. Share tips from our free downloadable EBSA guide with families. Nominate a named adult for each at-risk child to maintain contact over the summer. Communicate with pastoral leads and SENCOs about flexible September plans.

And most importantly, celebrate progress rather than focusing on the challenges.



**Fiona Atherton**  
Headteacher,  
Wrekin View Primary  
School and Nursery

### SUPPORT AND CHALLENGE

As summer approaches and end-of-term overwhelm takes hold, I've found listening to podcasts a great way to stay up to speed with the ever-shifting educational landscape.

With weeks to go before the break, one of the sector's chief concerns is the possibility of Ofsted inspections starting in November based on a framework we know nothing about.



Unions have called for these to be suspended until September 2026 so the sector can adapt to new judgments that, we do know, will focus more strongly on inclusion.

What that looks like is still unclear, and no wonder. This week's Cornwall Research School podcast makes clear there are still plenty of misconceptions about what good inclusive practice looks like.

John Rodgers' guest, SENCo and English lead Eugene McFadden, is unafraid to challenge some of those ideas.

He speaks compellingly about the way some well-intentioned support can

accidentally create more dependence. "We're not here to rescue," he says. "We're here to build capability." Rather than watering things down or making them too easy, we should ensure the right scaffolds are in place so all children can access the curriculum.

The discussion around teaching assistants is particularly resonant. As Eugene notes, they're only as effective as the training and clarity they receive.

"Briefings aren't professional development," he says, and he's absolutely right. We can't expect excellence from people we don't invest in, and assistants deserve the same quality of professional development as the teachers they support.

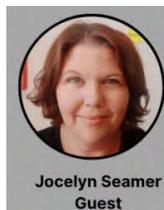
### PURPOSE AND FLUENCY

Meanwhile, over on the *Knowledge for Teachers* podcast, Mr Lee was joined this week by Jocelyn Seamer, a literacy consultant from Australia with a calm voice and fierce clarity.

The episode was titled *Know Thy Purpose*, and for me it couldn't have landed at a better time, reflecting



Brendan Lee  
Host



Jocelyn Seamer  
Guest

as I was on how much of my working week I spend on teaching and learning, and how much I spend on the other elements of my role.

I loved Seamer's insights on fluency. We talk a lot about decoding and comprehension, but she framed fluency as the bridge between them. "If they can't read smoothly," she says, "they can't think deeply."

Most compellingly, she talks about structured literacy as if it were a well-planned estate, neither dull nor overly rigid. "Explicit doesn't mean boring," she says. "It means intentional."

There's something reassuring about that. In a climate where we're constantly pulled in a dozen directions, she argues for a curriculum that knows where it's going.

### ENGAGEMENT BY DESIGN

And on the subject of curriculum, I have been talking about design and technology a lot at my school this term. So I was pleased to find this latest episode of the *Designed for Life* podcast, in which Janine Pavlis makes a great case for the subject in primary schools.

Our accountability system can make allocating time to D&T feel like a luxury. Pavlis reminds us that it is a necessity.

"Tinkering is thinking," she says. I love that!

She describes the magic that happens when children are allowed to build, test, fail and try again. She also raises the important point that D&T can be a leveller, especially for those children who may not shine in more traditional subjects.

Sadly, so many teachers feel ill-equipped to deliver it. As with SEND and literacy, it circles back to training and support. Passion is one thing; preparation is another.

All three of these conversations were deeply practical, but they also made space for something we're in danger of losing in our profession: purpose.

Schools are being asked to carry more and more societal weight – from food to feelings to futures – but we're not robots. We're human beings trying to make sense of an increasingly incoherent policy landscape while still showing up for the children in front of us.

These podcasts don't offer magic fixes. But they remind me that in the midst of the chaos, there are still educators thinking carefully, acting deliberately and trying to build something better.

My takeaway is that we still have the power to choose our focus. We just have to make the time to listen.



Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts



# The Knowledge

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



## How SEMH interventions can transform mainstream provision

**Jayne Curd, Senior leader for behaviour, Meridian High School, Croydon**

A new evaluation of a programme using SEMH interventions to support students in mainstream schools back onto the right educational path has demonstrated its effectiveness beyond doubt. But its true impact can only be fully appreciated on a school and individual level.

So take our year 10 student, Sammy (name changed).

Sammy has been on a dramatic journey over the past four years. As a year 7, he had a long record of behaviour issues and was subject to a fixed-term exclusion.

There were more than 130 defiance incidents recorded against Sammy that year, and he was removed from the classroom 112 times, with 67 internal exclusions.

It was clear that Sammy was fighting some very serious personal battles. At the time, he and his family faced a high-level court case involving a sibling's disappearance, which ended tragically.

His behaviour was so serious that it could have ended in a permanent exclusion. Instead, we used a multi-faceted SEMH intervention strategy rather than ineffective censure and punishment.

Recognising Sammy's need for emotional wellbeing support, we introduced him to the Thrive Approach, a programme designed to address social and emotional development.

Meridian staff are trained to use non-confrontational language and focus on building positive relationships with students. The approach is underpinned by an understanding that students show challenging behaviour because they find it hard to regulate themselves.

Thrive has given the students strategies to do just that and equipped staff with a framework to constructively support them.

We began Sammy's support programme by identifying gaps in his emotional development which could then be targeted with interventions. These included mentoring, a social skills programme, conflict resolution and emotional literacy training.

As a result of this stepped approach over the following three years, Sammy started to show a



better version of himself. His interactions with his peers improved, with fewer conflicts and increased positive engagement.

The programme helped him develop a better understanding of social cues and the importance of respectful communication.

For Sammy and many students like him, a focus on structured SEMH interventions helps them step back from the brink and sets them on the right course.

The impact of this approach has now been evaluated on a large scale, and we're really encouraged to see that new research echoes our own experiences.

ImpactEd Group compared the performance of 1,700 Thrive schools across England against Department for Education pupil attendance and exclusion data. We found that these schools had fewer exclusions, lower absence rates and enhanced staff wellbeing.

The interim findings showed that schools using the Thrive approach had 27 per cent fewer exclusions than the national average, equivalent to four fewer exclusions per 10,000 pupils per year.

The research also revealed that absence is three per cent lower and severe absence is 15 per cent lower in schools that use the approach, compared to those that don't.

Teachers in Thrive schools have better wellbeing than the national average too.

Benchmarked against the teacher wellbeing index, they saw their wellbeing improve by five per cent within an academic year.

At Meridian High School, using this approach has resulted in overall student absence improving by more than 17 per cent in 2023-24, and persistent absence falling 15 per cent.

Positive behaviour has also seen a substantial increase, with an average rise of 56 points per student.

Thrive has played a major role in this transformation by helping us create a school that students want to come to and where staff are happy. It is central to our behaviour and wellbeing policy and integral to our culture.

As for Sammy, his overall behaviour percentage dramatically improved, from 70 per cent in Year 7 to 95 per cent in Year 10, with a significant increase in positive behaviours and a huge reduction in negative incidents.

He was also successful in his application to become an ambassador helping other students to understand and benefit from the emotional wellbeing support that is helping him turn his life around.

And that has to be the most powerful evidence that a different approach to behaviour can be genuinely transformative.

**The full findings are scheduled for publication in September. Register for your copy [here](#)**

Week in

# Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

## SATURDAY:

The National Education Union is among the first to rally against what it perceives as poor pay rises for teachers.

When the government originally suggested teachers should get a 2.8 per cent pay rise for 2025-26, NEU's general secretary Daniel Kebede said the increase was "likely to be below inflation and behind wage increases in the wider economy. This will only deepen the crisis in education."

Upping the ante in April, he said that, if teachers were denied an increased, fully-funded pay rise, then Labour MPs would "pay a high political price through our campaigning in their constituencies".

As it turns out, the government upped its pay offer to 4 per cent, but schools had to foot most of those costs.

However, *The Times* reported today that the NEU, that bastion of ensuring workers get decent pay rises, is offering its own staff just a 2 per cent salary increase – half what teachers were given.

*The Times* reported that the offer has been rejected by Unite union officials, representing NEU staff. One aggrieved NEU staffer reportedly said it was "hypocrisy of the highest order".

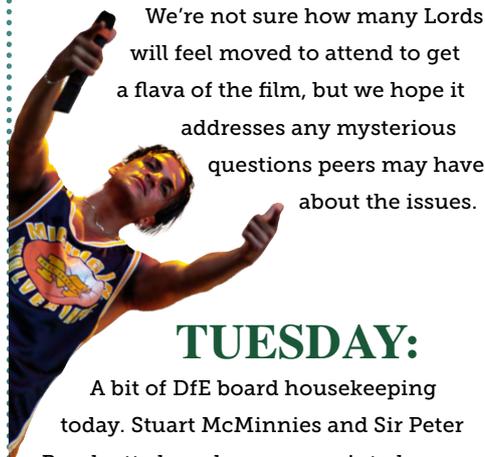
An NEU spokesperson said that "confidential discussions" were ongoing with staff and they couldn't comment further. A union source told *The Times* that 2 per cent was just an "opening offer".

## MONDAY:

Imagine our surprise while we were cheerfully listening to peers in the House

of Lords debate the schools bill to find the famed six-packed singer Peter Andre pop into the conversation.

Talking about an amendment on social media and mobile phones in schools, Lord Nash asked his erstwhile colleagues if they would like to visit the "other place" (the House of Commons) next month for a screening of a 15-minute film "starring Peter Andre (pictured), which powerfully displays the danger of smartphones and social media. If any noble peer would like to attend, please let me know."



We're not sure how many Lords will feel moved to attend to get a flava of the film, but we hope it addresses any mysterious questions peers may have about the issues.

## TUESDAY:

A bit of DfE board housekeeping today. Stuart McMinnies and Sir Peter Bazalgette have been reappointed as non-executive board members for the Department for Education from 1 June 2025 for a period of three years.

## WEDNESDAY:

To mark London Climate Action Week, the Ashden and Green Finance Institute held a private reception to launch what it said was a powerful new report "financing decarbonisation of schools".

Special guest for the do was minister Stephen Morgan.

While Ashden is a charity, the institute describes itself as a company that helps "channel capital to facilitate real economy

change". It has helped to "pioneer the use of green mortgages, local climate bonds and property linked finance".

Boom time for them – given Morgan's government has just ended the multi-billion pound public sector decarbonisation scheme that helped fund climate-friendly building works in schools, colleges and councils.

It leaves schools without access to the large sums of cash needed to do such works. Handy!

## THURSDAY:

Poor Bridget Phillipson has only just fought off the rumours that she will lose her job at the next reshuffle.

Now she is going to have to contend with the prospect of being sent packing by voters at the next election.

YouGov's first MRP poll since the general election found that Reform is on track to unseat the education secretary in Houghton and Sunderland South.

Despite this, her department colleagues Stephen Morgan and Catherine McKinnell are both expected to hold onto their seats.

Conservative shadow education secretary Laura Trott and schools minister Neil O'Brien are also forecast to remain in post.

However, the pollsters are predicting a hung parliament, with Reform (271 seats) the largest party.

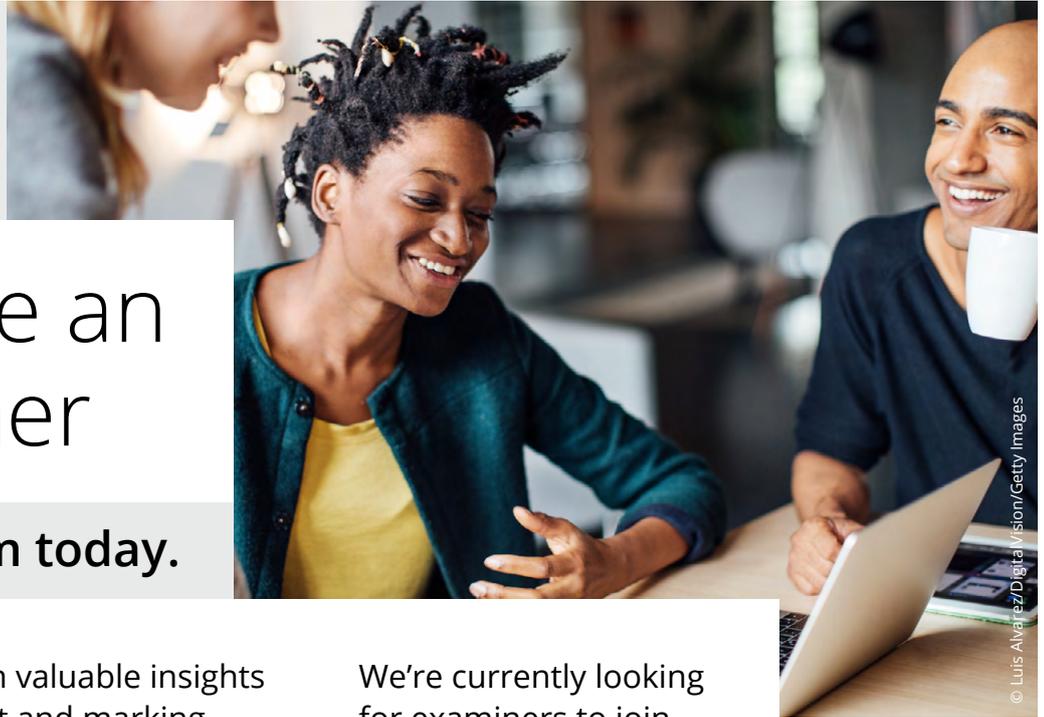
Labour – which secured a 172-seat majority last year – would have 178 MPs, while the Tories (46) are tracking to fall below the Lib Dems (81).

Prepare for that education ministers' roundabout to start spinning again!





Pearson  
Edexcel



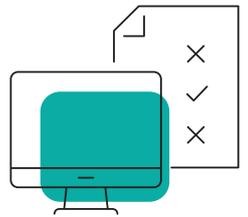
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