

PROFILE

The former
looked-after child
who's uniting
a rebel force



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Revealed: Plan for V-levels amid BTEC cull

- Ministers poised to set out plans for new vocational qualifications
- V-levels would become third route alongside A-levels and T-levels
- Skills white paper plan comes amid controversial axing of BTECs

SHANE CHOWEN | @SHANECHOWEN

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SCHOOLS
WEEK

Meet the news team

**John Dickens**
EDITOR@JOHNDICKENSSW
JOHN.DICKENS@SCHOOLS WEEK.CO.UK**Freddie Whittaker**
DEPUTY EDITOR@FCDWHITTAKER
FREDDIE.WHITTAKER@SCHOOLS WEEK.CO.UK**Samantha Booth**
CHIEF REPORTER@SAMANTHAJBOTH
SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLS WEEK.CO.UK**Lydia Chantler-Hicks**
SENIOR REPORTER@LYDIACHSW
LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLS WEEK.CO.UK**Jack Dyson**
SENIOR REPORTER@JACKYDYS
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLS WEEK.CO.UK**Ruth Lucas**
REPORTER@RUTHLUCAS_
RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLS WEEK.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

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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The government is proud of its new RISE teams, which it says deliver expert support to schools in need.

Ministers are confident the scheme will deliver improvements faster than academisation could for 'stuck' schools across the country.

That may be so. But we've already reported at length how the schemes blur accountability lines.

Pre-RISE, a responsible body was accountable for improvement. Now, it's not so clear. If a 'stuck' school doesn't improve, who's held accountable? The school, the adviser, the organisation supporting the school, or the regional director?

Our investigation this week digs into what some leaders say is another big problem – a lack of transparency.

We've found that for a fifth of schools getting RISE support, their government-appointed adviser has brokered improvement help from organisations employing other RISE advisers. Many of these are advisers working in the same regions. These organisations can get up to £100,000 each to provide support.

The government said it has a "clear conflict of interest policy" but we don't have any publicly-available details that explain how organisations are chosen to provide support.

Do they apply? Are they chosen based on metrics the regional director has? Is it just based on reputation, or whoever has capacity? Or are advisers just calling in their pals?

It's unlikely to be the latter, and there is nothing inherently wrong with the overlap of relationship. But the problem with zero transparency is that it leaves people wondering.

The issue echoes the early days of headteacher board meetings, where important academy decisions were made with little information communicated publicly.

Minutes for such meetings now have more detail about why decisions relating to academisations, rebrokers and mergers are made (although they are still not detailed enough, and boards should also publish papers relating to decisions – like councils do).

Officials should boost transparency about RISE decisions and how supporting organisations are chosen.

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School leaders' most-read: Teacher Tapp survey in June of 607 headteachers on education media read in past month

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Ministers' V-A-T plan to boost vocational education

SHANE CHOWEN

@SHANECHOWEN

EXCLUSIVE

Plans for new "V-level" qualifications to sit alongside A-levels and T-Levels are being drawn up, Schools Week can reveal.

Multiple sources confirmed ministers are poised to set out plans for a new suite of vocational qualifications in the upcoming white paper on post-16 education and skills.

It follows nearly a decade of heated debates over vocational and technical options for school leavers.

This led to the introduction of "gold-standard" T-levels in 2020 and the phased removal of applied general qualifications (AGQs), like BTECs, to direct students towards T-levels.

Ministers from the previous Conservative government and current Labour government have been lobbied heavily by colleges to maintain a third route for students that combines practical skills with academic learning.

Campaigners from the Protect Student Choice campaign, spearheaded by the Sixth Form Colleges Association, warned scrapping AGQs would create a "qualifications gap" for tens of thousands of students for whom a T-level either wasn't suitable or available.

Popular AGQs like BTECs in subjects such as health and social care, applied science and IT are due to be scrapped in 2026, with "highly regarded" AGQs in business and engineering set to follow in 2027.

There were over 277,000 students studying an AGQ last year compared to 41,500 T-level students. Protect Student Choice said removing those courses "risks reversing the recent progress made in widening access to higher education and could lead to an increase in the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)".

Minister hints

Earlier this year, the government's independent curriculum and assessment review, chaired by Becky Francis, said it would consider "what level 3 qualifications may need to exist alongside T-levels to ensure a simpler, high-quality offer



Jacqui Smith

that serves the needs of all learners".

The review's interim report said it was "clear" that T-levels "are not suitable as the only technical/vocational pathway" due to "many factors, including the high bar individual providers may choose to set for entry, the design of the programme, and the relatively low number of young people at age 16 who are confident about their likely career destination".

Francis's final report is due to publish in the coming weeks, and is expected to inform upcoming white papers on schools and post-16 education.

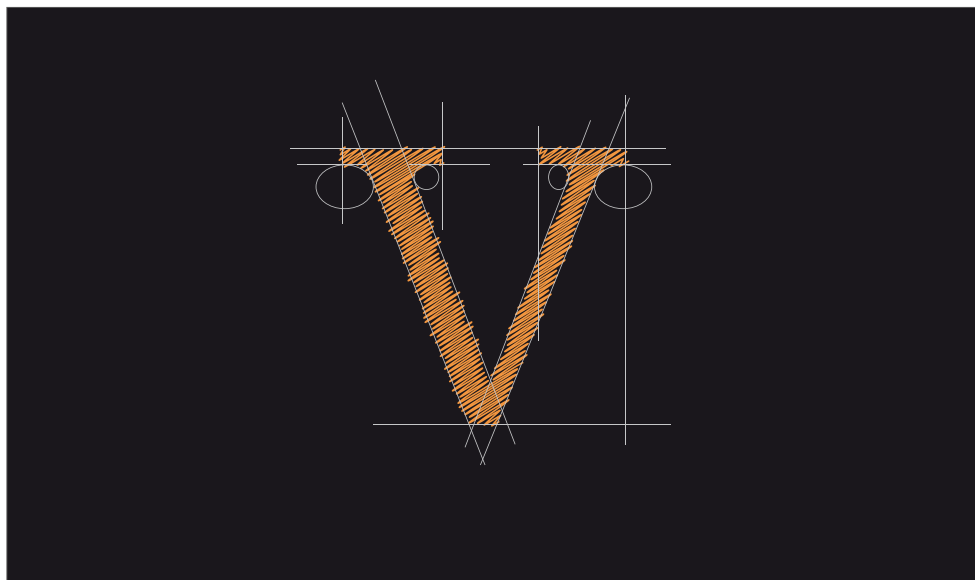
Skills minister Jacqui Smith hinted at an announcement during the Labour Party conference this week.

Asked by sister title FE Week if defunding plans were set in stone for 2026 and 2027, she said: "I've been completely clear that I think T-levels have got an important role to play. A-levels have got an important role to play. We have the need then for a third route in the middle.

"We'll have more to say about that, and I think that will provide the sort of choice for those wanting to protect something they've got at the moment."

Multiple sources told FE Week that V-levels would form the "third route", but details on the size of the qualifications, content, assessment and funding are yet to emerge.

The Department for Education declined requests for comment.



V for vocational

According to a government source, V-levels will be pitched as "sector-specific" qualifications next to T-levels, which are "occupationally-specific".

They added: "But what we don't want to see is a subsidiary route. We want everything to be of the same sort of quality provision, even if the assessment strategy is different, even if the content is different."

Level 3 reform has been one of the most contested areas of education policy since the 2016 Sainsbury Review called for a streamlined system of A-levels and technical qualifications.

T-levels were introduced by the last government in 2020 and continued to be championed by Labour ministers. Developing and rolling out the qualifications to date has cost around £1.8 billion, but T-levels have been criticised due to high numbers of dropouts and over-optimistic student forecasts.

Another source told FE Week: "Schools, colleges and teachers are desperate for some certainty on post-16 level 3 options. There is some coherence to an A-level, T-level and

V-level menu, but we'll have to see what the V-level offer will be; how it differs from a T-level and how it will be better than the current offer of level 3 alternatives."



Becky Francis

INVESTIGATION: RISE

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RISE advisers call on their own to support schools

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

The government must be more transparent about how decisions about its RISE teams are made, leaders have said, after it emerged many advisers buy in support from their colleagues' organisations.

In a fifth of schools supported under the government's RISE scheme, advisers brokered help from organisations employing fellow advisers, a Schools Week investigation found.

Many worked in the same regions.

One trust chief executive, who did not want to be named, said it "gives the perception of jobs for the boys".

But the government said it had a "clear conflict of interest policy" to "uphold integrity of the programme".

Many advisers had also been "seconded from trusts that have a strong track record of school improvement, and we have drawn on this expertise within the system to support RISE schools".

But the government does not currently publish details about how decisions are made.

Sam Henson, the deputy chief executive of the National Governance Association, added: "While peer support can be valuable, this does open the programme up to questions about potential conflicts of interest that need careful management through robust accountability frameworks, clear impartiality safeguards and ongoing transparency."

Our analysis also found organisations providing RISE support have their own "stuck" schools.

And several trusts with more than one RISE school receive support from different organisations, leading to concerns improvements will be difficult to maintain once support ends.

The RISE school advisers appointing their own

Data obtained through the freedom of information act shows 167 stuck schools, added to the RISE programme before the summer break, have so far been given targeted support.

Stuck schools are those rated 'requires improvement' following an earlier inspection that resulted in a grade below 'good'.

The government has seconded 65 experienced turnaround school leaders as advisers who are appointed to specific RISE schools in their region

**'This opens up the programme to questions about conflicts of interest'**

to identify priorities and propose an outside organisation to deliver the support.

The regional director then makes a final decision, with up to £100,000 funding available for each school.

Schools Week analysis found that of the 167 schools, 34 (20 per cent) are receiving support from an organisation employing another RISE adviser.

For 15 of these schools, the advisers work in the same region.

Greenshaw Learning Trust, which has a RISE adviser, supports five schools..

William Smith, its chief executive, said there were "clear boundaries ... for the different aspects of our involvement" with RISE to ensure there were no conflicts of interest.

Chiltern Learning Trust, which also employs an adviser, is also working with four schools. Adrian Rogers, its chief executive, said decisions over how to match schools were made jointly "by the trust/school and the DfE" and are "not within the gift of the RISE adviser to make" themselves.

"[They] are generally from the stronger trusts, stronger schools and stronger local authorities. Therefore, those organisations will be the ones supporting."

But Mark Lehair, a former Department for Education special adviser who now leads a trust, said the findings "illustrate the complexity inherent in the new [improvement] model".

"There's nothing necessarily wrong with the

overlap of relationships, but it could lead to people wondering how and why certain decisions were made."

A trust CEO, who did not want to be named, added the "absence of transparency makes it worse."

"The key thing is it could be perceived to be a conflict of interest ... [and] it gives the perception of jobs for the boys."

"Our sector is too mature for these types of things to happen in these days and ages."

The DfE said it had a "clear policy requiring all RISE advisers to declare any potential conflicts".

To "uphold the integrity of the programme", schools "are not matched with any organisation where a declared conflict exists".

Supporting organisations "must have a strong track record of school improvement, deliver high-quality and inclusive education and be well-matched to the specific context and challenges" of the RISE school.

The RISE school givers and takers

Our analysis also suggests that seven stuck schools receiving support are run by either a council or trust that employed or recently employed a RISE adviser.

And five of the organisations called in to help RISE schools also have their own stuck schools.

Richard Sheriff, the chief executive of Red Kite Learning Trust, said this could lead to the credibility of supporting organisations being

Continued on next page

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“called into question”.

But he added “many, many trusts” worked in “significantly disadvantaged communities” – which meant they “always have one school that’s got an issue”.

Sapientia Education Trust, whose chief executive Jonathan Taylor is a RISE adviser, has been selected to support a Norfolk primary. Its City Academy Norwich has itself been designated a stuck school and is receiving RISE support.

But Emma Davies, the trust’s director of education, said it was “inevitable that some trusts working with a clear moral purpose and open to taking on schools facing challenge may have some schools that fall within the scope of RISE, whilst also having the strength and expertise to support other schools.

“Strong MATs may well have schools in different stages of their school improvement journey and RISE’s individualised approach is a key strength and welcomed improvement of previous initiatives.”

However, Lechain said the wider findings highlighted the “advantages of the previous model for school improvement, which placed accountability for this solely with the responsible body – the trust for academies and the [council] for maintained schools.

“If a school given RISE support doesn’t get better, it’s no longer clear who is responsible.”

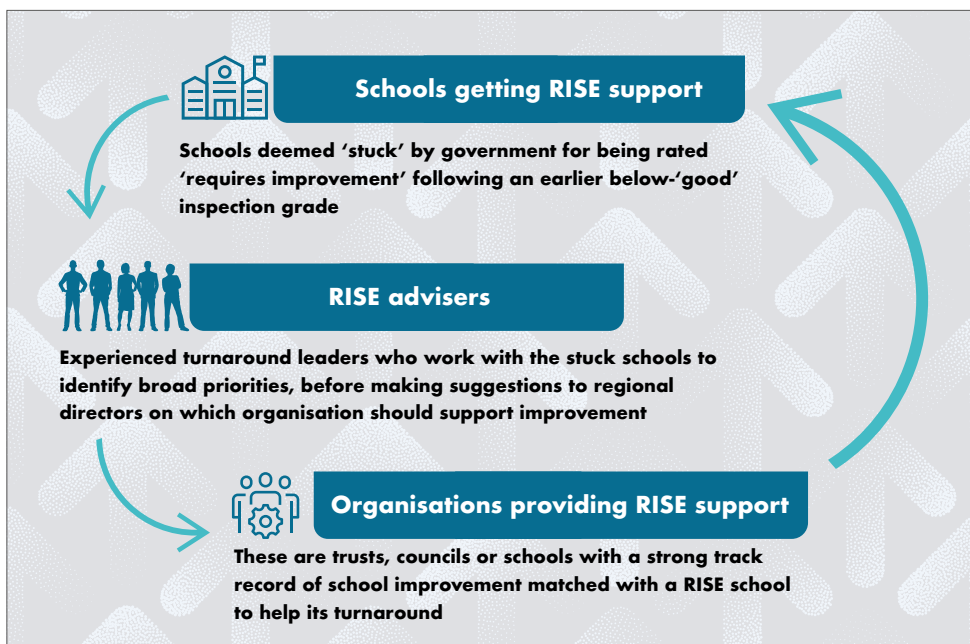
The RISE schools with different masters

In all, 25 responsible bodies – trusts or councils – have more than one RISE school. Twelve of those are working with more than one supporting organisation.

The DfE said in some cases, “one supporting organisation is best placed to support the schools”, while on other occasions “we will draw on the strengths of different organisations for different schools”.

However, Anne Dellar, an education adviser and former chief executive, said this could leave trusts with schools “doing different things”, hindering them from continuing to improve once they left RISE.

She urged the teams to adopt a “coordinated approach”.



‘There's nothing necessarily wrong with the overlap of relationships’

The Thinking Schools Academy Trust has seen both of its RISE schools matched with different MATs.

Stuart Gardner, its chief executive, said “much more clarity is needed. The programme requires transparent accountability and a more joined-up approach for trusts with multiple schools in order to really transform provision.”

The trust was “working closely” with the DfE to “share our experiences and feedback so the programme can continue to evolve and deliver on its intended purpose”.

The RISE schools NOT getting support

Our analysis also shows that 31 of the RISE schools have not been matched with a supporting organisation.

The DfE said advisers assessed whether the schools had “the resources and expertise to deliver the improvements they’ve planned”. Following this, it was decided they did not need the additional input from a supporting

organisation.

However, it is understood regular progress meetings are held.

Loic Menzies, an associate fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research, said the findings suggested “schools are working with their RISE teams to put together packages of support that are tailored to their context and needs – rather than a one-size-fits-all”.

But he warned: “This diversity comes with the risk of inconsistent quality and will therefore need careful monitoring.

“We all know that there is a huge amount of expertise within the education system and hopefully, as RISE teams get into their stride, they will be able to play a valuable role in getting that expertise to where it can have maximum impact”

Last month the department also confirmed RISE powers will be expanded, with a consultation set to be launched in the autumn.

A DfE spokesperson said RISE team were “providing the catalyst needed to drive up



Mark Lechain



Loic Menzies



Sam Henson



Anne Dellar



Adrian Rogers



Richard Sheriff

NEWS: ADMISSIONS

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Admissions watchdog rescinds fair banding approval

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

A controversial decision allowing a school to introduce fair banding has been withdrawn by the admissions watchdog over allegations important evidence was ignored.

The Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) ruled last week to throw out Bradford council's appeal to prevent Carlton Bolling secondary from introducing the controversial practice.

But Schools Week has learned the watchdog has now taken the rare step to withdraw its decision, with the ruling disappearing from its website.

The Department for Education said the ruling would now "either be re-published and the parties notified, or the case will be assigned to a different adjudicator to consider whether this piece of evidence has any relevance".

Under Carlton Bolling's plans, pupils would take tests on a Saturday and be split into nine ability bands. The number admitted from each band would match the proportion of applicants in that band.

WITHDRAWN

The 'outstanding' school said its current admissions arrangement "disproportionately favoured those living very close to the school", which meant it took on fewer disadvantaged children. Fair banding would fix this.

But Bradford council said the arrangements would "reflect the ability levels of those who apply" and "not necessarily" those living locally.

As the school was 'outstanding', more higher-attaining than local pupils might apply.

Neighbouring heads also argued the change "systemically discriminates against certain groups", forcing others in the area to take on more complex cohorts.

However, adjudicator Philip Lloyd, in last week's ruling, said the school had "taken steps to ensure the banding arrangements are accessible to all pupils".

He added there was "no evidence to suggest that children within the catchment area will be

disadvantaged".

He also said Bradford provided "no evidence" to substantiate fears that the assessments would discourage vulnerable applicants.

DfE guidance states "adjudicator's decisions are binding and enforceable and can only be challenged by judicial review in the High Court".

Trish D'Souza, a legal director at Browne Jacobson, noted that while OSA's "published process does not indicate it has the power to quash its own determination and reconsider this, all public bodies must exercise their decision-making discretion fairly and reasonably".

If a public body "considers that its decision was irrational or unreasonable in some way, that would, in public law practice, justify it retaking its decision".

A Bradford council spokesperson confirmed it had been "informed by the schools adjudicator's office that it has withdrawn the determination". The authority had "no further information at this stage".

Carlton Academy Trust, which runs the school, declined to comment.



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DfE waters down support plan for pupils at risk of NEET

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Expecting schools to provide more support to help pupils to secure a post-16 destination – potentially policed by Ofsted – “looks untenable” without “sustained investment”, the government has been warned.

Downing Street announced on Tuesday that schools would be “tasked with ensuring every pupil has a clear post-16 destination, supported by Ofsted, with a guaranteed college or FE provider place available as a safety net”.

However, on Wednesday a watered-down press release instead said that schools would “play a greater role in ensuring every pupil has a clear post-16 destination”.

The Department for Education has said it would “revise guidance so that schools routinely provide targeted support” for those at risk of ending up not in education, employment or training (NEET).

This would help them “choose their next step and successfully transition into post-16 education and training”.

But it has not said whether this guidance will be statutory.

Just under 950,000 16 to 24-year-olds in the UK were NEET in April to June (12.8 per cent), government data shows, up from 11.2 per cent in 2019.

The DfE said its new approach would allow schools and multi-academy trusts to better support positive post-16 transitions “with a tighter focus on identifying and improving underperformance”.

But Tom Richmond, a former DfE adviser, said that expecting schools to provide specialist support to every young person at risk of becoming NEET looked untenable “unless the schools receive sustained investment to build their capacity and expertise in this area”.

Schools already have a legal duty to provide careers advice, but they are not expected to find pupils a specific post-16 pathway.

Local authorities, on the other hand, have a duty under the “September guarantee” to find education and training places for 16 and 17-year-olds.

It is not clear to what extent schools’ new duties will



overlap with councils.

Pepe Di’Iasio, the general secretary of the ASCL school leaders’ union, said schools already put a lot of work into supporting pupils with post-16 transition, but had to do this within available staffing and resources.

“If the government wants them to do more it begs the question of where the funding and capacity will come from.”

John Yarham, the chief executive of the Careers and Enterprise Company, said the new policy was an “increased attention on the role that schools are playing in securing outcomes”.

But there are sparse details on the role Ofsted will play.

Asked for more information, the DfE said Ofsted’s “renewed framework is built on the standards and requirements that schools are expected to meet, and will therefore reflect these strengthened requirements”.

But Ofsted’s framework for inspections from November is already finalised. Any new guidance for schools would have to be reflected in a future update.

“Under the renewed framework, we will consider how well pupils are supported to be ready for their next phase of education, training or employment,” a spokesperson for the watchdog said.

“The framework is designed using the standards schools are required to meet by government. Annually, we will make updates to reflect changes to government policy.”

However, Richmond

said he would “question” whether Ofsted inspections were the right way to hold schools to account on pupil destinations.

Di’Iasio added that “making this yet another accountability measure policed by Ofsted isn’t really a sensible answer to that question. We’d suggest more investment in local careers services.”

The DfE has said that under the new model, pupils without a post-16 study plan will be “automatically allocated a place at a local college or further education provider”.

They will be “contacted by the provider to be given a place and have the wraparound support provided to ensure they remain in education or training”.

A series of pilots will involve designating a “default provider in a local area with the expertise to support young people with diverse needs”.

But Yarham pointed out schools did not have the power to create places in other establishments. He suggested the role of career hubs could be built upon to help provide support between education transitions.

Sir Keir Starmer told the Labour conference this week he would scrap the Blair era target of 50 per cent of young people attending university.

The government would “replace it with a new ambition, that two thirds of our children should go either to university or take a gold standard apprenticeship”.



John Yarham



Tom Richmond

ON LOCATION: LABOUR CONFERENCE

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Breakfast clubs 'not financially viable', say heads

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

A government survey has revealed three-quarters of primary leaders fear breakfast clubs are "not financially viable in their school" – just as it announced 2,000 more will be launched from April.

The scheme is being piloted in 750 "early adopters", although there have been issues over funding and logistics.

On Saturday, Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, announced a further £80 million to set up more clubs.

She said this national roll-out in 2,000 primaries would start in April, with schools also joining next September.

Labour's manifesto promised free breakfast clubs in all 17,000 primary schools, with £315 million committed to the scheme by 2028.

The Department for Education said details of the full rollout and how schools could apply "will be released later in the year".

The government previously said more than 3,000 schools had expressed an interest in becoming early adopters.

Widespread cost concerns

But findings from the DfE's April "school and college voice" survey, released this week, show widespread concerns.

Of the 770 primary leaders surveyed, 75 per cent said delivering a free breakfast club was "not financially viable for [their] school". Seventy-one per cent said "we won't have enough staff".

Meanwhile, just over half said they "won't have suitable or enough space or facilities".

Of the 675 leaders whose schools already offered some form of breakfast provision, 44 per cent said recruiting enough suitable staff was a challenge, while 35 per cent cited existing workloads as an issue.

Schools Week revealed in April that almost 80 of the original pilot schools – about one in 10 – had been replaced, with many blaming inadequate cash.

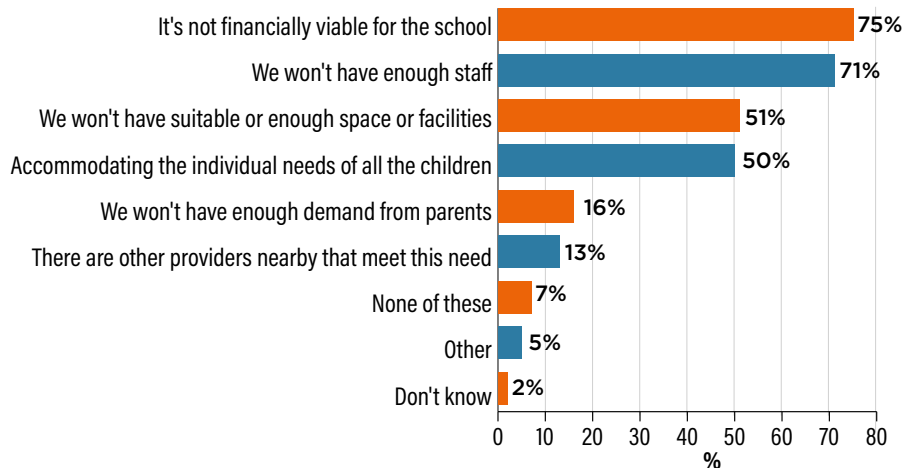
This week the DfE also released an assessment of the first year of the national scheme by Susan Acland-Hood, its permanent secretary.

She acknowledged a "principal risk" that schools "are unable to deliver" the clubs "either



Bridget Phillipson

What barriers do leaders anticipate encountering when delivering free breakfast clubs?



Source: DfE school and college voice survey, April

SCHOOLS WEEK

due to space, staffing or transport constraints". Take-up could also be "significantly higher or lower" than departmental modelling.

"We are mitigating these risks by using insight gathered during the early adopter phase."

"The programme is supported by a comprehensive delivery plan, evaluation strategy, and stakeholder engagement framework, and builds on a successful early adopter test and learn scheme."

Acland-Hood said she was "satisfied" the programme "represents good value for money... and is feasible to deliver in 2026 to 2027".

'Historic change for working families'

Phillipson hailed the national rollout as "an historic change in working families' daily

routines" and "another example of this Labour government making good on its promises to deliver the change the British people voted for".

Phillipson told Labour's conference this week that the scheme had so far provided 2.5 million breakfasts.

Paul Whiteman, of the NAHT school leaders' union, welcomed "the principle of free breakfast clubs".

"A good breakfast helps children to concentrate on their learning and has enormous benefits for their health and wellbeing."

But he warned it was "really important that feedback from the government's initial trial is taken into account as part of this roll-out, including concerns over funding, staffing and space within school buildings".

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Labour's £10m library promise 'unlikely to cover the costs'

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

The government has pledged every primary school in England will have its own library – but leaders say they fear the £6,000 funding will only cover “a few bookcases” and no staff.

The new scheme, announced by chancellor Rachel Reeves at Labour's conference this week, will create libraries in 1,700 primary schools by the end of this parliament.

But revelations that “over £10 million” committed to the scheme from £132.5 million of “dormant assets” would leave each school with just under £5,900.

It is unclear if schools will get any additional money to staff the new libraries.

'Significantly more funding may be required'

James Bowen, the assistant general secretary of the leaders' union NAHT, said access to reading materials was “vitally important” and “any financial support to help with that is obviously welcome”.

But he highlighted that many schools might not have a library “due to a lack of space”, and could need “significantly more funding” to create one.

“While we still need to see the details, it seems unlikely that the investment announced this week would cover the costs of such work across a large number of schools.

“We should also not forget the ongoing costs, including staffing.”

Victoria Dilly, the chief executive of the School Library Association (SLA), hailed the pledge “an important first step that will make a real difference to thousands of children”.

But its “real success”, she said, “will depend on ongoing investment year after year”. “School libraries need dedicated time, staffing and funding to thrive”.

Kathryn Marsh, a former school librarian and former primary teacher, said many schools would find it “very difficult” to find suitable space or staff.

“I worry that schools will think they can open a ‘reading room’ and staff it with a TA twice a week and say they have a school library.”

What is a library?

But the National Literacy Trust (NLT) – which has provided guidance to the government on the



Rachel Reeves

'Schools might open a 'reading room' and staff it with a TA twice a week'

policy – said the charity's definition of a library covered anything from a specific room to “curated bookcases...spread across communal spaces”.

It defined a library as “a shared space that provides children and young people with access to a curated collection of books, reading materials and resources that benefit their learning and development, and from which pupils of all ages can explore, choose and borrow”.

Marsh said curated bookcases could be of benefit, but it was “very much down to the individual teacher and their level of passion for reading. I hope it would go further than a few bookcases.”

The NLT has been campaigning for libraries for all UK primary schools with its Libraries for Primaries initiative.

The government said early estimates of how much the scheme will cost are based on the trust's work.

Through NLT's scheme, schools receive a

free package that includes 500 new books, an audiobook player and audiobooks, a furniture pack, staff training, and “access to author visits”.

The NLT says the cost of delivering libraries varied by school. Lucy Starbuck Braidley, its head of school libraries, said it was “able to secure items at scale with significant discounts” through support from publishers.

“We hope to work with the government to fully cost the roll-out programme and anticipate it to be over £10 million.”

The government has stressed it remained an estimate, and said more details would be set out in due course.

Unveiling the programme, Reeves hailed it “a statement of the value that this government places on all our children's futures”.

“I believe in a Britain based on opportunity, where ordinary kids can flourish unhindered by their backgrounds.”

A regional breakdown shows most schools without a library are in northern England and the Midlands.

NEWS

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Extension of free meals could cost schools £310m

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Schools face having to find £310 million from their own budgets to subsidise the growing cost of free school meals if government funding is not hiked, researchers have warned.

A report from Northumbria University found that the amount schools are having to stump up will balloon by £25 million when free school meals are extended to all pupils from universal credit-claiming families next year.

This would leave the average primary school having to spend £11,000 and the average secondary £25,000 from elsewhere in their budgets.

The report said most schools take the cash from teaching and learning budgets, such as the pupil premium.

Schools have to subsidise the cost of free school meals because government funding of £2.61 a meal is far below the actual cost. The report found



caterers “currently charge schools between £2.75 and £3.20 per meal”.

The government announced earlier this year that from 2026 it would extend free school meals to all families claiming universal credit, with more than £1 billion available over three years.

Currently, only those with a pre-benefits household income of below £7,400 are eligible.

Researchers from Northumbria and Lincoln universities and Alliance4Children modelled the financial impact of providing free school meals to existing eligible children and the additional recipients under the extension.

They found the cost impact for schools would jump from around £285 million to more than £310 million next year. They said the cost was “equivalent to the cost of over 7,700 teachers’ salaries”.

Professor Greta Defeyter of Northumbria University said the findings were “startling”.

“Inflation, rising food prices and increases in national insurance have all impacted on the overall cost to caterers for providing free school meals.

“Many schools are needing to take money from their own individual teaching and learning budgets to top up the difference between the funding they receive from the government and the amount they are charged by the caterer.”

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ANALYSIS: READING

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Year 8 reading test plan splits teachers and school leaders

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

More teachers back government plans for a mandatory reading test in year 8 than oppose it – but leaders are more sceptical, new polling shows.

Schools Week revealed last week that the government is planning to use its schools white paper later this term to introduce the check.

It would be the first statutory test in key stage 3 since SATs for year 9s were scrapped in 2008.

The policy has been prompted by concerns that poor reading is holding pupils back from accessing the curriculum in other subjects at secondary school.

A Teacher Tapp poll has found 16 per cent would “strongly support” the introduction of such a test, with a further 24 per cent “slightly” supporting the policy.

Thirty-six per cent said they neither supported nor opposed it. Nine per cent slightly opposed it, while 15 per cent were strongly opposed.

Under the plans, the test results would be available to the government and Ofsted, but would only be published at a national level – similar to the year 1 phonics check.

They would not be used to trigger intervention in schools, sources said.

But Teacher Tapp found headteachers were more likely to oppose a year 8 reading test (39 per cent) than other senior leaders (27 per cent), middle leaders (22 per cent) and classroom teachers (23 per cent).

The pollster said this showed “fears that a new test would be used as a school accountability measure”, something unions have also raised.

But speaking at the Labour Party conference at the weekend, Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, defended the proposal.

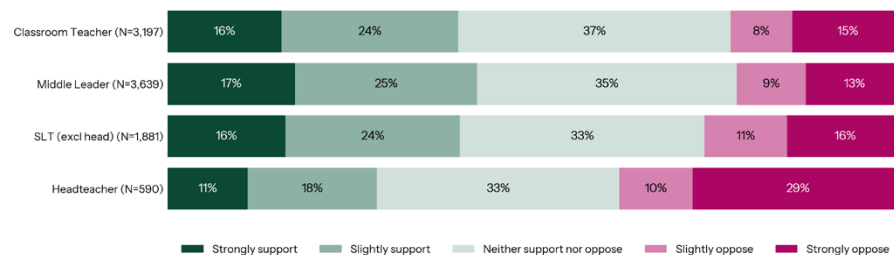
“It is important, particularly for working-class kids, that we have a sense not just of where they are but where we need to step in and put more support in place...”

“Of course, I want to make sure that our staff are well supported, but my number one priority is making sure that all children leave school well prepared for the world to come.”

Reactions from school leaders have been mixed. The ASCL leaders’ union has said if “done well”, the test “could be helpful”, but warned school leaders “may well be uneasy about what



There have been reports that the government plans to introduce a reading test in year 8. How do you feel about this change?



Question answered by 9,307 teachers on 26th September 2025 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics).

future governments might do”.

The NAHT union, on the other hand, has said the test would be “unnecessary, distracting and not a good use of money”.

Dan Morrow, the chief executive of the Cornwall Education Learning Trust, told the Labour conference he was “in favour” of the tests.

“Most of our children are sitting reading tests, left, right and centre, and we’re paying a lot of money for them.

“My worry about the check is that we react professionally, as sometimes we do, which is we teach to a test...That’s on us, frankly, because that’s not what the check is.

“As a primary leader, I would say this very honestly, sometimes we nurture and hold our primary children so well, then we say, ‘oh, but what happens when we get to secondary?’

“What happens is we didn’t teach them to read, and so they can’t actually access that curriculum. And that’s probably not the secondary leaders. That’s on all of us.”

Annamarie Hassall, the chief executive of the National Association for Special Educational Needs, told the same

panel event at the conference that the idea of year 8 checks had come up in her discussions with the government’s curriculum and assessment review.

“We did talk about measurements, and one of our proposed measurements was reading. We have a worry that sometimes there’s a view that reading is the job of primary phase, and in secondary that job should have been done elsewhere.”

Teacher Tapp’s polling shows schools take different approaches to internal testing during key stages 2 and 3.

Asked how they currently assessed whether pupils in their subject were on track at the end of key stage 3, 59 per cent said they used end of topic tests they wrote themselves, while 37 per cent said they relied on teachers’ judgment.

Just 11 per cent said they bought in tests.

But asked for the primary method they used to check reading progress during key stage 2, 43 per cent said they used standardised tests from external providers, while 27 per cent said they used past SATs papers and 24 per cent said their school provided its own tests.



Annamarie Hassall

NEWS: FUNDING

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SEND spend could hit £15bn (more than some government departments)

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

The spending watchdog should publish annual forecasts for high-needs spending and deficits, a think tank has said, as analysis shows the cost of the SEND system could soon outstrip that of entire government departments.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimated high-needs spending will rise to £15 billion a year by 2029, and councils' SEND deficits will swell to £8 billion by 2028.

It means spending on SEND alone would be much larger than the total budgets of several government departments, including the Ministry of Justice.

The IFS said that "given the scale and growth of spending, and the risks that they pose, the Office for Budget Responsibility should produce and publish annual forecasts for high-needs spending and high-needs deficits".

The think tank warned that councils had "little control" over SEND spending, as it is determined by statutory provision set out in education, health and care plans (EHCPs).

The number of plans in place in England has almost doubled since 2016, with spending failing to keep pace with rising demand and costs.

Councils have amassed huge deficits, with the IFS predicting the overall debt level could reach £8 billion by 2028.

This is when the "statutory override" – a budgeting mechanism allowing councils to keep their SEND deficits off their main balance sheets – is due to end after a recent government extension.

Ministers are already facing criticism over their SEND reforms, due to be set out in a white paper this term. One adviser said scrapping EHCPs was under consideration.

The Local Government Association has called for councils' SEND deficits to be wiped as part of the reforms.

Amanda Hopgood, chair of its children, young people and families committee, said: "We need an inclusive system where an EHCP is not always necessary, with a workforce that has the capacity and right skills, and investment in early intervention."



Amanda Hopgood



"The government must also address the outdated legislation that leaves councils facing rising and unsustainable costs, particularly in home-to-school transport, where demand has increased sharply but councils have little flexibility under current law."

Spending on high needs has ballooned by 66 per cent from £7.5 billion in 2016, to at least £12 billion this year.

A further £3 billion increase by 2029 is likely if the system is not reformed, the IFS warned.

The huge increase in EHCPs, particularly for pupils with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), is driving the rise.

The number of children with EHCPs for ASD almost tripled from 54,000 in 2015 to 149,000 in 2025, accounting for 40 per cent of the total increase in EHCPs.

The number of children with EHCPs for social, emotional and mental health needs, which includes ADHD, has also more than doubled, from 28,000 to 71,000.

The IFS said a "large part of this increase in recognised need is due to increased awareness of these conditions, although there may also be increases in underlying prevalence".

But "past squeezes on school budgets may also have acted as an incentive for parents and schools to seek EHCPs in order to access extra resources".

It warned that the continued spending

pressures, "without top-ups to school spending plans – will likely imply real-terms cuts to mainstream school spending per pupil".

As the number of children with EHCPs has soared, so has the number claiming child disability living allowance.

The IFS noted that "substantial overlap" between children receiving special educational support and children receiving support for a disability through the benefit system.

"This overlap suggests common factors are driving the large rise in identified need for both."

Mark Franks, the director of welfare at the Nuffield Foundation, said the current system was "fragmented and hasn't kept pace with the changing needs of the population."

"As demand and costs continue to rise, there is a strong case for holistic review of the system to ensure resources are directed where they are needed most and can achieve the greatest benefit."

The IFS report found that boys, older children and those from poorer families were more likely to have EHCPs – meaning any changes would have "big impacts" on the distribution of support to these groups.

The research also found "big differences across ethnic groups in the share of children receiving additional support".

For example, 2 per cent of Indian 12 to 15-year-olds had an EHCP, compared with 4.3 per cent of white British pupils and 5.7 per cent of black Caribbean pupils.

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ANALYSIS: OFSTED

Leaders 'caught in middle' over union's Ofsted demands

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

More than 1,000 school leaders have written to their employers to demand a full risk assessment over the "very real dangers" new Ofsted inspections pose to staff wellbeing.

However, some leaders said the NAHT's call to action leaves employers "caught in the middle" of the dispute – and one expert called it "rabble-rousing".

The leaders' union stepped up its campaigning against Ofsted this week by calling on its members to ask their employers, such as councils and trusts, how they will "protect and support" staff.

A template letter, seen by Schools Week, said: "We expect you to stand with us in demanding that staff wellbeing is not sacrificed to Ofsted's high-stakes agenda."

NAHT pointed to an independent wellbeing impact assessment that found new Ofsted inspections will increase staff workload and stress.

The letter urged employers to "recognise the very real dangers to staff wellbeing" and "take all necessary steps to protect us".

"This is not simply about workload or stress management. It is about preventing avoidable harm – including the most serious outcomes – arising from a flawed inspection system."

Calls for risk assessment

The letter called on employers to "undertake a full risk assessment" of the impact the new inspections would have on school staff.

It also urged them to create and share "a clear plan to mitigate the risks to staff wellbeing".

The letter highlighted "stark" findings made by the Ofsted-commissioned wellbeing review led by Sinéad Mc Brearty, the chief executive of the mental health and wellbeing charity Education Support.

Mc Brearty's report warned the "baseline stress level" of school leaders was "concerningly high", and that the revised framework "does not reduce the pressure...to achieve a desirable outcome". It laid out a string of recommendations, some of which have since been addressed by the watchdog.

But the NAHT letter added it was "deeply troubling that Ofsted has pressed ahead with



'This is about preventing avoidable harm from a flawed system'

these reforms despite clear evidence of the damage inspections already cause".

Employers 'caught in the middle'

However, David Barber, director of education at the Ebor Academy Trust, described the NAHT demand as "perverse".

"Of course good employers look after their staff, but to encourage members to demand risk assessments from trusts, governors and LAs because the NAHT has concerns about a system beyond our control is odd. Especially as many of us are NAHT members – in my case, not for long."

Steve Rollett, the deputy chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, said it was "seeking expert HR and employment advice" in response to NAHT guidance to members.

"Our view is that the trust is a protective structure; trust leaders can and do support school leaders through Ofsted inspections."

The Local Government Association, which represents councils, did not want to comment.

Andrea Squires, partner and head of education at Winckworth Sherwood, told Schools Week the NAHT had "jumped the gun" as pilot inspections were still assessing the impact of the finalised framework.

She also said broadly characterising inspections as "being somehow unsafe" was "rabble-rousing" that left employers "caught in the middle of essentially a political argument".

There have also been concerns the situation could lead to a repeat of scenes from 2023 when, following the suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry, a head threatened to refuse inspectors entry to her school.

But Squires said she "would be surprised" if schools took this step. "I think that [would be] an overreaction."

Schools have a legal duty to be inspected by Ofsted, and obstructing inspectors is illegal under the Education Act.

Squires said schools "naturally review practices and undertake regular risk assessments, as well as take appropriate steps to address any risk of harm".

Meanwhile Kamal Chauhan, a partner at dispute resolution solicitors Shakespeare Martineau, said "overall accountability for health and safety lies with the employer of the members of staff in the school".

"Ultimately, it is the employer that is responsible for making sure that risks, particularly the risks to staff (and pupils), are managed so far as is reasonably practicable."

‘Best practice’ guidance promised for SEN units

RUTH LUCAS
@RUTHLUCAS_

EXCLUSIVE

The government will publish “best practice” guidance to help mainstream schools set up and run SEN and pupil support units as part of their inclusion push.

The Department for Education has chosen the National Children’s Bureau (NCB) as the lead partner for the work, with interim guidance for schools due to be published in December. The final guidance is scheduled for February.

It will form part of Labour’s SEND strategy to educate more pupils with additional needs in the mainstream, rather than costly special school placements.

A government contract tender said the NCB would “work in collaboration with the DfE to engage lead practitioners and stakeholders, coordinating working groups and produce interim and final guidance”.

It said the review would develop “high-quality” guidance for local authorities and schools to



establish SEN units and resourced provision.

The NCB will receive £119,000.

SEN units, resourced provision and pupil support units all involve provision for pupils with additional needs in mainstream schools.

SEN units offer specialist lessons, while resourced provision acts as a support base for SEN pupils, who are mainly integrated into mainstream classes.

Meanwhile, pupil support units are planned interventions occurring in small groups for behavioural reasons or, in some cases, as a final preventative measure to support children at risk of exclusion.

According to the DfE, there were 449 schools with SEN units and 1,217 with resourced provision in January 2025. These numbers have been on the rise, with 392 schools having units in 2024, and 1,168 having resourced provision in 2023.

DfE survey data from January shows about 50 per cent of secondary schools have, or are planning on opening, a pupil support unit.

Labour pledged in its manifesto it would take a “community-wide approach” to SEND, improving “inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, as well as ensuring that special schools cater to those with the most complex needs”.

The government is also testing a ‘local inclusion support offer’ in councils across its “reformulated” SEND Change Programme, which seeks to “better identify needs early on in mainstream settings”.

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

Ed tech companies restart legal action on Oak change

A judicial review over the decision to turn Oak National Academy into a government quango has restarted.

The legal case has been brought by the British Education Suppliers Association (BESA), the Publishers Association and the Society of Authors who say the change has had a “detrimental impact” on their businesses.

They said this week they were “no further forward” in talks with the Department for Education. “In fact, over the past 10 months we have seen Oak’s resources and its detrimental impact on commercial providers and educational authors continue to grow leaving us with no option but to continue down the path of legal redress.”

They argued the quango would pose an “existential risk” to their sector, and that the conversion of Oak amounted to an “unlawful state subsidy”.

A market assessment, published last week, revealed Oak has impacted the domestic ed tech market, with competitors losing out on

investment since its launch.

Oak was used by 182,775 teachers between July 2024 and February 2025, a 200 per cent rise on the same period in the year before.

The DfE said it was “disappointed” the groups had decided to initiate “this costly legal action”.

It comes as an independent review of the quango, also published last week, suggested Oak ditch “national academy” to “shift perceptions that it is a means to impose a government-favoured pedagogy”.

It should also remove providing “stretching materials” for teachers and pupils from its strategic aims and “seek agreement” from curriculum partners to “display their branding more prominently on lesson resources they have developed”.

It also suggested the government consult with the foreign office “on the possibility of embedding Oak resources in appropriate international development interventions”.

Lara Newman the chief executive of LocatED,

who led the review, called for “a small level of further investment” into Oak to “increase the [government’s] return.”

The upcoming curriculum review and senior departures, including the Oak chair Sir Ian Bauckham, “provides an opportunity to work with the outcomes of this report and reposition the organisation and its strategic aims”.

Newman also said Oak should “release materials on relationships, sex and health education as soon as new statutory guidance is available”.

A DfE spokesperson said it welcomed the findings and would “take them into consideration when deciding on Oak’s future strategy and funding”.

But the bodies suing government said ministers should be “creating the conditions for teachers and schools to do this, not undermining their professional autonomy by force-feeding a centralised curriculum and pedagogy on schools that overlooks local needs and diverse communities.”

NEWS: ASSESSMENT

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AI questions to be trialled in SATs moderator tests

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Standardisation tests for SATs moderators will now include questions written by artificial intelligence under a new government trial to cut costs and school workload.

The Standards and Testing Agency (STA) is conducting the pilot amid a push to “harness the power of AI technology across the sector”.

Key stage 2 moderators must pass a standardisation exercise to ensure they have the “required knowledge” to examine English writing teacher assessments.

Unlike maths and reading SATs, English writing is marked by teachers, with local authorities required to moderate 25 per cent of maintained school and academy papers.

Trial ‘to cut costs’

But moderators must pass one of three standardisation tests to get approval. This year, the third test will be produced using AI.

The pilot aims to “explore whether large language models (LLMs) can help overcome ongoing challenges with standardisation exercise production, including sourcing sufficient scripts from schools and reducing associated costs,” the government said.

Since 2021-22, the Australian Council for Educational Research has created the exercises, using real samples of year 6 children’s work.

But the Department for Education said “collecting suitable pupil writing samples is expensive and adds extra work for schools”.

The trial follows “18 months of research [into] how effectively LLMs can generate scripts that are representative of the work and ability of year 6 pupils”.

To produce the AI tests, STA’s “expert assessment researcher will design prompts” based on the teacher assessment framework to “generate draft pupil scripts”.

The agency will then “edit and carefully review” them to “ensure they meet our standards for accuracy, validity and reliability” before they are used in the test.

LAs can opt out

Local authorities can “opt out of participating ... if they have concerns about the use of LLMs in the

**‘Collecting suitable pupil writing samples is expensive’**

creation of the materials”. Their moderators will instead sit the other exercises.

Schools Week approached the 15 biggest councils in England to find out if they were taking part.

Four responded, with three saying they have opted in.

Kent, England’s largest local authority, which employs “around 60 moderators” who teach in primary schools or work as English subject leaders each year, said its reviews of the AI scripts found them “to be reliable”.

Dr Mick Walker, president of the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors, said offering the AI tests “as an optional extension to normal procedures” meant it “does not pose a risk to pupils”.

“The inclusion of feedback presents an opportunity for moderators ... to inform future developments.”

Any future decisions following the trial would be subject to the government’s response to the curriculum and assessment review panel’s final report.

A frequently asked questions document produced by the agency ahead of the trial said the DfE’s “overarching strategy is to harness the power of AI

technology across the sector”.

However, the agency added it had “no plans to use AI to develop statutory national curriculum tests or assessments for primary pupils”.

AI’s ‘inevitable’ growth

Duncan Baldwin, an education consultant, said it was inevitable that AI would be used increasingly to support time-consuming and expensive tasks in education.

“AI can deliver huge benefits for teachers, school leaders and the government.”

Schools Week revealed last month that Ofsted inspectors trialled AI to save them time while taking notes during visits.

But the watchdog decided against any wider rollout as it felt the tools created more work, rather than streamline inspections.

The DfE also published AI toolkits for schools earlier this year. The guidance said leaders should plan for its “wider use” – including to analyse budgets and help plan CPD.

Ofsted also revealed that it used AI to process responses to its consultation on planned report cards “to improve efficiency”. It noted this was becoming “more common across government”.



Dr Mick Walker

NEWS: COVID

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Covid inquiry unearths more school pandemic 'chaos'

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

The government lacked "leadership and determination" to get children back to school as lockdowns were lifted, Baroness Anne Longfield, the former children's commissioner, has told the Covid inquiry.

Her remarks followed claims by Gavin Williamson, a former education secretary, that he was given just one day to plan for closing classrooms. Here's a round-up of what the inquiry heard ...

'Discombobulating sea change'

In her opening remarks on Monday, Claire Dobbin KC said the decision to close schools on March 18 "had ramifications that are difficult to overstate".

Evidence the Department for Education "didn't start planning for this closure of schools until after March 16 is a cause for alarm", she added.

The DfE said between January and March 2020, its contingency plans were "premised on the assumption that schools and other education settings would remain open".

Because of the focus to keep schools open, the DfE said it did not prepare an impact assessment on closures.

Williamson, who will be questioned later, said this was because No 10 had not commissioned advice on such an assessment.

He said the government had a "discombobulating 24-hour sea change" in policy towards schools, which left one day of planning.

But in his evidence, Boris Johnson, the former prime minister, said he "took issue" with Williamson's recall of events. He suggested that the DfE was "aware of the possibility" of school closures.

The inquiry also heard that Williamson felt the second closure in January 2021 was "not required", but it was a "panicked decision made without children's interests front and centre".

Dobbins said it was "significant" that the two figures were disputing over any planning for "so seismic an event".

'Chaotic' decision-making

Longfield, who gave evidence on Thursday, said the situation in government was "very fluid and somewhat chaotic".

**'It wasn't clear who had responsibility for planning for children'**

She met with the education secretary about once every six weeks, and the children's minister every fortnight.

When asked how much she contributed to decision-making, she said: "It was very difficult to see where decisions were being made, and they certainly didn't seem to be made primarily by those people that were talking to me."

She was "not even sure there were discussions" over the potential impacts of school closures.

"It was quite chaotic, it wasn't clear who had responsibility for planning for children – if anyone – nor what options were being considered, nor if any assessment should be made on the potential impacts on children."

No 'determination'

The former children's commissioner said the government could have worked to open schools again in June 2020, but that it did not have "momentum to break the impasse" between teaching unions, schools and local authorities.

"It was in my view that it was the government's responsibility to break through that impasse and to find a solution that meant that children could return to school as swiftly as possible...I don't think that leadership or determination was in place".

This led to a situation where "mistakes were

made, children were overlooked, and there were mistakes and decisions that went against children's best interests."

Impacts on children

Figures from other children's organisations set out the stark impacts of school closures.

Dr Carol Homden, from the children's charity Coram Group, said the pandemic came at the "very moment children perhaps needed the greatest consistency and regularity of access to school because of the changes this generation was experiencing" with social media and technology.

Nuala Toman, from Disabled People's Organisations, said the loss of in-person education for disabled pupils was "extremely detrimental", while Kate Anstey, from Child Poverty Action Group, said pupils eligible for free school meals "significantly suffered" in lockdown.

Poorer families were "simply were not set up" to have their children work from home. Technological barriers made them feel "more and more isolated".

Sammie McFarland, the co-founder of Long Covid Kids, said there was "no support [and] no understanding" from schools over the impact of the illness on children who could not attend school once lockdown was lifted. The inquiry will question staff from Ofsted, NHS England and special schools next week.



Baroness Anne Longfield

Tory call for Ofsted to fail schools on mobile phone use

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

Ofsted should fail schools on safeguarding if pupils are caught using smartphones in lessons, the shadow education secretary has said.

Laura Trott has written to Sir Martyn Oliver, the chief inspector, calling for the watchdog to treat smartphone use as a safeguarding concern.

While 90 per cent of secondary schools and nearly all primaries have policies on the use of mobiles, only 11 per cent of settings fully ban them from their premises, surveys suggest.

Ofsted's new toolkit for inspections, set to be implemented from November, says inspectors should look at "expectations related to mobile phones" when considering a school's behaviour and attendance policies.

Smartphones and safeguarding

In her letter, Trott told Oliver she "welcomes the fact that mobile phone use is now acknowledged...this correctly recognises the impact phones are having on behaviour in classrooms and the distractions they pose to learning and attainment.

"That is a step in the right direction, but it does not go far enough. Smartphones are not just a behaviour management issue; they present clear safeguarding risks, and Ofsted's framework should reflect that more explicitly."

Trott told Schools Week Ofsted judging smartphone policies would change behaviour in schools.

"A fundamental responsibility with Ofsted is around safeguarding, and I believe the evidence shows this is a safeguarding issue," Trott said.

"If there was a school where routinely we knew that kids could access pornography, we would obviously think that a safeguarding issue. We should see smartphones in the same light."

Trott said schools should be given warnings if they had poorly implemented smartphone policies – such as the commonly used "not seen, not heard, not used" rule – and expect



'The evidence shows mobile phones are a safeguarding issue'

an Ofsted return visit.

Under Ofsted's new inspections, safeguarding will have its own judgment area with a 'met' or 'not met' decision.

An 'overreach' from Ofsted

Michael Baxter, the head of City Academy London, introduced brick phones for year 7s last month, with plans to phase out smartphones completely.

But he said Ofsted judging school smartphone policies was "probably an overreach".

"If you're a rural school or schools in certain contexts it's quite hard to move away from allowing smartphones, whereas if you're in a city, it's easier.

"Context is important, and if Ofsted went down to a 'one size fits all' approach, schools would be playing into a deficit from the

moment they start."

Other heads support Trott's stance.

Andrew Downing, the principal of Netherwood Academy in Barnsley, said Trott's proposal "would go a significant way to addressing the rising and very real safeguarding concerns of educators and parents".

However it would depend on clear, enforceable guidelines and support for schools as it was implemented.

Scott Parker, the head of Tarleton Academy in Preston, also welcomed the proposal, but said the issue was not about the presence or absence of a device "but about ensuring that our young people can articulate with clarity the risks posed by smartphones".

The government has consistently fended off calls for a national ban in schools, with Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, describing it as a "nanny state" policy.

Ofsted declined to comment and said it would respond to Trott in due course.



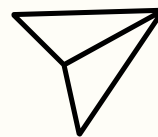
Laura Trott



Sir Martyn Oliver

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OUR READERS' RESPONSES TO THE WEEK'S NEWS AND VIEWS



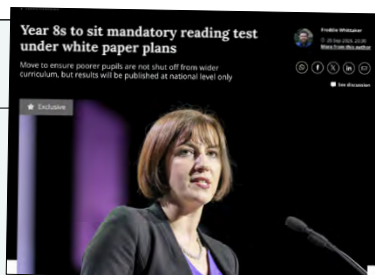
Letter of the week



It is welcome news that the government has been moved to set up a national testing programme for reading at secondary school – but year 8 is far too late. ([Year 8s to sit mandatory reading test under white paper plans](#), 25 September)

If the test is intended to be diagnostic, then it should be held at the beginning of year 7. If, on the other hand, it is an accountability measure for schools to ensure that they have addressed reading problems effectively, then late in year 9 is more appropriate. It should include decoding and fluency measures to be truly useful.

We have been campaigning for years for greater attention to the plight of struggling readers in secondary schools. About one in 10 of them needs intensive intervention in order to



catch up.

The sooner the DfE and secondary schools move from merely testing reading to teaching it well, the sooner we will see the end of a problem that costs our economy tens of billions of pounds every year, massively increases social costs, and inflicts a lifetime of misery on those who have endured 11 years of schooling and leave with reduced life chances.

**James and Dianne Murphy,
Co-Founders, Thinking Reading**

Labour's proposed reading test could have made us world-leading. Instead, it risks telling us what we already know.

The solution to the high number of children struggling to access the curriculum because of poor reading skills is not another one-off test two years after key stage 2 SATs. The technology exists for a much bolder approach to early identification and intervention.

Screening using AI-enhanced eye-tracking software can reveal not just whether a child can read, but how they process text, where fluency breaks down and if they have conditions such as dyslexia.

We should treat reading difficulties as a public

health issue. Just as the NHS provides universal screening for vision or hearing, a national AI-infused screening programme for reading, including dyslexia, should be an entitlement.

Such a model would unite parents and teachers in delivering the right support for those who struggle to read at the start of their secondary education.

Another old-fashioned test will not deliver the step-change we need. We must embrace emerging technology to turbo-charge educational outcomes and social justice.

Dr James Shea, Principal lecturer in teacher education, University of Bedfordshire

Labour must not let parental expectations lower standards
Ministers must reinforce high expectations when they set out their home school contract – or risk making an already tough job impossible



What a load of rubbish! Uniform is not a keystone of cultural improvement. It is another stupid little rule on top of a load of other stupid little rules that treat every compliance forced from a child as a victory. ([Labour must not let parental expectations lower standards](#), 27 September)

Trainers and piercings do not prevent a child from learning; what prevents a child from learning is being punished because their shoes are not exactly right, and schools and teachers wasting scarce resources on policing appearance.

If we are looking for the causes of cultural decline, let's talk about a school system that values quantitative results over qualitative, and is tunnel-visioned enough to call parents vexatious for wanting more from their children's education than ticks in boxes.

Miranda Buchanan, Home-educating parent of a five-year-old, Cheltenham

If those in power truly believe that parents should not be expected to pay for devices, then perhaps it is time to stop sending the sector contradictory messages. ([Schools demanding parents fund laptops leave Ofsted chief 'really shocked'](#), 26 September)

The government is promoting AI as a solution to many of the challenges in education, not least workload. Homework and marking are consistently the most labour-intensive parts of the job, so pupils' work will need to be digitised for AI to have a real impact.

The choice is clear: step up and fund the digital future of education – or tone down the rhetoric.

Daniel Williams, Physics teacher and associate assistant headteacher, Birmingham



Send your letters here:

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Profile

JL DUTAUT | @DUTAUT

'We've made education comorbid. We're killing it'

Having been a looked-after child herself, the CEO of a charity delivering qualifications for children in need is well placed to say what it takes to break down barriers to opportunity

The response to Ofsted's new inclusion judgment has by and large focused on SEND. But there is another group that new inspections will zero in on. And, having grown up as a looked-after child, it is a group with which ASDAN CEO Melissa Farnham is very personally acquainted.

"If I was starting school now, my education health and care plan would be worth a good old bomb," she laughs. "Dyslexic apparently, I'm still not sure about that one myself. Epilepsy, looked-after child, ward of court, some interesting layers of trauma..."

We joke that, if there was an inclusion bingo card, the young Farnham would have had a full house. In reality though, few children in care tick only one box in the life chances lottery.

According to the latest Department for Education data, looked-after children are almost four times more likely to have a special educational need (SEN) than all children, and almost nine times more likely to have an education, health and care plan (EHCP). For those with EHCPs, social, emotional and mental health needs are the most common types of primary need.

"Ten years ago, the term 'comorbid needs' was used all the time. When you think of what morbid means, it's a horrible way to talk about young people," Farnham adds.

"But I often talk about us having comorbid layers of education. Curriculum, regulators, a cohort of young people who are massively influenced by social media. We've made education comorbid, basically. We're killing it."

As CEO of ASDAN, an education charity that provides courses mostly for pupils who face barriers to learning in traditional education settings, Farnham is not only uniquely

Profile: Melissa Farnham

experienced to diagnose the disease; she is uniquely placed to administer the remedy.

Achieving and thriving

On paper, she was highly unlikely to get to her current position. "Ambition for me was potentially capped very early on," she says.

"Dad left. Mum was quite unwell. She had quite a complex personality, and she just wasn't able to cope. That presentation could be quite physical, sometimes towards us."

When Farnham was two, her older brother (then five) used the letters on the underside of Smarties lids to leave a message for the kindly neighbour who used to regularly give them the treats. Ostensibly a cry for help, the neighbour called the police, and it was not long before the pair were taken into care.

There followed a sequence of short placements, and they bounced around from home to home until, when Farnham was just five, they were picked up from a water park by their grandparents, who they had never met.

"We were supposed to just go for six months while mum could get sorted out. Court hearings and all sorts happened, but she never came. So, we became wards of court because our grandparents didn't want to have full ownership of us. They had just retired."

Her brother's behaviour was challenging, "because he'd had to witness so much, I think, and felt quite helpless ... and I basically became an elective mute for about the first 18 months of school".

Farnham holds her grandfather up as a model of "achieving and thriving". He rose to run the site operations of an entire hospital despite being functionally illiterate.

Eventually, though, he was diagnosed with asbestos poisoning contracted on the job. The grandparents moved to South Africa, and the siblings moved back into care.

Then followed a whole new series of placements. "The shortest was three weeks. The longest spanned years 7 and 8, and nearly half of year 9. That was the closest I came to continuity in education."

Farnham made good progress at school. Her brother, she says, "followed a very different path".



Farnham with her grandfather, age 5

Age 2, heading to her first care placement

Age 15, living in supported accommodation mid-GCSEs

'Ambition for me was potentially capped very early on'

She is keen to protect his privacy, but she shares that "he didn't get GCSEs or A-levels. The system was more difficult for him to navigate. But he runs huge projects in Antarctica now."

Breaking down barriers

Today, outcomes for looked-after children continue to lag behind those of their peers.

In 2018-19, 37 per cent met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths combined at the end of key stage 2, compared with 65 per cent for all pupils. Last year, it was 34 per cent, compared with 61 per cent for all pupils.

Their average Attainment 8 score is also just 18.3, compared to 45.9 for all children.

And all this while attending what are nominally the country's best schools. Statutory guidance tells local authorities to prioritise "schools judged by Ofsted to be 'good' or 'outstanding' when placing looked-after children in a new school" and, barring exceptional circumstances, never to place them in one judged 'inadequate'.

(The guidance has yet to be updated to reflect Ofsted's jettisoning of headline grades.)

But this was not the case when Farnham was

at school, making her progress even more of an outlier – especially as schools themselves erected more barriers.

At 16, living alone in supported accommodation, she won the election for the role of head girl – but her school kyboshed it. The headteacher called her into his office and told her simply that "it wouldn't be appropriate because you are a ward of court".

"The school also made me take child development instead of French at GCSE. 'It'll help you cope when you're a mum. It's more realistic for someone like you.'"

You can tell, when she recounts this, that she still carries a healthy amount of her teenage fury at the injustice.

She went on to complete her A-levels while living independently, "thanks to the support of two teachers who believed in me". She later did a teaching degree "partly to get out of a bedsit and into student halls, but also because I wanted to emulate those teachers".

And emulate them she did, pursuing a career that has included being headteacher in special schools for 14 years, "serving some of the most vulnerable (and most resilient) young people", many of whom "didn't belong in those

Profile: Melissa Farnham



Farnham with her grandparents at graduation

SEN schools. They were young people I would absolutely have been in a classroom with when I was at school”.

A promise of change

Established by the University of the West of England in 1991 as a curriculum project, ASDAN, which Farnham has been running since last June, became an independent charity in 1997.

Today with, Lord Jim Knight as its patron, the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network continues to pursue the project's original aims: to provide young people with opportunities to develop skills for learning, life and work.

“It was always there for those who have barriers to engagement,” Farnham explains. “It's all built around seven very core poverties: societal, cultural, political, spiritual, physiological and cognitive, as well as economic, of course.”

Last year, more than 42,000 learners (here and in 30 other countries) completed one of its programmes, some 7,500 of them receiving Ofqual-certified qualifications.

That is a remarkable performance, given that Farnham says the organisation's hey day was some 20 years ago, before “performance tables” incentivised schools away from the broader curriculum content for which ASDAN caters.

She is clearly hopeful that this could be the dawn of new golden age. She took up her role just a month before Labour came to office on a promise of “change”, and Farnham sees opportunity in the government's reform programme to make that happen.

But she does offer Bridget Phillipson some



Farnham and her brother, ages 6 and 9

‘The school made me take child development instead of French at GCSE’

words of warning: “I can see what the ambition around her using the word ‘belonging’ . She is trying to get rid of the word ‘inclusion’ and hone in on ‘equity’. But to belong somewhere, you need identity.

“How are Ofsted going to judge if a headteacher makes sure every learner belongs? As an executive headteacher, I could quantify equity with proxy data like attendance, or hard assessment data. I can't do that if I am trying to make them feel they belong in an environment that I know does not quite work for them. That's not solving the problem.”

For Farnham then, belonging is largely determined by how young people experience their environment. That, in turn, is largely determined by what that environment enables them to do.

Drawing on her grandfather's and her brother's experiences, she says: “If we want all young people to thrive and achieve, what we mean is that we want them to be capable. So, what does capable look like?”

Brewing rebellion

Which brings us to where Farnham really thinks the opportunity lies for Labour.

Ofsted's framework directs schools towards the areas in which improvement is needed but, as with looked-after children, so too with headteachers: success depends on the environment enabling them to meet Ofsted's expectations. And that cannot happen without reforming curriculum and performance measures.

“I talk to MAT CEOs, and what I hear a lot is, ‘we might think about rebelling’. You know, ‘should we just say we'll do Progress 5 and we can put qualifications like ASDAN back in, because we know it works?’”

She says the charity's courses offer schools “portfolio learning [...] that reflects progression, that the learner's got agency over and can see happening and can recover from and then try again.

“Our courses were built to develop executive function. Let's get back on that track, because that is what's missing from education right now.”

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Opinion

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STEVE WREN

Director, Yorkshire Educational Excellence and former Ofsted subject lead for mathematics

The quiet Ofsted plan that could revolutionise inspection fairness

What could become Ofsted's most significant reform is the one everyone seems to have missed, writes Steve Wren. Here's why a 'similar schools' approach matters to us all

Ofsted's recent consultation response quietly mentioned they were developing a "similar schools" approach. This proposal seemed to fly somewhat under the radar, yet it could fundamentally change the way we think about school effectiveness.

The approach is Ofsted's attempt to answer a long-standing question about fairness: in short, should we not be holding schools to account only for the factors within their control?

Not all pupils face the same challenges, and schools serve very different communities. Some work with a disproportionate number of pupils with additional needs, or who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, or have much weaker prior knowledge or speak English as an additional language.

In these contexts, traditional measures of achievement can be misleading. Ofsted must work to identify those schools doing exceptional work given their context so that others can learn from them.

Defining school context is undoubtedly difficult, not least because many aspects of a school's context cannot be captured by data

that is readily available.

Nevertheless, indicators such as pupils' prior attainment, the prevalence of special educational needs, the proportion of pupils with EAL, and the socioeconomic profile of cohorts clearly impact upon published outcomes.

More than that, they shape leaders' decisions around curriculum design, staffing structures and resource allocation.

By taking these factors fully into account, inspections can focus on how effectively a school responds to its unique challenges, rather than simply comparing simplistic headline exam results.

Governments have tried to adjust performance measures for context before. Between 2006 and 2010, New Labour used a contextual value-added (CVA) model, which aimed to create a single score for comparing all schools on a single numerical scale.

Unfortunately, CVA had clear limitations. Critics argued that it could lower expectations for some pupils, masked systemic inequalities and let politicians off the hook for addressing these.

CVA models focused only on the context of the year group who had most recently taken exams, ignoring the wider school community and strategic decisions that leaders make considering the whole school context. Its algorithmic approach was opaque, difficult to explain to



“ A 'similar schools' lens could provide richer insight

professionals and almost impossible for the public to understand.

This reduced trust in the CVA measure. It was too easy to brush away negative scores under the cloak of ignorance.

A "similar schools" approach addresses many of these weaknesses:

It does not hide from the reality that context acts as a significant barrier to achieving highly for some pupils.

It considers the whole school population, reflecting the whole school environment in which leaders make strategic decisions.

And it is easy to understand: It makes intuitive sense that schools can be compared with others operating in similar circumstances, helping parents, educators and policymakers to quickly see which schools are performing particularly well and which have room to improve.

Some questions still need answering.

- Which factors should be included, and how should they be weighted?
- How will Ofsted use this approach in its inspection toolkits?
- Should the "expected" column for achievement be adjusted to explicitly state that "achievement is broadly in line with schools serving similar contexts"?

Without clear answers, the approach's benefits could be diluted.

Worse, inconsistent application across inspections could undermine confidence in the process and reduce its usefulness for highlighting best practice.

If these challenges can be resolved, the potential is considerable. A "similar schools" lens could provide richer insight into performance, spotlighting schools helping pupils to achieve exceptionally well given their circumstances while flagging those not fully capitalising upon their advantages.

"Similar schools" is not about lowering expectations or excusing poor outcomes. It is about fairness, transparency and genuinely informed accountability.

By recognising excellence in context, policymakers can move beyond simplistic league tables and schools can make strategic decisions that maximise opportunities for every pupil, regardless of background.

The question now is whether Ofsted and the sector will take the opportunity seriously.

Done right, "similar schools" could finally give school leaders, inspectors and parents a tool that truly reflects the reality of teaching and learning across diverse communities.

And the only way to do it right is to ensure that this part of Ofsted's work is on everyone's radar.

Opinion

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MARTIN LONERGAN

Headteacher,
Northern Counties School

Special schools will need to raise their game – and so will inspectors

The new framework requires us to provide better evidence of our exemplary work, writes Martin Lonergan, but that will come to nought if inspectors aren't trained to recognise it

Ofsted's new education inspection framework (EIF) marks a significant shift for the whole sector. It is clear and, in many ways, consistent with previous versions, providing some continuity and reassurance. But not all continuity is welcome and nowhere is this truer than in special schools.

Like its predecessors, the new EIF is clearly written with mainstream schools in mind, raising some concerns for specialist settings such as ours.

The special school sector is incredibly diverse, from settings for children with profound and multiple learning difficulties to those supporting complex social, emotional and mental health needs.

This diversity makes it critical that inspectors are properly equipped with up-to-date, sector-specific knowledge to inspect special schools with both confidence and credibility.

Without meaningful preparation or ongoing training for inspectors on the nuances of specialist provision, there is a risk of applying a mainstream lens to settings that, for good reasons, operate very differently.

Unfortunately, this has been a long-standing gap in the inspection

process, leaving many in the special school sector to wonder how the new inspections will play out in our schools.

Inclusion

The fact that inclusion now stands alone as a core inspection area is a long-overdue recognition of its central importance. But for special schools, where inclusion is something we "just do by design", there is a risk of complacency.

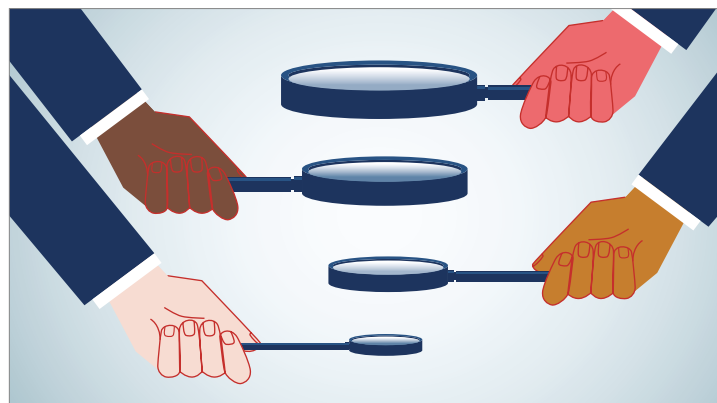
During inspections, SEND settings can expect inspectors to look beyond the assumption that inclusive practice is a given. Instead, they will probably probe how inclusion is strategically prioritised by leadership, embedded in classroom practice, and systematically monitored and reviewed.

This additional accountability will be welcome provided inspectors are able to avoid interpreting inclusion through a mainstream lens, potentially favouring models that prioritise integration over specialised provision.

If not, this will put undue pressure on settings where inclusion looks different by necessity.

Personalised progress

One of the most promising aspects of the new framework is its departure from standardised attainment measures as the primary marker of success. Instead, inspectors will look more closely at the progress that each



“ It is clearly written with mainstream schools in mind

pupil makes from their own starting point.

This is a welcome shift for SEND schools, and one that better aligns with our pupils' lived experiences. We know that progress does not always look like national expectations, but we must not fall into the trap of assuming inspectors will simply understand this.

So, the new framework provides us with an opportunity to tell a richer, more human story of progress, and we must be ready to tell it well.

Here is a chance for us to evidence exemplary practice with respect to personalised outcomes, broader developmental gains and the shared understanding of success among our staff, pupils and parents. But will inspectors know how to recognise it as such?

Safeguarding

Finally, the new standalone safeguarding is (marked as either "met" or "not met") raises the stakes for special schools.

Inspectors will expect to see how risks are identified and managed, but they will also be looking for evidence that pupils feel safe, know how to seek help and trust that their concerns will be taken seriously.

In many specialist settings, those

indicators may look very different from mainstream and may be harder to capture.

Here, too, the onus will fall on schools to provide not just compliance but clear, contextualised evidence that safeguarding is a lived, everyday practice.

Given the diverse communication styles, learning differences and complex behaviours present in our settings, inspectors will need to be particularly attentive as to whether and how safeguarding approaches are adapted thoughtfully and sensitively to meet these needs.

The direction that Ofsted is taking suggests a more contextualised and learner-focused approach, which is undoubtedly a positive move for the special sector.

This demands that we become more intentional, more evidence-driven and more reflective in how we present our work – all of which adds up to a genuine chance to shine.

But all of this hinges on inspectors who truly understand the unique context of special schools.

In recent webinars, Ofsted has assured the sector that they will deliver the level of rigour and insight we expect. We will soon find out whether they have the capacity to fulfil this promise.

Opinion

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SUSAN
MATHESON

Chief operating officer,
Maritime Academy Trust

Why making 3,500 home visits this term was time well spent

Belonging, school improvement and home-school relationships don't need convoluted policy answers, writes Susan Matheson. They need time

This autumn, Labour are developing plans for better school improvement, greater inclusion and clearer home-school expectations. On all three counts, our three-year-old programme of home visits holds important lessons.

During late August and early September this year, teachers across Maritime Academy Trust completed around 3,500 home visits – each one is crucial to our aim of building belonging.

Many primary schools run home visits for children starting nursery or reception, helping to ease those first steps into school. What we are doing differently is visiting the home of every child in every year group in almost every school. (Two do not take part and two only do so partly for contextual reasons.)

We do it because it allows teachers to build the best possible relationships with families from day one. Importantly, these visits are not primarily about raising issues or solving problems but about listening and connecting.

Teachers hear what the child enjoys, who they learn well with, and which areas might need focus.

Families get to ask questions about priorities for the year. And children get to meet their teacher and get excited about the year ahead.

How it works

Each school organises its own home visit programme with support from the central trust team. A class of 30 children typically takes two or three days to visit.

These are part of our school term but take place before everyone else goes back to school, so the children still enter the classroom at the same time as their peers. We set learning online for children on these days.

Two adults attend each visit, with support staff or senior leaders accompanying the class teacher. If families have children in multiple year groups, teachers will join up visits as much as possible.

Staff receive training beforehand, and a designated safeguarding lead (DSL) is always available should concerns arise. (Invariably they do, but that only helps us to intervene earlier and better.)

Unsurprisingly, some staff were nervous when we introduced this in 2022. But, with senior leaders role-modelling and offering support, confidence quickly grew. Now the programme is hugely popular.

Teachers say they get to know their new classes far more quickly than would otherwise be possible.

The visits also bring home the



“ Each visit is crucial to building belonging

reality of children's lives. Staff see families across the spectrum, from comfortable homes to those struggling to get by. With 31 per cent of children nationally growing up in poverty, these realities are clear.

Sometimes staff return upset, but they also feel more motivated: understanding children helps them to teach better.

The programme has even become a draw for recruitment, attracting teachers who want to work in a trust that truly prioritises relationships. Other schools and trusts are showing interest too.

Belonging from day one

Parents have also responded positively. Many describe how much more confident their children felt walking into school, particularly those with SEND.

Some families were hesitant at first, often those where parents' own experiences of school were a barrier to engagement. These visits can help to reset their own relationship with school as well, making it clear that school is going to be a safe, supportive and nurturing space for

their family.

Each year, that hesitance has reduced as the programme has become more established. For most, it is now “just how things are done”.

And why shouldn't it be? At a time when policymakers are looking for solutions to a rising tide of complaints and a loss of faith in institutions, the key is surely to humanise the home/school relationship. You are less likely to lose patience when you understand each other better.

As a result, our schools are receiving fewer complaints as well as benefiting from children's growing confidence in the classroom.

Our families could be sending their children to us for up to eight years. Feeling like they belong in our community for that time is vital.

Home visits alone are not enough to sustain that long-term partnership, but they set the expectations, inform our inclusive practice and make us all better.

And isn't that what a partnership should be designed to do from the start?

Opinion

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ROMANY HEARTFORD

Director, Route Education

How morphology can help students avoid the 'Year 7 dip'

The year 7 dip is beginning to rear its head already, writes Romany Heartford. Here's how leaders can plug a gap in their literacy strategy to make their curriculum more accessible

Just a few weeks into term, schools across the country are starting to see cracks appear. Students who arrived positive are disengaging. Pupils who were keen are showing signs of struggling.

It is the same every year, and it comes down to one key factor: one in four year 7 pupils cannot read well enough to access the curriculum.

Too many familiar initiatives show why morphology is essential. Tutor reading schemes launch with noble intent, but the weakest readers sit in silence. Catch-up phonics drives word recognition but, without comprehension, progress stalls. Disciplinary literacy asks specialists to model complex texts, but many pupils cannot break down the words on the page.

There is a gap in our attempts to bring year 7 into the curriculum conversation. Morphology plugs that gap.

The genius of genealogy

Morphology (*morph* = shape + *logos* = study) is concerned with meaningful word parts (morphemes): roots, prefixes and suffixes. It shows pupils that construct, destruction and infrastructure are not strangers, but

a family formed from the root *struct* (to build).

Most multisyllabic and academic vocabulary derives from Latin and Greek. Teaching those roots accelerates comprehension across the curriculum.

A pupil who knows *bio-* (life) and *graph-* (write) can connect "biography" in English, "biodegradable" in science, "geography" in humanities, even "epigraph" in RE.

Once pupils grasp how words are put together, vocabulary stops being a list to memorise or an inaccessible wall of letters and becomes a system that they can decode and extend across subjects.

This morphological awareness also builds metacognition and develops cognitive flexibility: skills that travel beyond English into science, history and maths, wherever unfamiliar language appears.

Research confirms that explicit morphology instruction delivers months of progress, with the greatest gains for struggling readers. One taught root can open dozens of words.

The good news is that morphology is high-leverage, low-cost and immediately actionable. The barrier is not evidence but ownership.

Here is how leadership can ensure that morphology becomes systematic and sustained, delivering for all pupils, and especially for those for whom literacy remains a barrier.



“ There is a gap in our curriculum conversation

A structure for instruction

Work with your curriculum teams to make this practical by identifying high-utility roots (*bio-*, *graph*, *struct*, *port*) and embedding them into key stage 3 teaching.

A clear framework helps:

Map: Select 20-30 priority morphemes across KS3. These can be roots, prefixes or suffixes.

Model: Train English staff to introduce and revisit them weekly.

Reinforce: Equip departments to flag the same roots in context.

Monitor: Build roots into vocab tests, book looks and curriculum maps.

A simple "root of the week" routine works: introduce one root, connect it to five or six words and revisit it through retrieval tasks.

CPD should support departments to reinforce these roots visually (eg word-family maps or concept organisers) to highlight the same connections across subjects.

Other practical strategies include morphology word walls and word-building challenges, where pupils combine prefixes, roots and suffixes.

The heavy lifting sits with English, but consistency across subjects turns learning into curriculum coherence.

From bonus to bonanza

Literacy is key to accessing the curriculum, and accessing the curriculum is key to tackling the year 7 dip. For leaders, moving morphology from a peripheral bonus to a protected part of curriculum intent can unlock a bonanza of added engagement and attainment.

But, more than that, it can also significantly reduce the pressure associated with literacy data: interventions, catch-up classes, reading ages, GCSE re-sits.

In order to bring all these benefits, morphology should be timetabled, trained for and monitored so that all pupils experience it as part of the curriculum spine, just like times tables or tutor reading.

Morphology turns scattered vocabulary into connected knowledge and gives pupils a way to unlock meaning independently, across every subject, every day. Embedding it shifts the conversation from what pupils cannot access to how fluently they can read, write and learn.

Doing this is key to ensuring that your curriculum implementation has real impact for all learners, fostering their sense of belonging and their inclusion in every classroom.

Solutions

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RACHEL JOHNSON
CEO, PiXL

Five ways to beat the autumn blues with optimistic realism

As excitement about the new academic year invariably gives way to the brutal reality of the long autumn term, here are five ways leaders can foster resilience and positivity, writes Rachel Johnson

Every year, it feels like we cross a threshold earlier and earlier: that moment when the excitement of the new term gives way to exhaustion, lurgies and the autumn blues. But the nights are not drawing in any faster than they used to, and this trend is neither inevitable nor irreversible.

Of course, I have just given myself away as an optimist. The more cynical reader might also say that I have given myself away as someone who is not working in a school.

Both are undeniable facts, but I work with enough schools to know that optimistic leadership can make a real difference – even to the most cynical.

Optimism is more than wishful thinking. It is the feeling of having a measure of control of our fate – that what we want is achievable through our efforts. It is more than simple hope, because optimism involves a willingness to face brutal facts.

Whatever your role in school, brutal facts are lurking somewhere. They might be keeping your staff up

at night, or making tummies churn when you enter a room.

As leaders, our job is to bring them into the light so that we can address them. After all, that is the key to improvement.

But, to do that, we need staff who refuse to resign themselves to the brutal facts; staff who will join us in charting a difficult course past hopelessness and denial. In short, our aim is to model and foster in our teams what I call optimistic realism.

Before the autumn blues claims too many more victims, here are five practical techniques for doing just that:

Create a pre-victorium

This is where you tell the story of what success looks like in the future. Leaders must always speak “hope” among the brutal facts.

Success breeds optimism, so ensure that you are making past success constantly visible. Read out the great notes from parents, young people and the community; tell the story of your alumni or focus on a pupil case-study.

Talk about what future success is going to look like in detail: the future needs to feel like a real place for us to connect to it and buy in.

Conduct a ‘pre-mortem’

A “pre-mortem” is when you anticipate all the things that could



“ Optimism involves facing brutal facts

be barriers in advance. You are more able to control things if you know they are coming.

Create two lists: what you can control and what you really can't. Rank the ones which you can in order of importance and start working out how.

Build frustration lists

Small things can stop progress. Ask people to submit their frustrations, then start fixing them. And tell people when you have. (Anything significant should go into the pre-mortem.)

Get everyone on TASC

Everyone needs to understand what they are being asked to do. I use Brene Brown's TASC model:

- Task owner: who is responsible?
- Authority: does this person have the power/position to do this task?
- Success: are they set up to achieve?
- Checklists: are there clear steps to get there?

We should also be asking people, “what am I missing?” and listen to

what they tell us.

(For those of you going through exam analysis with subject heads, do they know what you are expecting? Do they have an example of “done”?)

To-do and ta-da lists

Next to each of your “to-dos”, write down the success that will happen as a result of you doing that task. You will soon see the ones that need your time – and the ones that can wait.

To keep optimism high, at the end of each week, write a “ta-da” list celebrating all that you have done – individually and as a team.

Then, instead of listening to the criticism sub-committee (in the staffroom or in your head), seek out the board of praise (there is one in both places too!). You are the chair of that board for your team, so make yourself heard.

Having optimistic realism helps us to be clearer, more focused and more equipped, so that we can get ahead of the brutal facts before they get ahead of us.

And the autumn blues are just one of those brutal facts.

THE RESEARCH LEADER

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



Do we really know how to attract and retain teachers?

Dr Sam Sims

Associate professor, UCL
Centre for Education
Policy and Equalising
Opportunities



A new Ambition Institute report sheds light on how teachers and non-teachers decide whether the profession is (still) for them, reveals Sam Sims

One problem with research is that it is all about the past. When policymakers or school leaders try out an innovative response to a problem, it can take years for researchers to collect enough good data to determine whether it worked.

For example, many schools have been experimenting with increased flexible working. However, an EEF-funded review found a "lack of robust evidence" about whether this improves recruitment and retention. But, given that flexible working is a relatively recent phenomenon in schools, this may simply reflect a lack of accumulated data.

One way around this is simply to ask people whether flexible working (or other potential reforms) would make teaching jobs more attractive. But this has drawbacks of its own.

First, people may give "socially desirable" answers to the researchers. For example, they may play down the extent to which money or paid leave would influence their choices.

Second, we would like to know how much these reforms matter. It is unsurprising that some flexibility is better than none. The question is: will it make a real difference to recruitment and retention?

Recently, researchers have made increased use of job-choice studies, in which participants choose between pairs of hypothetical jobs.

This mitigates social desirability bias because both jobs have socially desirable aspects. It also allows us to quantify the relative impact of different changes on (hypothetical) job choices.

In a new paper for the Ambition Institute, we summarise the results from 12 job choice studies. This includes studies conducted with teachers (who could choose to leave the profession) and non-teachers (who could potentially enter it).



We found that teachers and non-teachers alike are highly sensitive to pay. Strikingly, one study found that teachers' job choices are five times more sensitive to a 10 per cent increase in pay now than a 10 per cent increase upon retirement.

This suggests that shifting some of teachers' pay earlier in the lifecycle (from pensions to salary) could have a sizable effect on shortages.

Paid time off is another draw. Our results suggest that an extra 10 days of paid leave per year can be worth as much as a 7 per cent pay rise. This could be pertinent to schools considering a nine-day working fortnight.

Unsurprisingly, workload also emerged as important. In one study with non-teachers, a 20 per cent reduction in workload was valued as much as a 10 per cent increase in wages.

Put another way, cutting workload by 10 per cent could boost the attractiveness of teaching by about the same as the official 5.5 per cent pay rise which the government awarded last year.

We also found that both teachers and non-teachers are more likely to choose a job if it comes with ongoing professional development. Indeed, in one study, having job-specific training affected choices by the same amount as a modest increase in salary.

This is noteworthy: people are willing to choose a job with lower pay if they know they will be supported to develop professionally.

Flexibility also matters – quite a lot. Each extra day that somebody has to work from the office (as opposed to home) is associated with a four percentage point change in their probability of choosing a job.

No wonder many schools are experimenting with off-site PPA. The same study suggests that people would need to be paid £2,000 per year more to compensate them for the lack of work-from-home opportunities in teaching.

Understanding the actual effect of the above reforms on real job choices will require patient evaluations of reforms over the coming years. But the findings from job choice studies allow us a glimpse of the likely effects before implementation has even happened.

One theme among the findings is the importance of extrinsic rewards. Adverts to attract new teachers have historically tended to focus on the vocational aspect of the job, and with good reason. People become teachers to make a difference in the lives of children, and this motivator will always be at the heart of the profession.

But that does not mean we can ignore other factors that can offer teachers more balanced lives and make them feel rewarded for the demanding work that they do.

Read the full Ambition Institute report [here](#)

~~Week in~~~~Westminster~~Labour party conference
in Liverpool

The week that was in the corridors of power

SATURDAY

Not content with SEND reforms, a white paper, a curriculum review and new Ofsted inspections, Bridget Phillipson is also vying with Lucy Powell for the deputy leadership of the Labour party.

Both got the chance to pick up some more votes at the party conference's LGBT disco in Liverpool on Saturday night.

Phillipson opened her set with "Believe" from Cher, before playing "Voulez-Vous" from ABBA, "Club Tropicana" from Wham! and "Just Can't Get Enough" from Depeche Mode, according to reports.

She also had a shot halfway through the set (and given how much she's got on her plate right now, who can blame her?)

SUNDAY

The former Conservative education secretary Michael Gove was not who *Schools Week* expected to see standing in front of us while queueing in Liverpool to pick up a party conference pass.

Govey is now editor of *The Spectator*, and hotfooted from picking up his pass to catch Phillipson in conversation with former children's commissioner Anne Longfield on Sunday evening.

However, our *Schools Week* staffer, just minutes behind, was told the event had reached capacity and wasn't allowed in ... leading us to ponder whether Govey got special treatment?

MONDAY

New schools minister Georgia Gould was almost evacuated from a Labour

conference fringe at Liverpool's museum after a fire alarm went off.

Delegates looked confused, causing someone on the panel to ask if there was a "headteacher in the room".

Thankfully, trust chief executive Dan Morrow restored some calm by quickly assuming fire warden duties – but it turned out to be a drill!

Much laughter at *Schools Week's* (superb) Labour conference drinks do as special guest, skills minister Jacqui Smith, threw shade on Nigel Farage's education policies, Andrea Jenkyn's singing, PM-wannabe Andy Burnham and ... our colleagues' *FE Week*.

Smith thanked *FE Week* for "all the FOIs you submit", including about her "travel arrangements".

Our publisher rebuts the accusation that we send the department too many FOIs – and we think Smith may have been talking about a *Schools Week* FOI.

However, due to the hundreds that we submit to the department, we were unable to work out which one she was referring to.

Smith also declared she was "enjoying a Jacquiri Smith" – one of the special, minister-themed cocktails available on the night – "courtesy of AQA", the exam board that co-hosted the evening.

Her cocktail (rum, lime and ice) was particularly delicious. However, having hoped to have escaped any ministerial criticism, it got *Schools Week's* editor

John Dickens in trouble.

Gould, who had also popped over to the event, rightly called him out for sipping on a Jacquiri rather than the school minister's Black and Gould cocktail.

Eager to impress, Dickens duly ordered one – before realising it was mostly whisky and ice and was unable to finish it. Luckily Gould, who had sank hers, left early and he could quietly leave it on the bar unfinished...

TUESDAY

... Alas, Gould cornered *Schools Week* at an event today and discovered the truth – leaving Dickens struck off her interview list.

Bad news for us, but good news for education policy that we have a determined minister who doesn't let things drop!

Phillipson was interviewed by *Sunday Times* political editor Caroline Wheeler for an event hosted by Parentkind today.

Phillipson told school leaders they needed to communicate with parents in a way that was "careful and considered" so they didn't feel like they were "being talked down to or judged" (hopefully she says the same to parents).

But her talk was interrupted when the lights suddenly went off. As Wheeler quipped, let's hope that's not a sign of Labour's energy policy.





HEADTEACHER

Excelsior Academy offers transformative education at the heart of a vibrant and highly diverse area of Newcastle. We proudly serve a community that, whilst it has experienced long term disadvantage and challenge, is ambitious for the future.

Due to the retirement later this year of our current Headteacher, the Trustees are seeking to appoint an inspirational, values led individual to lead Excelsior Academy.

This full-time role is an exciting opportunity to lead a large, inclusive Academy into the next, exciting stage of its development. Excelsior is a coeducational Academy which opened in 2008. Over the next few years, the primary phase will gradually close with the Academy reverting to provision of education for the 11-18 age range.

The successful candidate will possess the vision, knowledge, experience and tenacity to enable the entire Excelsior community to move forward together.

[CLICK TO FIND OUT MORE](#) ➔



Director of Impact and Growth

At ASDAN, we are driven by a clear purpose: to engage, elevate, and empower learners whose life chances are too often constrained by poverty, exclusion, or systemic barriers. We believe education should be a force for equity, enabling every learner to discover their abilities, build confidence, and take control of their future. That belief has guided ASDAN since our foundation, and today it feels more urgent than ever.

ASDAN is seeking a **Director of Impact and Growth**, a senior leadership role responsible for driving the delivery, quality, and expansion of ASDAN's programmes and qualifications. You will ensure effective project management of strategic priorities, the growth and support of a diverse and international membership, and the quality assurance of all delivery functions. This role also supports the CEO in building ASDAN's external profile and influence

Applications close: **24 October 2025**

[CLICK HERE TO APPLY](#) ➔



INSPIRE YOUNG MINDS. SHAPE BRIGHT FUTURES. LEAD WITH PURPOSE.

PRINCIPAL – ASHTREE PRIMARY ACADEMY

Location: Stevenage | **Salary:** Leadership scale £67,898 - £75,050 | **Start:** January 2026

Ashtree Primary Academy, part of Future Academies, is seeking a dynamic and visionary Principal to lead our school into its next chapter. This is an exciting opportunity for an experienced leader with ambition, creativity, and a passion for raising aspirations and life chances.

As Principal, you will:

- Provide strong and strategic leadership, shaping the academy's vision within its local context.
- Inspire staff and pupils to achieve excellence in teaching, learning, and wider school life.
- Champion high expectations, inclusion, and opportunity for every child.
- Recruit, retain, and develop talented staff, ensuring a culture of collaboration and professional growth.
- Work in partnership with Future Academies' central team to realise the ambitions of trustees and the executive team.

About Us

Future Academies is a flourishing multi-academy trust, founded to improve life chances and raise aspirations for young people. We deliver a knowledge-rich curriculum, rich cultural and

extracurricular opportunities, and a strong pastoral system. Our ethos is underpinned by our values of Knowledge, Aspiration, and Respect, and by our motto *libertas per cultum* – "freedom through education".

Staff Benefits

We recognise our colleagues as our most important asset and offer:

- Excellent CPD and career progression opportunities.
- Employer contributions to Teachers' Pension Scheme.
- A supportive ethos and strong focus on staff wellbeing.
- Access to Mintago benefits, Virtual GP, and Employee Assistance Programme.

We warmly welcome visits to the school. To arrange this, or to have a confidential discussion about the role, please email HREnquiries@futureacademies.org. Alternatively, contact Oliver Wimborne, Director of Education, via oliver.wimborne@futureacademies.org.

Join us in shaping the future of Ashtree Primary Academy.



HEADTEACHER TURVES GREEN PRIMARY SCHOOL



We are seeking to appoint a Headteacher to join Turves Green Primary School.

This is a pivotal and exciting time to join Turves Green Primary School and make a real difference to children's progress and outcomes.

The Head Teacher will report to the Directors of Education and the Chief Executive Officer.

They will:

- support the Director of Education and the Chief Executive Officer to set and review the school's priorities and objectives, leading activity to ensure these are delivered and standards are raised.
- demonstrate exemplary leadership.
- develop, motivate, and deploy teaching and non-teaching staff to secure the best possible use of available talent.

- determine and drive appropriate standards and targets to deliver improvement.
- promote and demonstrate strong parent partnerships.
- create an accountable, safe, and positive learning environment in which diversity and co-operation are celebrated.

We welcome applications from talented and experienced Head Teachers.

Our Excelsior People Strategy aims to get the right people into the right seats from where they will grow into bigger seats, enabling our Trust to meet the needs of all our pupils effectively. Your further growth into ambitious leadership within Excelsior here is key.

Closing Date: 3rd October 2025

Interview Date: 13th October 2025

Start Date: January 2026



Vacancies - Excelsior Multi Academy Trust - Driving Equality, Innovation & Aspiration

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