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'I dream curriculum every night'



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SCHOOL GROUPS PLAN EXPLORED AS SATs FINANCE FAILURES REVEALED

- Rise in standalone schools at risk of closure over finances
- Government offers bailouts of up £1.5m to stave off collapse
- Leaders briefed on white paper plans for schools in groups

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SCHOOLS
WEEK

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After an initial rocky ride on school standards, the Labour government and Bridget Phillipson seem to have found their "thing": the forgotten kids.

It is disappointing that it has taken more than a year to get here. But it is a theme that unites many of their policies: tests to check literacy levels before disengagement starts; improving outcomes for white working-class youngsters; and boosting attendance and behaviour.

It allows them to escape the bind of the Conservative reforms being seen by the political class to have boosted school standards.

Labour can now say, "sure they did for some kids – but not all". Labour is the "party of high and rising standards for every child".

It also fits into their wider emerging political narrative.

As Phillipson told school leaders at the Confederation of School Trusts annual conference on Thursday, the "fight for the soul of our nation isn't just about politics. It's about all of us here in this room – setting our young people off on the right path in life."

But there is a big problem. So far, the solution has been a mixture of ambitions, targets and expectations.

Expectations for parental engagement and pupil behaviour. A "school-ready" target. A phonics check national ambition.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a system of high challenge, but it also needs high support.

A couple of million quid for a library here and a hub there is unlikely to cut it. If the government wants more from schools, it needs to give them the resources to deliver.

One solution being considered for inclusion in the white paper is for all schools to become part of a bigger group.

We will need to wait for more details over how groups may be defined – should the policy land in the white paper – but we know that standalone schools are more vulnerable to the many turbulent headwinds (see our investigation on pages 4 to 7).

But this alone won't do. Labour must show in its upcoming white paper that new ambitions will be matched with action.

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NEWS

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Grammars top tables as attainment replaces progress 8

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

Grammar schools are back dominating the top of GCSE league tables after the progress 8 performance measure was put on pause for two years.

Progress 8 cannot be calculated this year and next because SATs were cancelled for two years during the pandemic. It measures the progress between the end of primary school up to GCSEs.

Instead, the government's performance website now defaults to ranking schools by attainment 8 – which scores pupils across eight "slots" including English and maths.

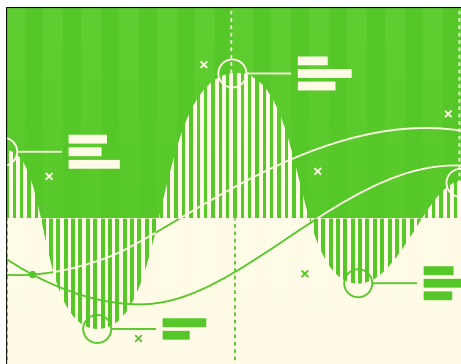
Last year, 15 of the top 50 highest P8 scores were grammar schools. But this year, all but one of them are schools with selective intakes, whose pupils were already high performers on entry.

Michaela Community School, in west London, is the only state school in the top 50 this year coming 47th. It usually tops the progress 8 league tables.

Experts said this has reconfirmed that, "despite its flaws", progress data is a fairer way of comparing schools than just using raw attainment measures alone as it adjusts for differences in attainment on intake.

FFT Datalab found a group of schools which had above average progress scores last year but below average attainment scores in 2025. Schools in more disadvantaged areas will tend to have lower A8 scores, it said.

The Steiner Academy Hereford was ranked sixth



in the country for progress 8 last year, but it now shows as 838th in the attainment 8 league table.

Eden Boys' School, Birmingham, had the fourth-highest progress 8 score in 2024. It is 225th for attainment 8.

Bedford Free School, part of Advantage Schools, was 42nd for P8 last year, compared to 1,542 in A8 this year.

Stuart Lock, Advantage Schools chief executive, said he was "very proud" of the school and "not worried" about where it is in the league tables.

"I don't think parents look at progress 8 or attainment 8 very much. The detail beyond a general impression has never really been that powerful for parents. They have a sense of a good school in an area.

"And now attainment 8 is all we've got, not that that it is anyone's fault. I'm in favour of data, transparency and league tables – but you can tell a very small amount from the data."

He added that "we should credit the grammar schools at the top as they are very likely to be

doing a good job of it".

Frank Young, chief policy officer at Parentkind, said that school performance measures can be "very challenging" for parents, who take a "rounded view of schools".

"Data is good, but there are always challenges related to communication to help parents understand how their school compares to other nearby or similar schools, but it certainly isn't the only measure for parents."

When looking at individual schools on the Department for Education's (DfE's) school performance website, it does also state that "attainment measures show how pupils have performed in tests and assessments but do not take pupils' starting points into account".

In 2016, progress 8 replaced 5 A*-C including English and maths as the main measure for secondary schools.

But whether progress 8 returns, and in what shape, is bound up with the government's curriculum review, Pepe Di'Iasio, general secretary of ASCL said.

"We would like to see a system where the information provided to parents better reflects the breadth of what schools do – and we can see that the government is trying to move in that direction – but the measures which underpin any system have to be right."

Datalab said the fairest comparison of performance of any school now is with other schools with similar intakes.

The DfE was approached for comment.

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

Ofsted to appoint MAT inspection lead

Ofsted wants to recruit a policy lead to help shape its new inspections of multi-academy trusts (MATs). But the government is not yet able to say when MAT inspections are likely to be rolled out.

Ofsted has advertised for a new policy lead who "will focus on MAT inspections". The watchdog says the role "offers an exciting opportunity to shape a new inspection regime, as Ofsted prepares for the first inspections of multi-academy trusts."

"MATs now educate the majority of pupils in England, and the government intends to introduce MAT inspections this parliament.

"These inspections will align accountability with decision-making, spotlight excellent practice, and support the Department for Education in setting standards for trusts."

The £69,000 role "will involve leading the development of inspection frameworks, the policies and guidance" as well as "establishing programme management and governance, building stakeholder networks, recruiting and managing a new team, and contributing to the DfE's regulatory work."

Labour pledged in its election manifesto to start inspecting trusts as well as individual schools, under wider Ofsted reforms.

Ofsted previously did summary evaluations of trusts (MATSEs), which saw it batch-inspect a number of schools within a trust, but it does not inspect the way their central teams work.

It said the DfE must formally consult on the policy and legislate before MAT inspections can be implemented. "Together, we will be engaging with the sector to hear their views," it added.

The DfE said MAT inspections would "highlight best practice" as well as "areas of improvement". This will be done before 2029, it added.

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More standalone schools on the brink as deficits grow

JACK DYSON

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Soaring inflation, plunging rolls, staff absences and unfunded pay rises have left the future of scores of academy trusts in doubt as they scramble to plug multi-million-pound holes in their budgets.

Seventy-five trusts – one with a deficit of almost £6 million – raised concerns about their ability to continue operating in 2023-24, a Schools Week investigation found. This is more than double the number the year before.

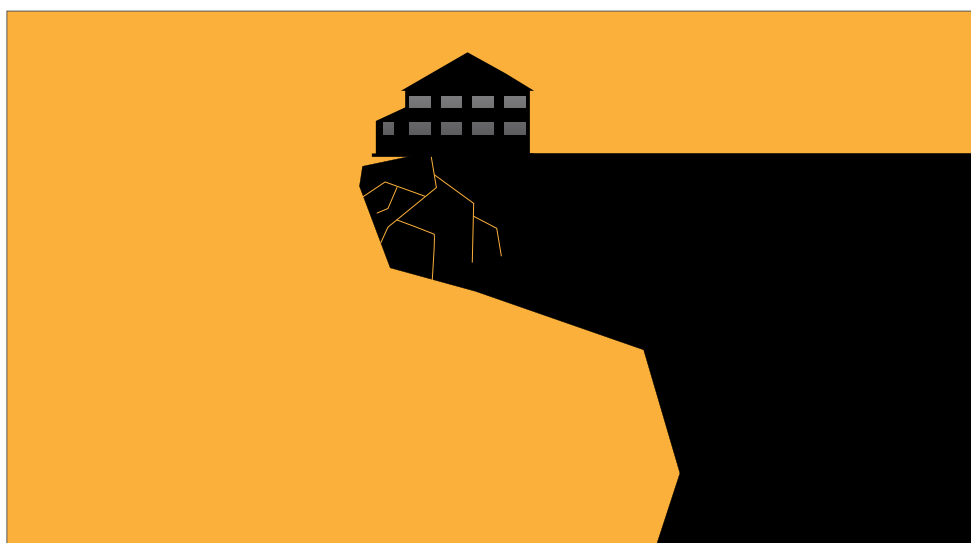
And over a third of the trusts in financial distress last year have been handed government bailouts or been told by officials that they stand to receive additional financial support stretching into seven figures.

Almost 70 per cent of them were single-academy trusts. Separate findings also show a big rise in the number of council schools subject to a notice of financial concern.

It comes as government officials are working on white paper proposals to set an ambition that all schools are part of a group, multiple sources briefed on the plans said (see story below).

'Terrible toll'

Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Pepe Di'Iasio said: "We



'Last year, we had to make some very difficult decisions'

recognise that the national finances are tight, but we're very worried that schools and colleges are expected to do ever more with ever less, and this has a terrible toll.

"We really do need a long-term plan for education in which we are clear about what we expect from schools and colleges, and then make sure they have the resources to deliver those expectations."

The Department for Education (DfE) revealed last month that more than one in eight trusts last year had an "emphasis of matter" or "material uncertainty" opinion in their annual accounts (13.4 per cent).

This means auditors flagged concerns about the trust's financial sustainability or the reliability of

Continued on next page

Leaders briefed on plans for schools in groups

Government officials are working on white paper proposals to encourage all schools to join a group, sources briefed on the plans have said.

It is not known how Labour would define a school 'group'. However, it is understood the plan would not force schools into new ownership.

Institute of School Business Leadership chief Stephen Morales believes Labour's schools white paper is "likely" to include "encouragement for schools to collaborate and not operate as islands".

"Groups of schools coming together makes absolute sense and it's probably the most sustainable way for our system to prevail given the fiscal backdrop."

The Conservative government tried through

various white papers to force schools to join trusts, but the plans always failed.

The 2022 white paper included a target for all schools to be in "strong" multi-academy trusts by 2030. There was also an expectation most trusts would have at least 10 schools, or 7,500 pupils. However the plan was later ditched.

DfE did not want to comment.

Trusts are not the only school group. Some councils have federations of schools, and other schools also have looser partnerships.

The Kreston report showed small MATs – those with fewer than 3,000 pupils – had, on average, surpluses "of just £1,000 [last year] compared to £203,000 in 2022".

Primary and secondary single-academy trusts also tended to be in deficit, according to

the analysis.

Fifty-two of the 75 schools with financial issues flagged in their accounts last year were SATs.

Of the SATs, 30 (58 per cent) were either secondaries or all-throughs. Thirteen (25 per cent) were in the east of England, 10 (19 per cent) in London and nine (17 per cent) were based in the South-west.

Salvatorian College was the SAT with the largest deficit (£1.4 million). This came after the ESFA "approved a financial facility" of £1.4 million in 2019, of which £1.3 million had been "drawn down" by the end of August 2024.

But trustees believed that "some additional support may be required" and they had "a reasonable expectation" this "would be forthcoming".

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its accounts, effectively raising risks or doubts about its ability to continue operating without additional support. The number had also risen from 9.9 per cent in 2022-23.

Most of these were for trusts closing or transferring. But risks over financial issues were flagged in 75 sets of trust accounts for 2023-24.

While this only equates to 3.2 per cent of the country's trusts, it is more than double the 1.3 per cent that issued financial health warnings the year before.

The DfE said the statements are made when "a material uncertainty existed relating to events or conditions that may have cast significant doubt on the trust's ability to continue as a going concern".

£5.9m in deficit

Schools Week obtained the names of the 75 – running 264 schools – through the freedom of information act. Our analysis shows 46 of them were in deficit, with four more than £1 million in the red.

The largest deficit was posted by the **St Ralph Sherwin Catholic Multi Academy Trust** based in Derbyshire (£5.9 million). Accounts show its 25 academies had "collectively been in financial decline for several years" prior to the MAT's launch in 2018.

But "rising utility costs, challenges in recruiting to key posts, general inflation, staffing absences and the funding versus cost to deliver free school meals" strained the "delicate balance between income and expenditure".

The Confederation of School Trusts' (CST's) annual survey last month revealed that financial sustainability was CEOs' number one priority this year – for the second year running. Many are looking at cutting classroom staff and leadership redundancies to balance the books.

The trust did not respond to a request for comment.

But finance expert Micon Metcalfe noted that Catholic MATs more generally may be "disproportionately affected" by financial pressures.

This is because "they are wanting to deliver the bishop's plan for the area and protect small Catholic schools", which are harder hit by cuts.

iPads and job cuts

The **Arthur Terry Learning Partnership** (£3.9 million) and the **Sherborne Area Schools' Trust** (£1.9 million) had the next-highest deficits. They ran 23 and 18 schools at the time.

Schools Week previously revealed how Arthur



'Groups of schools coming together makes absolute sense'

Terry had racked up seven-figure losses after purchasing iPads as part of an initiative to provide 11,000 devices for all pupils and staff.

In a letter sent to parents last week, the trust said it was "consulting with staff regarding voluntary redundancy and early resignation programmes".

But the trust added that the "majority of staff will not be affected by these programmes", and this was "one of several measures being considered to manage resources responsibly".

Sherborne's accounts cited pressures including "the increasing cost and challenge around alternative provision".

This was "further compounded by high levels of staff absence in the form of the associated costs of backfilling essential frontline teaching roles".

Andi Brown, of academy consultancy firm SAAF Education, has been called in to help more trusts in financial difficulty over the past six months.

This is due to pay rises not being fully funded,



Leora Cruddas

"higher than expected inflation and a general reduction in pupil numbers, particularly in primary schools", among other things, he said.

"We're now starting to recommend trusts aim for staff costs to be 75 per cent of total income. Three, four years ago it was 80 per cent."

The price of inclusion?

The **Beckmead Trust** – which also appeared on the list – was this week issued with a notice to improve after approaching the government for an emergency bailout amid concerns it would be plunged into a "cashflow deficit".

A spokesperson for the MAT, which runs 12 special and alternative provision schools, said it went into the red due to "significant delays" for cash "to build new free schools approved by the DfE, and in receiving funding from local authorities".

Broad Horizons Education Trust CEO Owen Jenkins also said its £670,000 deficit reflected "the complexities of bringing together a very diverse family of schools", including two special schools.

"The commitment to inclusion is not easy to deliver within the current funding context," he added. "Last year, we had to make some very difficult decisions ... and sadly this meant some redundancies, but this did not come at the cost of inclusion."

Broad Horizons "is now outperforming its approved financial recovery plan and moving into an in-year surplus position", he added.

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: FUNDING

Problems not confined to trusts

CST CEO Leora Cruddas stressed that trusts “are not immune from the financial pressures facing all public services”, highlighting that 15 per cent of maintained schools also have a budget deficit.

A separate FOI lodged with the DfE showed 159 local authority-run schools across 26 councils were subject to a notice of financial concern in 2023-24, up from 94 the year before.

These are similar to academy improvement notices, also issued when funding rules are breached. Council schools do not publish details of their accounts, so the reasons for deficits are not as transparent as in academy trusts.

Michael Barton, the National Governance Association's head of policy, added: “While the summer's spending review was relatively positive for schools and may offer some short-term relief, it fell short of delivering the scale of investment needed to fully address the financial pressures facing the system.”

Brown warned that even those which “have built up large reserves and can weather this storm a bit better” are “going to start burning through” their savings.

... but some weren't in deficit

But 28 of the 75 trusts listed in our FOI for flagging concerns were in surplus.

Despite registering a £1.4 million surplus, the **Bishop Wheeler Catholic Academy Trust** forecast a future “in-year deficit that could deplete [its] remaining cash reserves”.

Among other things, the 16-school trust also pointed to “significant underfunding through the national funding formula over a 10-year period that has become more acute in the last three years”.

Bishop Wheeler said the issue has left its schools “funded at 82 per cent of the minimum level necessary to operate as indicated” by the department's efficiency benchmarks.

This was “acknowledged” by the DfE, which “indicated” it would “consider providing short-term funding ... should it be required”.

The **Cornelius Vermuyden School** made similar projections, despite recording a £110,000 surplus. This prompted department officials to advise that it “needs to join a multi-academy trust”.

The South East Essex Academy Trust, which is working with the school, said budgets were squeezed, in part, by “reduced pupil numbers”

brought on by “local demographic changes and the impact of an Ofsted report”.

A report by the Kreston group of accountancy firms suggested that “if the sector is trying to ensure that it is financially sustainable, then the obvious solution would be for MATs to become large or at least for the smaller MATs to become larger”.

£1m bailouts

In all, 22 trusts either received bailouts or had received “indications” they would be given additional financial support.

Among them was **Sherborne**, which “anticipated future funding/cashflow support from the DfE of up to £1.3 million”. **Arthur Terry** was also offered a £1.5 million government loan to stay afloat.

Morales said some trusts were “getting too big to fail [as] they have so many children in their care”.

When academies in big struggling MATs cannot be rebrokered, “the government has to do everything possible to keep things running. In the end, it's their duty to ensure thousands of children in any community are educated.”

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Phillipson reveals behaviour 'expectation' and phonics 'ambition'

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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The upcoming white paper will set a new "ambition" for 90 per cent of pupils to reach the expected standard in phonics within five years and establish "early expectations" for pupil behaviour.

Speaking at the Confederation of School Trusts, education secretary Bridget Phillipson said "forgotten" children were at the heart of her education vision.

She said the white paper will "guide us towards: children – from forgotten to included; their learning, their schools – from narrow to broad. The result – from withdrawn to engaged.

"To restore opportunity to communities across the country, that is my moral mission," she said. "A school system that values richness, just as much as it values rigour."

But her speech was light on new policy details. Mandatory year 8 reading tests were officially announced and will focus on "assessing reading fluency and comprehension".

The government will also "build on the success of the phonics programme" by setting the "ambition" that 90 per cent of children should meet the expected standard in the year one phonics screening check.

It aims to hit the target by the end of this parliament, in 2029. This year, 80 per cent of pupils passed the check in year 1, the same proportion as last year.

The government is also expanding its support for reception pupils through the English hubs, putting a "laser-focus on the children that struggle the most, alongside reforms to boost the quality of education in the early years, and wider family support through Best Start Family Hubs".

Meanwhile the white paper will also "focus on setting early expectations on behaviour".

Phillipson said the system had "turned a corner in our fight to get children back in the classroom. Last year, children spent five million more days in school.

"But there's still much more to do – on behaviour too, another marker of engagement. Far too much time is lost on poor behaviour. Seven minutes for every 30 in the classroom. And that's time children can't afford. And suspensions have tripled.

"We've got to turn it around," she said.

Asked by Schools Week for further details,



Bridget Phillipson

Phillipson said she had "heard the call from the sector to do more on this. "But this will have to be government, schools and parents working together, and through the white paper, we'll set out how we'll deliver that.

"It is about schools having good engagement with their parents, with their families, but also expectations on parents about their responsibilities to make sure that they are supporting their child's school and setting high expectations around what children should be doing."

Rebecca Boomer-Clark, chief executive of Lift Schools, welcomed the phonics target and reading test, adding: "Reading is the key that unlocks everything, both learning and engagement."

Lift has been testing reading ability for pupils in years 2 to 10 for the past few years, which

has provided "invaluable insight on how to get children back on track" and "driven significant leaps forward".

However, Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders' union NAHT, said: "Simply announcing a new ambition for attainment in the check won't make it actually happen without more tangible intervention."

Pepe Di'Lasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, added: "Tests and targets are easy to set, but what would make the greatest difference in improving literacy is to ensure that schools are sufficiently funded."

Phillipson said a year 8 reading check would set clear expectations to support parents, teachers and pupils in identifying gaps early. It would also target support for those who need it and help the most able go further.

Leaders are in a 'fight for the soul of our nation'

Phillipson made "forgotten" children who are "growing away from the light of a great education" a centrepiece of her speech.

She called for "every child [to be] achieving and thriving. That's my challenge to you as leaders in your schools, your trusts: in every school we need to go from withdrawn to engaged."

She gave the example of a boy who "skulks through your corridors, when he turns up for school at all".

She added: "And now that boy's spending night after night alone in his bedroom. Vulnerable to the darker forces that seek him

out online, and whisper poison in his ear.

"Turning him away from the free and fair society we seek to build. Video by video. Reel by reel. Meme by meme. Colleagues, this is how the fabric of our communities begins to rip."

Echoing comments by the prime minister a few weeks ago, she added: "We have a choice: Hope or grievance? Renewal or decline?"

"That [is a] fight for the soul of our nation. It isn't just about politics. It's about all of us here in this room – setting our young people off on the right path in life."

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Key takeaways from the CST conference

SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

Schools Week reporters were out and about at the Confederation of School Trusts annual conference this week. Here's a round-up of the main talking points for school leaders ...

White, working-class issues

Working-class white children “seem the most resistant to the transformative work” of schools, the leader of the review investigating the youngsters’ performance has said.

Star Academies CEO Sir Hamid Patel, who is chairing the independent inquiry into white working-class educational outcomes alongside Baroness Estelle Morris, made the statement during a speech at the CST annual conference on Thursday.

A survey conducted by the review revealed that 25 per cent of white working-class boys do not read outside school and that white working-class youngsters are less likely to enjoy classes.

Patel told the event that leaders “cannot assume that our pupils or their parents share” the belief in “the value of education for its own sake, as well as recognising its power to open doors”.

“And don’t get me wrong, I’m not suggesting for a minute that white working-class pupils should be the sole focus of our work,” he added.

“But the white, low-income children as a group seem the most resistant to the transformative work we are trying to do in the sector. For those with SEND, disenchantment is compounded.”

The survey found 26 per cent of disadvantaged white youngsters “rarely or never enjoy lessons”, compared to 15 per cent of non-white pupils.

Only 52 per cent of white working-class parents thought their child’s teachers “respected them by years 10 and 11”.

Patel said schools were “faced with intergenerational discontent”.

“Our ingenuity needs to focus on helping children who are the hardest to help, building the relationships which make them feel valued. Our disadvantaged children need us most.”

AI feedback for ECTs

Artificial intelligence could be used to analyse recordings of lessons delivered by new teachers, to give feedback on what they are doing well



Sir Hamid Patel

and what could improve, as part of a National Institute of Teaching (NioT) project.

Raj Chande, senior research associate at the NioT, said early career teachers’ (ECTs) lessons would be recorded and uploaded to “a secure tool that’s... converted into a transcript”.

“Those transcripts are going to be analysed by... relevant experts who are going to be able to say, ‘that’s great questioning there’ or... ‘they shouldn’t have started that explanation with that much disruption going on.’”

The feedback given by human experts will then be used to train an AI model, to “replicate the judgment of experts”.

“At scale, mentors and ECTs [could] be given semi-automatic feedback, all quality assured by our team development experts.

Chande said if the project is successful, teachers could be “given instantaneous, semi-automatic feedback without anybody actually having to come into the room.”

He said the scheme was not designed to “substitute... having a conversation. But we’re trying to reduce the constraints on time and... increase the breadth of lessons that are observed.”

The project would allow the establishment of “a database of teacher practices” comprising “thousands of lessons”.

“We [will] know what’s being done and what’s

not being done quite so well.”

Work on the project will begin this academic year, with around 12 ECTs testing the recording tool. Far higher numbers would then record their practice next academic year.

Conversations are believed to be underway around legal aspects of the programme.

EHCP reform debate welcome

The debate around changing education, health and care plans is often “very polarised and difficult to talk about in public”, the government’s inclusion tsar has said.

Tom Rees, chair of the Department for Education’s inclusion expert advisory group, said a recent report by the children’s commissioner was “one of the few documents that I have read that sets out an alternative system to how EHCPs might work”.

Rachel de Souza’s report recommended that plans be restricted to pupils whose needs sit across education, health and care, with other levels of plan created for those with one or two needs.

Rees, chief executive of Ormiston Academy Trust, said: “It has generated some really welcome debate about a topic that often becomes very polarised and it’s difficult to talk about in public.”

There was a huge backlash earlier this year when Schools Week revealed that plans to reform EHCPs were being considered as part of government reforms.

Rees also said there has not been “enough learning” on resource bases in mainstream schools for pupils with SEND – another key government reform. Ministers have commissioned a study into the provision.

He added that the current system can also “disempower teachers and schools. Too quickly it can suggest that the answer is somewhere else, away from the front line.”

Representatives from early years, further education and alternative provision have also been added to Rees’ inclusion group.

These include Matthew Evans, CEO of The Athelstan Trust, Julian Grenier, senior content and engagement manager for early years at the Education Endowment Foundation, and Michelle Dowse, principal at Heart of Worcestershire College.

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Small schools demand Ofsted clarity over report card impact

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

EXCLUSIVE

Small schools want clarity on how new Ofsted inspections will be adapted for their “unique” circumstances amid concerns they will continue to place “unrealistic” demands on leaders.

The watchdog has ditched deep dives from its new report card inspections, admitting they were “more challenging” in small schools, which were more likely to get lower grades.

Ofsted has also said its new framework will consider context and ensure inspections are tailored to each school, when they are rolled out next month.

But inspectors will now conduct three learning walks on the first day of inspections and hold at least five “reflection meetings” with leaders across two days.

They should also meet “a group of staff” including the SENCo and safeguarding lead.

‘The final straw’

Former HM inspectors Adrian Gray, Frank Norris and Professor Colin Richards said this “makes little allowance” for senior staff who teach and fails to explain “what special arrangements have been made” to help small schools manage inspection pressures.

They added that the “heavy emphasis” on leadership meetings and multiple learning walks “in a small village school with only one or two classes... is totally impractical”.

Ofsted’s website explains in detail how inspections are adapted for small schools under the current framework, but this guidance has not been updated for new inspections.

Norris said the watchdog “must publish specific guidance for the leaders of small schools and inspectors ... so that the requirements are manageable, and avoid additional stress caused by unrealistic expectations”.

More than 2,100 schools in England have 100 pupils or fewer, Department for Education data suggests. In many, the headteacher can



‘I’ve no idea how standalone small schools can undertake this’

have several other school roles.

Julie Kelly, chair of the National Association of Small Schools (NASS), described the new inspections as “very exposing” and high stakes for schools with few staff.

Analysis by Gray last year found that large primary schools were nine times more likely to be awarded ‘outstanding’ than those with fewer than 100 pupils.

“It’s going to come back more on the headteacher – they will be doing everything,” Kelly added.

Norris suggested the new proposals “will make it even more challenging” and “could be the final straw for some”.

‘More context than ever’

Ofsted said its framework “takes more account of a school’s context than ever before”.

Inspection formats “will be adapted to reflect each setting’s size, type and unique circumstances – as set out in the toolkits”, a spokesperson added. “We are confident that small schools will see the benefits of this change when we begin inspecting next month.”

Small schools are

mentioned once in Ofsted’s inspectors’ operating guide.

It says inspectors must “bear in mind that, in smaller schools, one leader may be responsible for many different areas. Discuss with leaders who would be the most appropriate person for an inspector to talk with, and their availability.”

Elsewhere, it says inspectors should “adapt activities to the school’s context” throughout an inspection.

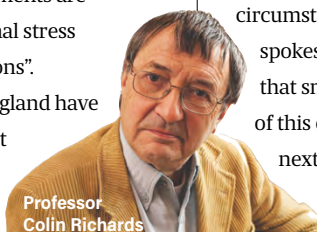
Nominee ‘challenge’

Under the new proposals, schools will be invited to select a senior staff “nominee” to support the inspection and attend meetings. This is optional.

But Emma Bone, deputy CEO of Learning Academy Partnership (LAP), which runs 18 primaries in Devon, said this “could be challenging” for small schools.

“For small, maintained schools, that capacity may just not be there. In such schools, headteachers are often also class teachers, which may make managing two inspectors, while handling day-to-day classroom responsibilities, quite demanding.”

Under the new framework, a third inspector will also attend on the

Professor
Colin Richards

Frank Norris

Continued on next page

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first day. Ian Hartwright, head of policy at school leaders' union NAHT, said a third inspector will "likely add to the stress on leaders and staff" in these schools.

However, Dan Morrow, CEO of Cornwall Education Learning Trust (CELT), said being in a trust could provide a "protective factor" to some of those issues.

"I have no idea how standalone [small] schools would be able to undertake this – I can see it being exceptionally challenging," he said.

"It's not just the headteacher who's got responsibility in inspection – it's the whole of leadership and governance."

Debbie Thomas, director of primary education at Consortium Trust, said the MAT structure makes securing a nominee "manageable".

But Kelly said some small rural schools are not in trusts for reasons of geography. Some are in federations, and she stressed inspectors "need to be able to understand" this structure too.

'Unique' context

A key principle will be that those inspecting small schools should have relevant, Kelly added. "They've got to be really aware and adapt the activities to reduce the disruption, else they're going to



Debbie Thomas



Sir Martyn Oliver

'They've got to be really aware and adapt activities to reduce disruption'

overburden staff."

Yet inspections are often led by inspectors from large trusts or secondaries, who are "blind to the context" and "find it difficult to get their heads around" the difference.

New inspections will be led only by experienced HMIs, and Ofsted has pledged to match inspectors with settings in

which they have experience. But Paul Rickeard, CEO of Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Learning Trust (DNDLT), said it is unclear "how many of them have... experience of tiny rural schools".

As of August 2024, Ofsted had 350 schools HMIs. Analysis of "pen portraits" on its website suggests only eight have direct experience of small schools. However, these portraits offer only a snapshot of inspectors' backgrounds.

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

'We're transparent', Ofsted says over secret consultation findings

Ofsted has dealt "openly and transparently" with feedback on its planned reforms, its chief inspector has claimed, after the watchdog was blasted for refusing to give a breakdown of consultation responses.

Sir Martyn Oliver and recently appointed Ofsted chair Dame Christine Gilbert were questioned by the education committee on Tuesday about the watchdog's reforms and consultation process.

Liberal Democrat MP and schools spokesperson Caroline Voaden pressed Oliver on Ofsted's refusal to publish a breakdown of the 6,500 consultation responses it received regarding new "report card" inspections.

Unions said only publishing a narrative summary was "deeply problematic".

But Oliver claimed: "I think we have published openly and transparently the views that were expressed to us.

"We set out really clearly the negativity that we heard against what we proposed to consult on."

Requests for a "granular breakdown" reflected

a "fundamental misunderstanding of what a consultation is", he said.

While failing to win the confidence of unions "does concern me", Oliver said he takes confidence from the response of "those who've actually experienced an inspection".

But he would not commit to publishing analysis of the pilot inspections that are currently underway.

Meanwhile Gilbert, whose damning review following headteacher Ruth Perry's death prompted many of Ofsted's reforms, said progress had been made.

She described Ofsted's new complaints processes as "much more human" and "far better" than it used to be.

But she is "looking at options... for greater independence in the process" and will report back around March. This was "really key", she added.

Oliver said he felt Ofsted "go[es] as far and in not further than almost all of the regulators in

this country, with dealing with complaints."

Gilbert's review of Ofsted in 2024 found the role of its board "appear[ed] curiously limited" and called for it to be strengthened.

Having now been at its helm for around six weeks, she assured the education committee that the Ofsted board "won't be taking reports, nodding, and saying 'well done'... We will be looking ourselves at... engaging with the sector."

Oliver also gave insight into Ofsted's plans to match inspectors with settings in which they have had experience.

He said the regulator had "undertaken what they are confident in saying is the largest data set on civil servants, to match their experience and expertise". This comprises "two million sets of data" on HMIs.

He added that Ofsted now specified settings when advertising for HMIs.

"Each region has looked at its strengths and deficits of experience and it's advertising to fill that pool. We're on it," he said.

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Poorer children less likely to secure EHCPs

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

Children from poorer homes with SEND are less likely to secure an education, health and care plan and access a special school place, a new study has found.

The Sutton Trust charity has warned of a “double disadvantage” for children with SEND from poorer families, who “are less able to navigate the system than more affluent parents”.

Researchers surveyed 4,000 parents to understand why children who are from a lower socio-economic background and have SEND have some of the poorest education outcomes of all pupil groups.

It is thought to be the first study to evidence the assertion that families from wealthier backgrounds can access the SEND system more easily.

Schools minister Georgia Gould said the report “lays bare how badly children with SEND have been let down and denied the opportunities and support they deserve”.



The charity found, through a survey by Public First, that 74 per cent of middle-class parents had EHCPs granted without issue or after tribunal, compared to 66 per cent of those from lower incomes.

Looking at just tribunal success, 22 per cent of wealthier families were successful compared to 15 per cent of poorer families.

Sixty-five per cent of working-class parents spent no money on their EHCP application, compared to 29 per cent of middle-class parents. Parents who spent more money were

also more likely to secure an EHCP.

Parents are spending money on private assessments and SEND consultants.

Better-off families were also more likely to secure a special school place for their child – 41 per cent compared to 25 per cent of low-income parents.

Families with a child in a special school reported higher levels of satisfaction and positive impact – which the charity said highlighted a “challenge” for greater inclusion in mainstream schools.

EXCLUSIVE

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

Wanted: experts to help prepare more ‘school-ready’ children

The government plans to recruit experts to support new local leads in early maths, language and development as part of efforts to boost school readiness.

They will train early years educators, “helping them build confidence in teaching maths and improving children’s vital language skills”.

The Department for Education (DfE) is looking for “subject matter experts” to support these area leads, a new market engagement notice reveals.

They could also review and give feedback on DfE training modules for teachers, and develop and pilot new ones. The experts could also train the local leads, support their teaching, and help them to “share best practice”.

The government aims to raise the proportion of “school-ready” children to 75 per cent by 2028.

Last year, 67.7 per cent of children had a “good” level of development across areas such as language, personal development, maths and literacy, down from a peak of 71.8 per cent.

Unveiling the target last year, the prime

minister Keir Starmer said one in three children are “not ready for school at the age of five”.

“That’s kids in reception who aren’t starting to read. They’re struggling to speak.”

The DfE engagement notice describes language and maths skills at age five as “two of the strongest predictors of later attainment”.

“More than one in five children are reaching compulsory school age without the communication, language and literacy skills they need to thrive at school and in later life, with even higher numbers falling short in early maths.”

The tender is expected to be published in late November. The contract would run from April 2026 until March 2027, with a possible one-year extension.

The National Association for Primary Education (NAPE) welcomed the move, which comes as the government announces funding allocations for its Best Start Family Hubs.

The hubs mark a revival of the Sure Start children’s centres which operated under the

previous Labour government.

“We believe this renewed focus on the most crucial stage of children’s learning, combined with the restoration of Sure Start in many communities, represents one of the most significant and positive commitments to early education in recent years,” NAPE said.

“If delivered with care and sustained investment, it could stand as the current secretary of state’s most transformative and lasting contribution to our society.”

Felicity Gillespie, director of Kindred Squared, said: “Children’s progress from birth directly... [is] the root of so much social inequality later in life, so all investment at the earliest stages of education has to be welcome.”

For the government to have “any chance” of meeting its school readiness pledge, “it also needs to help parents and carers, who are a child’s very first educators”, she added.

“We want to see more parents getting simple, clear advice and support.”

INTERVIEW: EXAMS

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Cyber-attacks, exam fees and digital vision... meet the new head of Cambridge OCR

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

Exam boards are playing a “game of cat and mouse” with cyber criminals and an attack could jeopardise a future exam series, the new head of Cambridge OCR has warned.

Myles McGinley, who took over as managing director of UK education at Cambridge University Press and Assessment last month, also called on the government and exams regulator Ofqual to set out a “vision” for the future of digital assessment.

Defending recent rises in exam fees charged to schools, McGinley said boards were working “in an environment where costs of our suppliers have gone up, but also actually the threats that we are dealing with now are quite different from a cyber security perspective”.

Asked if there was a risk that a cyber-attack could jeopardise a future exam series, McGinley said: “Of course. I mean, you look at banks, supermarkets, Transport for London...”

‘We’re not immune to hack threat’

“We’re not immune. We work in the same environment, and we take it incredibly seriously.”

The education sector has been rocked by some recent serious cyber-attacks.

School staff data such as passport and national insurance numbers was exposed in a “malicious” attack on the software supplier of Single Central Record (SCR). The company says it manages more than 350,000 staff records at 1,500 schools.

Describing the preventative work as a “game of cat and mouse”, McGinley said Cambridge OCR had a “lot of technology that’s in place to secure our whole estate.”

“It’s a massive, co-ordinated effort,” he admitted.

This includes increased monitoring of threats and training for staff and schools around vulnerabilities.

OCR also measures its work against the government-backed “cyber essentials plus” kitemark, which requires organisations to put controls in place such as malware protection and multi-factor identification. The board has also launched a vocational qualification in cyber security and networks.



‘It feels like there are lots of separate conversations going on’

‘AI experimentation phase’

But, just as technology represents a huge threat to the exams system, it also offers huge potential benefits in the form of on-screen assessment.

McGinley believes we need to be “clear on the opportunity and the benefits” during what he calls the “experimentation phase”.

He added: “If you go into an exam, you are using a computer, you are coding live, you are seeing whether something works or not. You are able to change variables, parameters. It has a positive washback on teaching and learning as well.”

There is also “the potential digital has to solve some of the problems that people are talking about within the system. If you think about the growth we have seen with anxiety, with special educational needs...”

OCR has been “surprised how empowering” it was to give students greater “ability to control

their assessment experience in the way that is needed for them”, for example by changing font sizes and text colour or using an on-screen timer.

“What we really need [is a] bit of vision about the future of assessment, and that is what we are trying to talk about. But we need to be doing this nationally, i.e. from government, regulator.

“It feels like there are lots of separate conversations going on and individual pitches being made, whereas we could do with a bit of momentum.”

Tech pupil security threat

But McGinley acknowledges there are concerns – about security and access.

“How can we be confident that a student who doesn’t have these devices at home is getting enough practice in a setting?”

Could digital exams have a cost benefit for

INTERVIEW: EXAMS

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schools? He accepted the “very real” financial burden of exams on schools and colleges.

“Whether digital can be the silver bullet for that would, I think, depend on the speed of transition.”

Digital comes with “a different cost”. Hardware, for example. And it “also possibly comes with a scale problem of having computers available all at the same time.

“What I imagine will happen is that we’ll have a mix of paper and digital around for a long time while we work out these things.”

But there are other benefits. The huge number of GCSE English and maths re-sits means some colleges “have to close from a teaching and learning perspective” while the tests are taking place. More students also need access arrangements, such as different coloured paper.

“It’s not just the exam fees. There are lots of other things associated with doing an exam. Just printing out all those coloured papers – it all adds up.

“So that’s where digital could have potential, not just giving a student a better assessment experience, but reducing some of the cost and administrative burden.”

Vocational qualification warning

Raised in Bromley, south-east London, McGinley attended a state primary and then St Dunstan’s College in Catford. Descended from a farming community in Ireland, he described the “breezy old Victorian building” as “so alien”.

He studied English and history at Salford University, then taught English in Berlin before returning to work at Oxford University Press and spent 18 years at Pearson. He joined Cambridge in 2019.

Cambridge OCR remains a small player in England’s GCSE market. For three years it has held a market share of 6.7 per cent for the key stage 4 qualifications.

Welsh board Eduqas recently announced it had overtaken OCR as the third of four exam boards for the qualifications in England, with 7.1 per cent of the market.

But its share in some qualifications is much larger. It retains just over 20 per cent of the A-level market in England, third to Edexcel’s 28 per cent and AQA’s 46 per cent.

Cambridge OCR’s international arm is also much larger than its English operations, and the board has “really grown” in vocational qualifications.

McGinley thinks the focus of the last and current government on ensuring “confidence” in



‘We’ll have a mix of paper and digital around for a long time’

vocational qualifications” is “absolutely right, we haven’t shied away from that”.

But “the trick is not to lose the essence of what a vocational qualification is doing. It’s doing something different”.

OCR has benefited from a “growth in that mixed curriculum” in sixth form.

“Making those combinations – maths A-level, physics A-level plus an engineering qualification that’s vocational. That gives you all the academic underpinning you need, but also those skills around teamwork and design and things you might need for engineering.”

Why are teenagers more interested in vocational qualifications? McGinley thinks “kids are more savvy, certainly than I was. I just wanted to do something I enjoyed.

“And I think they have a real view. I’ve got two lads of my own. One is doing film production.

“He wants to be practical, whether it’s script writing or editing or doing cinematography, because that’s the industry he wants to be in.”

Technology has “really opened up industries to kids in a way that wasn’t the case for me when I was at school. They can see these things in action. They’ve got opportunities to make money themselves.”

‘You start to create perverse incentives’

With the final report of the government’s curriculum and assessment review imminent, McGinley is “mindful” of the “capacity that’s in the system to change”.

But “at the same time, there are parts that do need change”. For example, the “wash back” on the rest of the curriculum by the size of GCSE maths and science qualifications.

He is supportive of plans, reported by Schools Week, for reading checks during key stage 3. He would also support a check on numeracy.

“We don’t have a picture nationally about what’s really going on that you can rely on. That’s... the value of a standardised assessment.”

But he acknowledges “concerns about the implementation”, arguing it should not be a “performance measure”.

“This touches on some of the challenges with the exam system as well, the degree to which our system is high stakes. You start to create some perverse incentives.

“For an assessment to work as well as it can, I think we would like to see some heat taken out of that environment for a school or college, so they can focus on teaching.”

NEWS: COVID

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Sweary rants, regrets and rejections – this week at the Covid inquiry

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

The permanent secretary at the Department for Education was “confident” that her team would have been able to deliver mass testing in schools to fend off a second round of closures in January 2021, the Covid inquiry heard on Wednesday.

Her claim came after education secretary Sir Gavin Williamson texted the prime minister to say he had been “fucked over” by decisions about school closures and had his “legs cut from under me” by the appointment of catch-up tsar Sir Kevan Collins.

Here’s what we learned at the Covid inquiry this week ...

‘We would have executed testing plan’

In her evidence, Acland-Hood described how plans for Covid testing sites for schools in the run-up to January 2021 emerged.

On December 10, 2020, the DfE and Department of Health and Social Care agreed that they would roll out a test site in every school, which would only be required for pupils and teachers who had recently tested positive.

But the DHSC wanted to get all secondary school pupils tested twice in their first week back, and then once a week after that.

Acland-Hood said, while she was “appropriately confident that we could deliver” the original plans, the new requirements would “be a huge extension” of those plans.

“We were asking something that I think felt deeply unreasonable to schools,” she explained, “but we said we can do this much bigger ask and, if that’s what it takes to keep schools open, we’ll do it.”

By January 4, 2021, Acland-Hood said lateral flow tests had been delivered to 97.2 per cent of schools across England. But the decision to close them was then taken by Downing Street.



Gavin Williamson

Acland-Hood said: “We were asked to do some very challenging things that changed rapidly, and people rose to that challenge absolutely magnificently.

“I feel really secure in my judgment that, had that remained the plan, we would have executed it, and I think we could have executed it really well.”

Williamson told the inquiry this week he was also confident that a national testing programme in schools would have meant they could have stayed open in January.

However, the department was heavily criticised for its roll-out of other key Covid interventions, such as free school meal vouchers, the national tutoring programme and laptops for pupils.

‘Odd’ that DfE wasn’t in the room

The permanent secretary and Williamson were also frustrated about not being involved in key decisions.

Although Acland-Hood told the inquiry the DfE “did have a good voice”, there were “a small number of extremely high-profile decisions that directly affected children where it was odd that

the department was not in the room when they were taken”, she said.

She confirmed this comment was made about the closure of schools in both March 2020 and January 2021.

Acland-Hood also reflected on how prepared the department was for rapid responses to the pandemic.

“The starting assumption was that the key people to have in the room were the owners of the presenting risk, in other words the Department of Health, because of the health risk... The DfE doesn’t hold many causes of risk. We have some, but mainly we are a department that holds really big society-wide downstream impacts of those risks.”

Two big disagreements...

Williamson said he was frustrated that decision-making had become “increasingly centralised” over the course of the pandemic, and he felt he “needed permission to basically act”.

Williamson disagreed with Boris Johnson’s message to families that schools could have a phased reopening in the summer of 2020.

He accused Johnson of giving families “false

Continued on next page

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hope" over plans to reopen schools when the prime minister was not willing to lift social distancing rules.

This meant there was "no physical way that you could ask schools to do it without basically breaking the law", Williamson told the inquiry.

The second disagreement came in January 2021, when Downing Street decided to close schools again, the inquiry heard.

"It was done as much for messaging and it was trying to influence and change behaviour," Williamson explained.

"They chose to prioritise different things, which is ultimately a choice a PM has to make. I think [Johnson] chose the NHS over children. Obviously, as secretary of state ultimately for children in many ways – in all ways – you want to be the one who's fighting the corner for children, and ultimately the decision was disappointing."

'Completely fucked over'

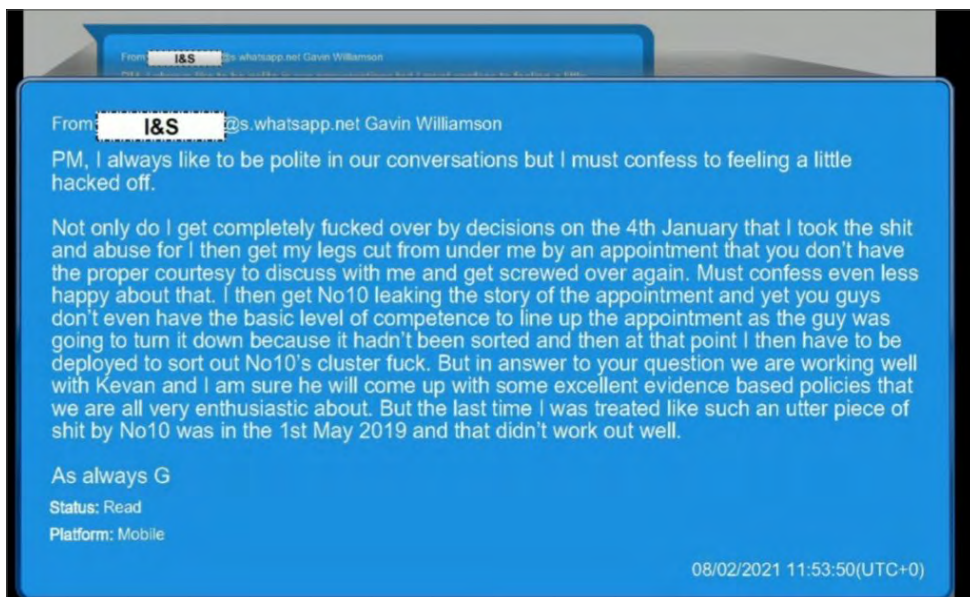
The inquiry was shown a message which Williamson sent to Johnson on February 8, 2021.

He claimed Johnson did not "have the proper courtesy to discuss" the appointment of Collins as education recovery tsar.

"PM, I always like to be polite in our conversations but I must confess to feeling a little hacked off.

"Not only do I get completely fucked over by decisions on the 4th January that I took the shit and abuse for, I then get my legs cut from under me by an appointment that you don't have the proper courtesy to discuss with me and get screwed over again.

"I then get No10 leaking the story of the



appointment and yet you guys don't even have the basic level of competence to line up the appointment... at that point I then have to be deployed to sort out No10's clusterfuck."

In a tone change, he added that the DfE was "working well with Kevan and I am sure he will come up with some excellent evidence-based policies that we are all very enthusiastic about".

Collins has since been appointed by Labour as the DfE's lead non-executive director.

'Many mistakes' made

Williamson told the inquiry there were "failures" over the government's lack of pre-planning before the pandemic.

School closures were first discussed at a SAGE meeting on February 4, 2020, but all preparation was for schools to remain open, Williamson said.

"There were lots of actions that were taking place that we thought were right, but as we look back on it now, we should have had better actions in place. I readily accept that there were many mistakes pre-pandemic," he said.

Williamson argued that plans for how to deal with a pandemic should have been drawn up as early as 2013.

The former education secretary was being "steered" by Downing Street to develop plans to keep schools open, but was given one night to develop a plan to close schools on March 17.

"We were probably overly focused on the mission to keep schools open because that was

the political steer we were getting... but we were trying to do everything within that to actually take the steps that were going to be required in an evolving and different situation.

"I do accept that it wasn't being done in the best way."

He also said that, if the government had consulted with stakeholders to draw up plans for closing schools, it "actually would have become a self-fulfilling prophecy".

Exam results model 'quite clearly wrong'

Williamson also admitted the model to award GCSE and A-level grades in 2020 was "quite clearly wrong".

It involved using an algorithm to modify teacher-awarded grades to avoid exam inflation, but resulted in many pupils' results being lowered.

Last week, the inquiry heard from Sir Jon Coles, CEO of United Learning academy trust, who met Williamson to discuss his concerns over the grade model plan.

Coles said Williamson "appeared to recognise what I was saying was correct", but it was "too late to do anything about it".

Williamson said he had "no recollection" of saying that, but admitted to faults in the system.

"The model was quite clearly wrong. We felt at the time, and when we consistently met with Ofqual for reassurances on the issue of fairness, that it was the correct model to be pursuing.

"There wasn't a realisation in terms of the individual impact on students."

He blamed "too much of a collective group-think" over the policy.

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End of PFI contracts 'could cost schools £4bn'

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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EXCLUSIVE

Schools, trusts and councils could face billions of pounds in unplanned maintenance costs as their private finance initiative (PFI) contracts come to an end, analysis has revealed.

Government data shows there are 219 active PFI contracts in education in the UK, more than any other sector. The majority – 170 – relate to schools in England.

PFI deals have been used to fund new school projects since the late 1990s. They involve private companies building and maintaining sites in exchange for mortgage-style payments, normally over 25-year contracts – which rise beyond inflation – before handing them over to taxpayers.

During a panel discussion at the Education Estates conference in Manchester this week, Dave Hallam, senior director at buildings consultancy Arcadis, said the “scale is huge and the stakes are very high”.

According to the firm’s analysis, the capital value of the UK’s active education PFI contracts, which all expire in the next 17 years, stands at £12 billion.

But Arcadis said its own work had found “condition disputes alone can amount to as much as 34 per cent of the original capital value at construction”.

“If you put that into perspective from the schools portfolio, we talked about £12 billion



capital value,” said Hallam.

“So, a third of that in terms of backlog and unplanned condition liability, you’re talking about £4 billion potentially landing into the books of schools and academies.”

He added that “the scale is huge, and the stakes are very high, and particularly for those with smaller authorities and trusts with lean teams and business as usual responsibilities. It can be a daunting challenge.”

Schools Week recently revealed how vital construction work on schools involved in England’s biggest PFI deal could be left incomplete, despite a council pumping in £3.5 million of its own money to fill a funding shortfall.

Local authority chiefs in Stoke stumped up the extra funding as they signed off on an extension for the work to be completed by a PFI company, just months before its contract was due to end.

Nigel Herbert, head of practice for asset optimisation at Arcadis, said organisations were being caught out by leaving preparation for the end of their deals “until the 11th hour”.

“People are leaving it until, in some instances, jobs that we’ve got involved in, a year before hand back. And that just is too late.”

He also warned that the public sector has become “deskilled” in PFI over the past 25 or 30 years, and organisations suddenly face a “massive task to actually look at getting their hand-back dealt with”.

Nick Iloff, from the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, which sits within the Treasury, said “expiry planning can never start soon enough”.

But his organisation saw bodies such as schools with “two types of bad relationship” with PFI providers – “ones where the relationship is too good, perversely, and ones where the relationship is very bad”.

The first is where they have “fallen out” over things like performance failure. But the “other kind of bad relationship, I would say, is the one which is too cozy.”

“I have been to a number of schools where I have said, ‘well, what performance deductions have you made over the last five to 10 years?’ They go, ‘well, minimal or none, but by the way, we have an absolutely fantastic relationship with the... provider’.

“You will probably find your relationship isn’t as good as you think it is.”

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

School capacity check popularity proves challenging

A project to assess the capacity of England’s secondary and special schools saw such high take-up it became a “challenge” for assessors.

And the government hopes to develop guidance and training so that schools can carry out their own assessments in the future.

Officials from the Department for Education (DfE) and Valuation Office Agency told the Education Estates conference this week that the net capacity assessment (NCA) project had reached 97.4 per cent of secondary and special schools in England.

Of those that did not take part in the optional scheme, most had ongoing building work. Only three refused to take part for other reasons, officials said.



Gareth Palmer, NCA project director at the Valuation Office Agency, said the “engagement was a bit of a challenge because we hadn’t anticipated getting those numbers”.

“We ended up doing 300-odd schools more than we had ever bargained for,” he added.

He said the engagement rate was “a real achievement and far exceeded our

expectations at the beginning of the project.

“In all, we have spent 78,000 hours on site in schools, and we have measured over 36 million square meters of space across 4,159 schools.”

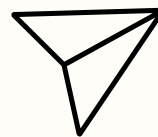
Simon Lindsay, stakeholder manager at the DfE, pointed out that “this was not a mandatory programme. Schools did not have to take part.”

Secondary and special schools have now started to be sent their reports, officials said, as the project moves into the primary phase.

Lindsay said the programme was a “one-off”, but they may provide more guidance and training so schools or responsible bodies themselves can carry out assessments.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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



Letter of the week

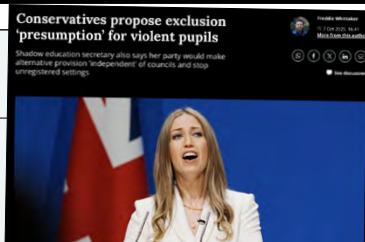


Laura Trott's recent announcement, ([Conservatives propose exclusion 'presumption' for violent pupils](#), October 7) raises serious questions that deserve careful reflection. No one disputes the need to protect staff and pupils from serious harm, nor the duty to uphold safe learning environments.

But a rigid "one-strike" approach risks eroding professional judgment and disproportionately affects the most vulnerable learners – particularly those with unmet special educational needs, trauma histories or mental health challenges.

Permanent exclusion should remain a last resort, not a predetermined outcome. Each case must be assessed in context, with headteachers trusted to weigh intent, age, and circumstance. A presumption of exclusion, however well-intentioned, risks replacing professional discernment with political symbolism.

The AP sector is already stretched, too. Without significant investment and appropriate



oversight, increasing exclusions would overwhelm capacity and leave excluded pupils further marginalised, without any provision and at serious risk of harm.

Any government that wishes to improve safety and behaviour sustainably must match accountability with support – strengthening early intervention, pastoral systems and inclusive practice.

Schools need resources to enable de-escalation of issues before crisis, not just mechanisms to exclude after harm.

A principled behaviour approach would balance protection with compassion. But policy that simplifies complex realities into rigid rules risks deepening exclusion, not resolving it.

Rob Gasson, CEO, Wave Trust

Why do politicians insist on coming up with headline grabbing 'policies' which have clearly not been thought through?

Every case of poor behaviour choices has a nuance which schools can understand and try to work with.

I had a case of a primary-aged child with a knife in school which, when investigated, had significant nuance. It meant that suspension and input from the police and others was more important and more impactful for the pupil and his classmates than simply kicking him out.

We also know that the AP system and PRUs are already overloaded and unable to cope.

If this policy is to become reality, there needs to be many millions invested now to create capacity.

Yes, some councils apply pressure to avoid pupil exclusions as they know that the system is crumbling already. But headteachers are independent. They can and do make the decisions that are right for the individual and their community.

Those of us working in schools day in, day out know this is far more complex than grabbing headlines.

Mark Mackley, headteacher, Lancashire

How to make the most of Ofsted's new nominee role

Schools can't afford to allow this new feature of Ofsted's framework to go unnoticed. It can transform the inspection experience.



There are valid concerns about the impact on small schools of Ofsted's new nominee role, ([How to make the most of Ofsted's new nominee role](#), October 10).

But as a former HMI initially in the post-16 division, I found the nominee roll to be an excellent addition to the inspection process – even in smaller colleges.

I remember working with a nominee in a couple of schools who sat in on team meetings and, again, found this invaluable as this person was usually the deputy principal, so it gave me good insights into how well distributive leadership worked in the school. It also brought different leadership perspectives, which I believe are very important to capture around the leadership judgments – the evidence based referenced the 'joined up' nature of leadership, the school culture and its values. All this was key evidence.

Meena Wood,
former HMI and leadership consultant

I love the concept of embedding youth work principles, ([Five do-now strategies to ease the Year 7 dip](#), October 14).

I am a big believer that sometimes we need to think more like life-coaches than teachers to deliver certain messages, especially when it comes to raising aspiration, tackling attendance and improving engagement.

It often feels strange to start to think like this – but as soon as we learn to shift our mindset, I have found it is very freeing and highly effective.

Seth Butcher, founder of attendance support company Future Decided



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Profile

JOHN DICKENS | @JOHNDICKENSSW



'I dream the curriculum every night': leading education's toughest brief

After 14 months heading the government's curriculum review, Becky Francis reflects on control, compromise – and finding the right balance between 'firebrand' and 'technocrat'

It's been more than 14 months since Becky Francis was appointed chair of the government's curriculum review.

As we sit down for a profile interview – in a frosted-panel Department for Education meeting room – it's still not clear exactly when the final report will land (early November is the best current guess, but it's largely out of Francis' control).

The review is bound up in the government's autumn-term policy blitz alongside a white paper, SEND reforms and new Ofsted inspections.

Government policymaking can be incoherent at the quietest of times – so what's it like being a fly on the wall now?

'I'm a bit of a control freak'

"I like leadership, partly because I find it creative,

but partly because, like a lot of leaders, I'm a bit of a control freak," Francis says.

"So being based in the department, and with all of the other things that are going on, I find that quite difficult.

"The way that events and ideas can intervene with things, or different ebbs and flows of capacity in the department, or given other agendas: all of this has been, sort of, interesting.

"Obviously we are independent, and that independence is precious and real, but we also have to work collaboratively with government if we want our findings to land."

Francis can't talk about what's in the final report. But I want to know what she has learnt from taking on such a mammoth role. First, why did she take it on?

"I felt very privileged to be invited to do this job.

It feels a really significant responsibility. It's an opportunity for the sector, and it's an opportunity to do good things and make improvements."

Francis attributes this outlook on life – to make a positive difference – to her parents, who were Quakers. "You're not just in the world, you're acting on it as well," she says of their values. "However naïve, I have a view that we ought to be trying to give service and make change for the better."

But she was also motivated by "the significant damage that could be done" if the "wrong person was appointed".

"Things have, over time, improved in our system. It's really important to capitalize on that and, given the capacity issues in the system, not to mend things that don't need fixing. Instead, [we need] to go harder on where the problems are."

Profile: Becky Francis

The view relates back to her schooling. Francis remembers her secondary, Ralph Allen School which was just outside Bath and had a free bus service for pupils in the surrounding villages, as “not a safe place. I saw terrible bullying, including of people that I cared about. It had falling rolls and a sense of crisis”.

She says the school’s general “patchiness” of provision has “characterised the English education system for most of my career”.

But, overall, “the patchiness is improving,” she adds. “Things are better than they were.”

Francis believes a fundamental plank of that improvement is the national curriculum, which she points out was introduced the year after she finished O-levels.

“It’s been transformational. It ensured the basics for everybody. Before it we had huge disparities, for example according to gender, with girls not pursuing maths or science.”

Educational inequality has been a “shaping motivation” for Francis ever since. “One of the main takeaways from my experience of schooling was while I managed to go to tech college and then university: many of my friends didn’t.

“In my view, that came down to cultural capital and family background, rather than intelligence or ability.”

Curriculum dreams

Her mission matches with Labour’s – which is to break down barriers to education.

But where to start with the curriculum – easily one of education’s most contested areas.

The curriculum review alone got more than 7,000 responses from its call for evidence, more than Ofsted’s report card plans consultation.

Francis points to the review’s specific terms of reference, which made clear any changes would be “evolution, not revolution”.

“They have proven really important guardrails for the work. I think we did good expectation management, [for instance] around being aware of trade-offs. We don’t want to be triggering unintended consequences.

“Being evidence led, we also really have tried to be guided by the data – that’s super important because it’s a world of myths, assumptions, long-standing campaign positions, etc. I think, genuinely, people are expecting incremental



Francis visiting a school during her national curriculum roadshow

‘Like a lot of leaders, I’m a bit of a control freak’

improvement, rather than us throwing everything up in the air.”

But how does she cope with expectations from people who want all those things, and more?

“I feel a real responsibility to get it right,” Francis adds. But “weighed on top of that is the knowledge that, not only are you never going to please all the people all the time – but in a wide spectrum – chances are there’s going to be a hell of a lot of people that you aren’t going to please on one side or another.

“I’m relatively resilient, and not somebody that kind of takes problems to bed generally. But if you ask me, ‘do I dream the curriculum every night?’ Yes, I do.”

‘Worst part of media’

Her appointment was mostly welcomed in the education sector, but less so in some arenas.

One right-leaning newspaper called Francis a “feminist ex-punk”. Another piece quoted a Conservative party source saying she “seems more concerned about gender equality than exam results”.

Francis wrote a book on gender dynamics in the classroom during her first job, studying nurse education at the University of Greenwich. She

says social justice, alongside research, are her key passions. And she’s put both into practice ever since.

In 2016, Francis became the first woman director of University College London’s prestigious Institute for Education in its 114-year-history. She said it was a “privilege” to be “part of an absolute research and teaching powerhouse”.

Then in 2020, shortly before Covid hit, she was headhunted to become chief executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, an organisation funded by the Conservative government to become the sector’s trusted broker of evidence on what works.

Her mandate was to “focus on impact and support for the system” – ensuring the body didn’t just do research, but help schools implement its findings, too.

During her time (she’s currently on secondment to the DfE for her curriculum role), the organisation has more than doubled in size.

Francis points to her EEF work when talking about some of the “infuriating” media coverage.

She adds some pieces were a “deliberate attempt to spin ... a real worked effort to undermine the government’s choice for political reasons rather than looking at my record and

Profile: Becky Francis



role at the time
– leading the
government-
funded
evidence
resource for
the system,
set up by Michael Gove, no less.”

Under Francis, the EEF also ran the first year of the Tory government’s flagship National Tutoring Programme (NTP). The scheme was heavily criticised across the chaotic Covid years, but it delivered more than six million tutoring courses.

Does she regret the EEF’s brief foray from arbiter of interventions to deliverer?

“It was a very political and very angry time between people on the ground in the schools, their representatives, and the government, and everybody in crisis.

“I feel that the National Tutoring Programme got caught up a little bit in that, because in terms of effective delivery of a programme at speed, it is one of the fastest in history. So I certainly have no regrets.”

She also says it opened government eyes to its ability to deliver interventions at scale, and still have impact.

Francis points to the more recent example of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) scheme, a government-funded catch-up programme available to schools with reception pupils who need extra support with their speech and language. (She adds NELI is the closest an intervention has got to being an ‘education silver bullet’.)

And perhaps that tutoring criticism also helped



‘Chances are you aren’t going to please a hell of a lot of people’

with the increased scrutiny of her current role.

Francis jokes about a more recent comment in the media (this time the left-leaning newspaper The Observer) that she was a “timid technocrat”.

“It’s not great to have names and labels attributed to you, but they’ve balanced out. On the one hand I’m a left-wing firebrand – but now I’m a timid technocrat. Hopefully I’ll be somewhere in the middle.”

Financial education surprise

Francis’s interim review did signal some potentially big changes, though. The EBacc accountability measure is under review, the number of GCSE exams could be cut and there is also lots of work going into lightening the primary curriculum load.

Schools Week also revealed last month that the government plans to introduce a year 8 reading test.

Another change could be a strengthening of financial education. Francis says “every focus group or stakeholder meeting that I’ve had with young people – they have volunteered without prompting that they want more financial education”.

She said it has been the most surprising finding from her work. “I would never have predicted that at the beginning. I might have been a bit sceptical about the value or importance.

“But the level of appetite for more financial literacy and education from young people themselves and their parents, let alone the many kinds of stakeholder advocates, has been a real takeaway.”

Her nationwide curriculum roadshow tour – hearing from and speaking to thousands of school staff and pupils – is the element she’s enjoyed most.

“I just really enjoy talking to people about education. It is absolutely fascinating. One of the characteristics for me of the review – and the nature of the review – is the endless dilemmas and trade-offs.

“There’s the amazing upside in the inspiring work and opportunities for improvement. The frustrating side is that there absolutely is no perfect, one solution.”

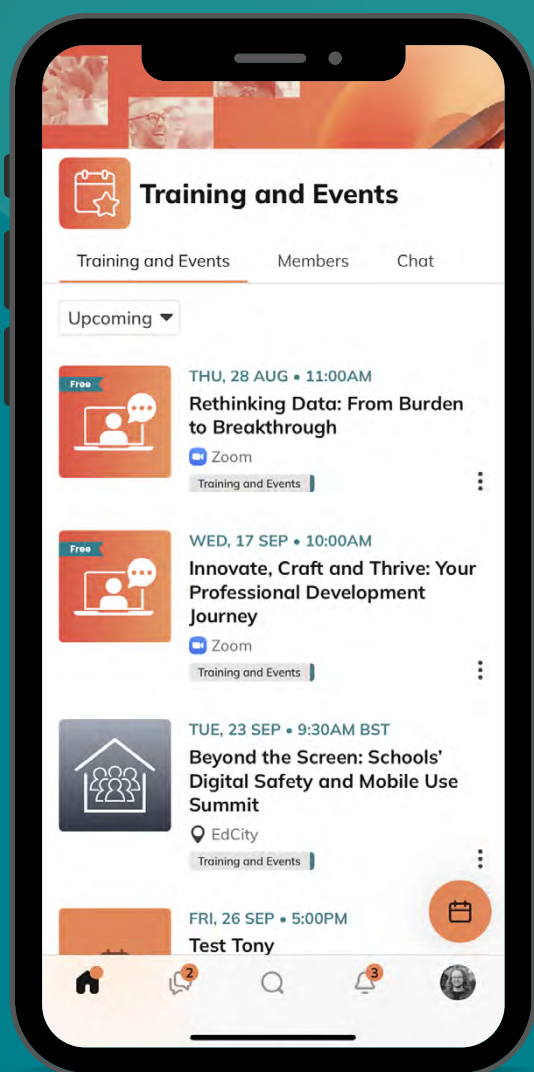
Francis knows she can’t please everyone. But if her review can bring a bit more coherence – and a little less patchiness – she might just be able to have her old dreams back, too.



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DAVID CLAYTON

CEO, Endeavour Learning Trust

Leadership lessons from Southport's darkest days

In the wake of unimaginable loss, trust leader David Clayton shares how compassion, presence and belonging came to define what leadership really means

Nothing can prepare you for the moment your community is shaken by tragedy.

I've seen how the strength of a school community lies in its people and the way they come together when everything else feels uncertain.

I've learned that leadership, in those moments, isn't about having all the answers. It's about presence. It's about bringing people together, creating space to listen, and holding steady when others need it most.

Sometimes, simply showing up, again and again, is the most powerful act of all.

When the terrorist attack

been filled with sunshine, fun and laughter, but everything changed in an instant.

The weight of that day was almost unbearable for everyone after learning that two of our pupils, Alice Aguiar and Bebe King, had lost their lives, and others had been injured.

Those first few hours were filled with confusion and fear. News travelled fast, but facts were slow to emerge. It was clear early on that there would be no formal playbook to follow.

So, together with the school leadership and our central team, we began to build our own response based on compassion, communication and belonging.

In the days that followed, unrest and fear spread across the streets, deepening the sense of shock that had already gripped our community.

Families, staff and children were left reeling. Our role, as a trust, was

“ Sometimes, simply showing up is the most powerful act of all ”

happened in Southport last July, pupils from one of our schools, Churchtown Primary, were among those affected.

It was the start of the summer holidays, a time that should have

simple but vital: to be there for them in whatever way they needed.

Looking back, there are lessons I'll carry with me for the rest of my career.

The first is about communication.



The Prince and Princess of Wales open the memorial playground



Opinion

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In the immediate aftermath, information was limited, and people were desperate for reassurance. What mattered most wasn't having all the answers, but being visible, honest and calm.

We worked hard to keep families, staff and the wider community updated, sometimes just to say, "we don't know yet, but we're here".

Those moments of steady contact made a difference. People need to feel that someone is holding the line when everything else feels chaotic.

The second lesson is about belonging. In those first few days, our team decided that Churchtown would stay open as a place for people to come together. It became a hub of togetherness.

Two days after the attack, children, parents, staff and the wider community walked through the gates not for lessons, but for connection. Children hugged, parents cried, and staff listened.

No one tried to fill the silence; it was enough simply to be there. We took our lead from them.

From that point on, the school opened weekly through the summer holidays, with counsellors and psychologists available to support anyone who needed it. Churchtown became an anchor for the community.

As September approached, we focused on helping everyone return to some kind of normality.

Pupils met their new teachers in small groups for play and conversation, while parents were invited into school too. We knew how hard that first moment of separation would be. The compassion shown in those days between parents, staff and children was extraordinary. It showed what genuine community looks like.

Over time, attention turned to how we could remember the two pupils we lost, Alice and Bebe, in a way that



“Watching the children laugh, dance and play on the new outdoor stage – a space designed for joy – was one of the most moving moments of my life

reflected their light and joy.

Working with their families and the wider community, the idea of a memorial playground began to take shape. The fundraising effort was led by headteacher Jinnie Payne, joined by Alice's dad Sergio and supported by one of our trust directors who all ran the London Marathon together.

What began as a modest target grew into something remarkable: more than £400,000 raised to build a playground and library, with surplus

funds donated to local charities.

This September, the playground was officially opened by the Prince and Princess of Wales. Watching the children laugh, dance and play on the new outdoor stage – a space designed for joy – was one of the most moving moments of my life.

It stands as a symbol of hope, and a reminder that even in the darkest moments, light can return.

If there's a final lesson I've learned, it's that healing takes time and care



can't be rushed. Trauma affects people in different ways. Our job as leaders is to keep showing up, to keep listening, and to hold the space long after the headlines fade.

What happened in Southport will never be forgotten. But neither will the compassion that followed – from staff who gave everything to their community, from families who supported one another through grief, and from children who somehow found the courage to laugh again.

This year has reminded me that the heart of education isn't policy or performance. It's people. It's the quiet strength that binds a community together when the unthinkable happens and the hope that helps it heal.

Opinion

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MARY
MYATT

Author and education consultant

How Labour can turn The Wasted Years into The Ambitious Years

Key stage 3 provision has improved but is too often used as a rehearsal for GCSEs, rather than being secondary's 'intellectual powerhouse', says Mary Myatt

It's 10 years since Ofsted published its landmark report, *Key Stage 3: The Wasted Years?* The findings were stark. While there were examples of strong leadership and thoughtful provision, these were the exception. Across much of the system, key stage 3 was found to be dull, under-resourced and overshadowed by the exam years.

A decade later, has much changed?

Progress made, but patchy

There has undoubtedly been improvement. The curriculum conversation is stronger, and more schools are giving this phase greater thought and attention. But provision is still inconsistent. Too often, KS3 is treated as a rehearsal for GCSEs rather than a stage with its own intellectual purpose.

In its 2023 *Rich encounters with the past: history subject report*, Ofsted noted that "in the best schools, pupils developed rich and connected knowledge of the past. In others, pupils' knowledge was disconnected or superficial". Geography, too, has seen advances, but inspectors found that many schools still overlooked the key

concepts that give the subject coherence.

The picture, then, is one of partial progress. KS3 remains ripe for renewal.

Listening to pupils

One of the clearest signals comes from pupils themselves. Many report being taught material they had already covered in primary school. Of course, revisiting prior learning can be valuable for consolidation; but re-teaching it as though it were new is not.

Secondary colleagues can easily check for overlap by revisiting the 'importance statements' and 'programmes of study' in the primary national curriculum. A little coordination can prevent a lot of repetition.

Raising expectations

Pupils also tell us that the work can feel too easy. The gap between what pupils achieve at the end of KS2 and what they encounter at KS3 remains wide. Secondary teachers are often surprised by the sophistication of year 6 work. When they see it, the reflection that follows is natural: *if they can do this in primary, what more could we offer them in secondary?*

Addressing this isn't about adding workload. It's about asking different questions about content, challenge and coherence.



“ The transformation at KS3 has not yet materialised

Evidence of what's possible

Research from the University of Sussex highlights the impact of giving students access to more challenging material, including high-quality texts. Schools adopting this approach have reported two striking outcomes: first, that students, including those with lower starting points, can cope; and second, that engagement rises.

Some schools are now extending this model beyond English, using high-quality source material in a range of subjects. Pupils experience the "big ideas" and disciplinary thinking that underpin later study. Those who continue the subject to GCSE benefit from firm foundations; those who do not still leave KS3 with meaningful and memorable encounters with the discipline.

Professional collaboration

Schools that are serious about strengthening KS3 are finding practical ways to sustain momentum. Many are setting up termly subject meetings, either in

person or online, to share examples of pupils' work, moderate standards and exchange resources. These sessions are proving a simple but powerful way to build shared expertise and raise expectations.

A call to re-imagine KS3

Despite a sharper focus on curriculum quality under the current inspection framework, the transformation at KS3 has not yet materialised. In too many schools, the phase still contracts into two years as GCSE content encroaches into year 9. This denies pupils their entitlement to a full three-year broad and balanced curriculum.

If we are serious about social justice and intellectual ambition, this must change. KS3 should be the intellectual powerhouse of the secondary school. The phase where pupils encounter demanding ideas, develop disciplinary habits of mind, and build the secure knowledge that makes later learning possible.

The foundations laid here are not just for GCSEs, but for life.

Opinion

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PROF HAILI HUGHES

Director of professional development, All Saints MAT

AI can be part of the solution to schools' mentor capacity crisis

One school now uses AI coaching to provide personalised feedback – without taking up mentors' limited time. Professor Haili Hughes reveals whether others should follow suit

With PGCE placements now in full swing and early career teachers getting to grips with their own classes – mentors up and down the country are ready to support them.

Research consistently tells us mentors play an important role in helping schools support and develop new teachers.

Yet, a Teaching Commission report sounded the alarm on a challenge that goes beyond curriculum reform or accountability: England's schools are facing a crisis in mentor capacity.

The commission found many schools are 'stretched to breaking point' and unable to release experienced staff from timetables to provide the sustained, one-to-one support that new teachers require.

In England, the early career framework has rightly raised expectations for the quality of mentoring. But as an evaluation by the University of Gloucestershire recently found, the expansion of the early career framework has intensified workload pressures for mentors, with many juggling their teaching responsibilities alongside training and observation requirements.

The Education Policy Institute has also warned that without additional funding and staffing, "mentoring risks becoming tokenistic, with mentors too overstretched to provide meaningful feedback".

Similar findings from the Sutton Trust underline that structured mentoring's success depends on capacity, and capacity is exactly what schools lack.

Could AI coaching fill the gap?

If human mentors are in short supply, could artificial intelligence (AI) help plug the gap?

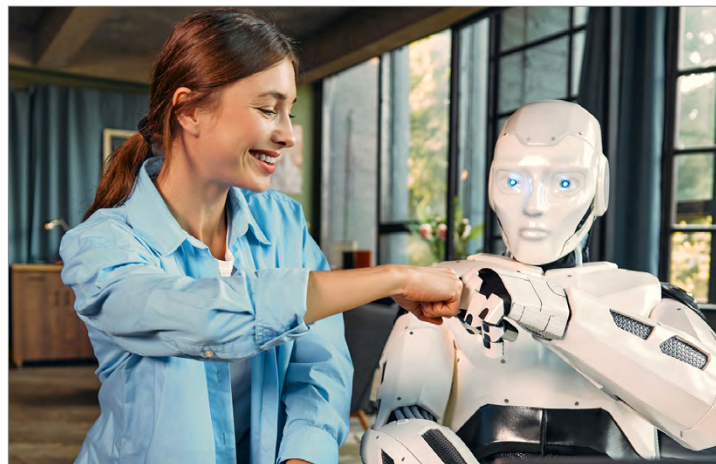
A promising avenue for using AI for one part of a mentor's role – improving teaching – is AI-powered coaching tools.

At Church Hill Primary, part of the Central Region Schools Trust, colleagues have experimented with an AI coaching model as a way of providing regular, personalised feedback – without relying on senior leaders' limited time.

Teachers essentially record their lessons, feed the transcript into an AI coach and receive immediate, private insights that focus on strengths and areas for growth.

This model has two advantages. It can provide every teacher with access to feedback every week, something impossible with human-only systems given staffing constraints.

And teachers report feeling less judged and more willing to engage



“ AI could handle the scalable, low-stakes feedback loop

with feedback when it comes from a neutral tool, rather than a line manager.

At Church Hill, nearly all staff have engaged enthusiastically with AI coaching – voluntarily recording multiple lessons per week and reporting increased confidence in their teaching.

Research from the Chartered College of Teaching notes that technologies which 'democratise access to coaching' could play a role in teacher retention, especially if they help new teachers feel less isolated.

AI mentoring and coaching could address equity concerns, providing consistency across schools where human mentoring capacity is uneven.

The drawbacks: What AI can't do

But while the promise of AI is real, so too are its limitations. Mentoring is not just about pointing out patterns or areas for improvement. It is also about human connection and the important relational trust built over time.

The Teaching Commission report stresses that mentoring is as much about emotional support as it is about instructional guidance.

This is something that AI, at least for now, cannot replicate.

Towards a balanced model?

While AI may not be the full solution to the mentor capacity crisis, it can certainly be part of it. A balanced model could involve AI handling the scalable, low-stakes feedback loop, enabling teachers to reflect regularly and track progress.

Human mentors, freed from some of the burden, could then focus on the relational and developmental aspects of support that technology cannot provide.

Dismissing the potential of AI would be a mistake.

Without bold solutions, the ECF risks collapsing under its own weight – leaving early career teachers unsupported and schools unable to stem attrition.

The challenge for policymakers and school leaders is to resist both extremes: neither imagining AI as a silver bullet, nor dismissing it as irrelevant.

Opportunity lies in seeing AI as one tool among many, helping schools to see the wood for the trees and ensuring every teacher receives the support they deserve.

Opinion

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JASMINE LANE
English teacher
at a London state school

I’ve given my all to British education – now I’m told I may not belong here

US-born teacher Jasmine Lane reflects on what new immigration rules and rhetoric mean for the educators Britain can least afford to lose

Over the last year, the work I’ve done as head of literacy and English as an Additional Language at a London secondary school has secured improvement in the reading age attainment of every year group. I’ve helped deliver the best results at GCSE and A-level our school has ever seen. The level of English proficiency among pupils has increased. The overall culture and integration of various groups of children has begun to take shape. I have been so proud to be a part of this change and progress. But one day, whilst browsing, I saw the headline ‘migrants already in UK face longer wait for permanent settlement’. I felt my heart drop into my stomach. I moved to London four years ago from America. I’m less than a year away from eligibility for indefinite leave to remain, but plan to make my life here, and this summer I was looking forward to answering

the year 8 history trivia questions about the Magna Carta, 1066, and Henry VIII’s wives. I have been in England for four years. I have invested in this country. I believe in the future of it, and am literally teaching the children of it. But the thought that I won’t be able to be treated as a citizen is disturbing. As are policies proposed by the Reform UK party that include banning indefinite leave to remain altogether. I’m often asked why I moved to London, and I give a variety of answers: *I wanted a change; I’ve always been a bit bold; I was interested in ResearchEd.* But the truth is I was terrified of stagnation, of having put all the sweat and tears into advancing myself without a single child who I could point to as evidence of the meritocratic nature of the system in which I worked. I left America with three suitcases and a dream. England offered me the opportunity to see an outsized impact for my work. This is the message I tell the children I teach every day: this society isn’t about luck, if you work hard, you will get the same GCSEs as anyone at any other school. My sense of moral duty has



“ Many dedicated teachers like me will now be placed in limbo

improved. My sense of obligation to a civilised society is stronger than before. Very simply, I’m a better person. For the entire time I’ve lived here, I believed that the strength of British identity and pride would withstand anything, that no gale could deter the journey forward. How naive I had been. Something I had been planning on is now suddenly, potentially, out of reach. The uncertainty of what my future would hold is back. Worryingly, I knew that the toxicity of American discourse had finally reached these shores. You may be tempted to say ‘well, you’re clearly contributing to British society, you’ll be fine’. But that is besides the point: the country I came to just four years ago is increasingly becoming one I no longer recognise. There are many dedicated teachers, like me, across the country who will now be placed in limbo.

They may decide that the increased pressures are no longer worth the increasing hostility. Worse, they may be denied the ability to stay and continue their careers. Add to this the uncertainty for teachers who already have indefinite leave. They may well take up an opportunity in more welcoming countries, rather than one which increasingly says ‘you’re not wanted here’. With an ageing population and long-standing recruitment crisis, this is a serious error in judgment. I take pride in knowing that I’m contributing to some of the best readers in the world and that English schools are leading international education discourse. And that is the message I want Labour to be shouting from the rooftops. A message of progress, of hope, and yes, of pride – not a zero-sum game rooted in debating whether someone is British enough.

THE LEGAL LEADER

Expert advice on education and the law



Why a small funding rule update is another leash on academy freedoms

Philip Wood

Principal associate,
Browne Jacobson



Guidance on novel, contentious and repercussive (NCR) transactions point to a requirement to ask the Department for Education first, says Philip Wood

Most financial decision-making is delegated to operational leadership in academy trusts and colleges, but there are certain transactions that require prior approval from the Department for Education.

One of these examples is novel, contentious and repercussive (NCR) transactions, for which best practice guidance from the government was introduced in March and updated in August.

It doesn't appear to have been intended as a major change in approach. NCRs have been in the academy trust handbook for years.

But vagueness over how these provisions would be interpreted meant that schools' understanding of the requirements has changed over time – a freedom they will no longer have.

What's changed?

The NCR guidance reiterates and provides more details on the three categories that require consent. They are:

- **Novel transactions:** Transactions the institution has not previously undertaken or fall outside its typical operations
- **Contentious transactions:** Transactions that might attract criticism from stakeholders, including Parliament, the public or media
- **Repercussive transactions:** Actions that could have broader financial implications for the education sector or set a precedent for other institutions

While the government generally does not appear to have an overarching philosophy across government departments, the secretary of state has mooted more collaboration and a rising regulatory expectation on schools, especially academies, when compared to previous recent governments.

This is notably different to health, where there is talk about "earned autonomy" and league tables.



An example is a recent single central record data breach which affected school staff. Some trusts wanted to pay for fraud protection for their staff, or to replace their passports after details were leaked.

But they are subject to spending restrictions because it hits all the thresholds of the NCR guidance. It's novel, likely to be contentious and affects other trusts.

Key takeaways

While the guidance does not introduce new requirements, it does aim to highlight where the regulatory line is on each element. Associated case studies also require attention. So here are three main takeaways for leaders:

1. Importance of seeking DfE consent

This makes clear without any doubt that the DfE wants you to seek its view as to whether something will fall into one of the above categories – but especially so for novel transactions.

The fact that a neighbouring trust has done something similar does not mean you will be able to do it without consent. There is very much a focus on your school or trust's experience and impact of the proposal.

2. Increased grey areas

Examples given in the guidance indicate things we suspect trusts would not have previously thought as requiring consent, do need consent.

This includes the waiver of a deduction from

wages on a goodwill basis following strike action, in order to avoid further walk-outs and getting staff back to work before the start of a new academic year. The cost of the waiver would be just £10,000, in circumstances where the trust has £3 million reserves.

The examples generally show there is a considerable amount of grey area. And the strong theme is if you're in doubt, seek a view from the DfE.

3. Enhanced auditor role

The guidance also highlights the role of auditors in the process in more detail than before. While the DfE may not be aware you have failed to obtain consent, it may well come out in the year-end audit and the expectation is that trusts will then obtain retrospective consent. As part of this, the DfE will want to know why consent was not sought at the outset.

The DfE has both hard and soft regulatory levers to pull on academies, and this guidance shows how easily the position and interpretation on existing regulatory powers and intervention can change without the need for new legislation.

But under the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, the freedom and flexibility enjoyed by academies is now being tightened further by the government, which wants to establish a more unified education system.

Taken together, it feels like another step by ministers towards reining in the 'freedoms' enjoyed by academy trusts over the past 15 years.

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

FRIDAY:

Flag wars reached parliamentary questions today, when Conservative MP Sir John Hayes asked the Department for Education (DfE) on how many days the Union flag was flown on its sites this year and last.

(Note: Hayes really likes flags – he has called for the Union flag to be flown on all public buildings, including schools)

In response, children's minister Josh MacAlister said the flag "is flown every day at the department headquarters in London" – which is the only department building with a flagpole.

He said this was in accordance with the "Union flag flying guidance for UK government buildings". Something we're sure you'll all be reading over the weekend...

TUESDAY:

Irony alert at the education estates conference in Manchester today, as the DfE's estates director Jonathan Dewsbury's keynote speech was almost drowned out by ... the sound of construction in the conference area behind him.

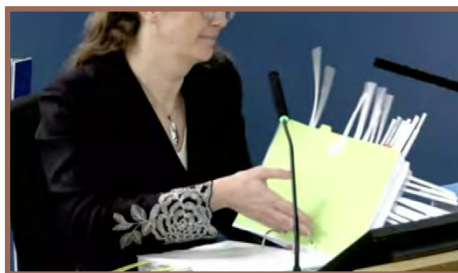
WEDNESDAY:

The stakes were upped in the Labour deputy leader contest when contender Bridget Phillipson did a "this or that: Bridget edition".

She plumped for *Bake Off over Love Island*, a full English over a roast dinner and *Traitors over Strictly Come Dancing*.

Bad news for her colleague, skills minister Jacqui Smith, who competed in *Strictly* in 2020.

Commenting on the Instagram post, Smith quipped: "Very disappointed that Bridget chose *Traitors* over *Strictly* 😞 but she's still got my vote! 😊"



Susan Acland-Hood (above) hit peak civil servant status at the Covid inquiry today. While giving evidence, she pulled out a ginormous folder that had the most phenomenal, colour-coded set of tabs one has ever seen.

It was **so** impressive, in fact, that Covid inquiry chair Baroness Heather Hallett even congratulated Acland-Hood for her thoroughness.

"It's been extremely helpful, and you've obviously put in, not just a great deal of thought, but a great deal of work in preparing for today," Hallett said.

"I'm really grateful to you and all your colleagues who obviously helped – including the poor soul that put all those tabs in your folder."

Acland-Hood replied: "It's a team effort, the tabs."

Former education secretary Gavin Williamson also made his own impression on the inquiry – but for a different reason: his ability to swear.

Appearing the day before Acland-Hood, those attending were left gasping when an expletive-laden text message from Williamson to former prime minister Boris Johnson was displayed on screens. Everyone also got out their phones to take a picture of it.

In the message on February 8 2021, sent after Number 10 had chosen Sir Kevan Collins as its Covid recovery tsar, Williamson wrote: "PM, I always like to be polite in our conversations but I must confess to feeling a little hacked off.

"Not only do I get completely fucked

over by decisions on the 4th January that I took the shit and abuse for [to close schools], I then get my legs cut from under me by an appointment that you don't have the proper courtesy to discuss with me and get screwed over again.

"I then get No10 leaking the story of the appointment and yet you guys don't even have the basic level of competence to line up the appointment ... then at that point I have to be deployed to sort out No10's clusterfuck."

In one of the most fantastic tone changes ever witnessed, Williamson then adds he is "working well with Kevan and I am sure he will come up with some excellent evidence-based policies that we are all very enthusiastic about".

He signs off the message 'As always G'.

We would love to have been a fly on the DfE office walls when this was revealed. Collins has since been appointed by Labour as the department's lead non-executive director!

THURSDAY

The secretary of state's annual speech at the Confederation of School Trusts is normally an important one – where she sets out her vision to trust leaders who have for the past decade led the government's school improvement drive.

With a white paper about to drop in a few weeks, expectations were high for what Bridget Phillipson would announce, or at least give a nod to, from the policy document – which she has said will "lay a path for a national renewal of schools to 2030".

Alas, Phillipson's centrepiece of the speech was a policy everybody already knew about because *Schools Week* told them last month: a mandatory reading test for year 8 pupils!



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Our curriculum blends core subjects with project-based learning, positive psychology, and real-world employability experiences. With unique facilities like a music studio, equine provision, The Bike Hub, and The Cookie Bus, we create opportunities that re-engage students and prepare them for life beyond school.

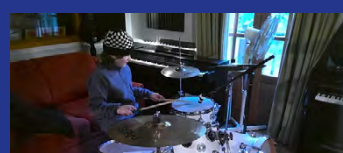
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Director of Impact and Growth

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**

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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.



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INSPIRING TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES

Join the Harris Federation and play your part in shaping a brighter, more inclusive future for our students. Across our academies, we are seeking teachers and leaders who combine subject expertise with a deep belief in every child's potential.

Whether you're a classroom innovator, a creative subject lead, or an experienced SEN professional, you'll find a culture that values collaboration, professional growth, and joy in teaching. You'll

work with passionate colleagues who share your drive to create classrooms full of curiosity, confidence, and opportunity.

We are proud to work in communities where education transforms lives – and where your impact will truly matter.

Be part of something bigger. Join Harris and help every student discover what they're capable of.

SENCO

at Harris Academy Clapham

Location: 33 Clarence Ave,
London SW4 8LD

Contract: Permanent, Full-time

Salary: Leadership Scale L4–L8
(£61,398 – £66,402)

Lead the provision for students with SEND in a nurturing, high-achieving academy. You'll work closely with staff and families to ensure that every child thrives.

TEACHER OF DESIGN TECHNOLOGY

at Harris Academy Orpington

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Inspire creativity and innovation through hands-on learning. Join a dynamic team that equips students with the skills and confidence to design, build, and problem-solve for the future.

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at Harris Academy Chafford Hundred

Location: Mayflower Rd, London, Chafford
Hundred, Grays RM16 6SA

Contract: Permanent, Full-time

Salary: Leadership Scale L5–L10
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Bring the ancient world to life in a modern, high-achieving academy. You'll lead a subject that connects history, philosophy, and language — inspiring students to think deeply and see the world differently.

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