



UNDER THE CAR BONNET

'Ambitious but achievable': curriculum and
assessment review sets reform agenda

But Phillipson overrules Francis to shake-up
progress 8 ...

... and admits more specialists needed for
triple science pledge

RE to make national curriculum – only if
'sector consensus'

School leaders rally to slam
'dumbing down' claims

Full round-up of CAR policies and
government response



SCHOOLS
WEEK

Meet the news team

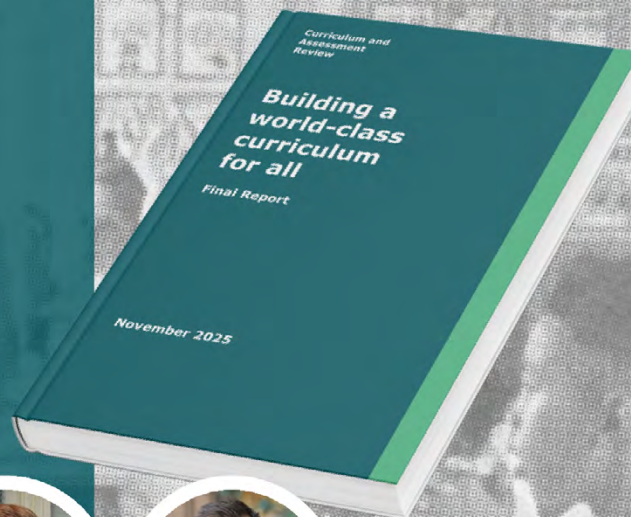
**John Dickens**
EDITOR@JOHNDICKENSSW
JOHN.DICKENS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Freddie Whittaker**
DEPUTY EDITOR@FCDWHITTAKER
FREDDIE.WHITTAKER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Samantha Booth**
CHIEF REPORTER@SAMANTHAJBOTH
SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Lydia Chantler-Hicks**
SENIOR REPORTER@LYDIACHSW
LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Jack Dyson**
SENIOR REPORTER@JACKYDYS
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Ruth Lucas**
REPORTER@RUTHLUCAS_
RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**JL Dutaut**
COMMISSIONING
EDITOR@DUTAUT.BSKY.SOCIAL
JEAN-LOUISDUTAUT@EDUCATIONSCAPE.COM**Nicky Phillips**
HEAD DESIGNER@GELVETICA
NICKY.PHILLIPS@FEWEEK.CO.UK**Shane Mann**
CHIEF EXECUTIVE@SHANERMANN
SHANE.MANN@EDUCATIONSCAPE.COM

THE TEAM

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

Online event

Free Webinar

Under the
CAR bonnetSchools Week editor John Dickens in
conversation with curriculum review
chair Professor Becky Francis

10.30–11.30am – Friday 7th Nov 2025

SCHOOLS
WEEK

Delivered by



The curriculum review has done what it said on the tin.

Evolution not revolution. Build on the good, improve the bad. Ambitious but achievable policies.

Some more left-leaning educators were unhappy from the start, and wanted more radical reform. Meanwhile, some loyal Gove education reformers are displeased at the EBacc being scrapped (one of the report's key recommendations)

But the main response from school leaders seems to be: "This looks sensible."

On an issue such as curriculum, building this sort of consensus can't be understated.

As Sir Jon Coles says, you may not agree with every word – but the report is "serious, rigorous and evidence-based".

The government has accepted most of the recommendations.

Some big changes are coming (see our coverage with explainers, analysis and interviews on pages 4 to 12).

But – there have been some notable differences between Professor Becky Francis and the policies ministers have taken forward.

Most notably this is on Progress 8 – the key school performance measure. The curriculum

review was clear: "We recommend making no changes to the structure of Progress 8 or the composition of the 'buckets'."

The government has overruled this, and is proposing changes to six of the eight buckets. This is to meet a Labour manifesto commitment to bring a creative subject into accountability measures, garnering much more concern in the sector than the wider review recommendations.

The government will consult on the changes, so the sector will have a chance to make its voice heard.

Ministers are also going ahead with their year 8 reading test – which wasn't in the review – but won't fully deliver the review's call for mandatory English and maths "diagnostic" tests in the same year.

It is of course right that the government of the day chooses the policies it wants to implement.

But having been so vocal on the importance of its evidence-backed review – it does now put the onus on ministers to show what evidence they have supporting their own proposals. And, crucially, to show why their evidence is better than the evidence collected during an independent review that took over a year and had submissions from thousands of educators.

Most read online this week:

- New curriculum to be introduced in 2028 as review published**
- Curriculum review: The subject-specific policy proposals**
- Curriculum review: All the key policy recommendations**
- 10 things we learned from DfE teacher pay evidence**
- DfE ignores Francis review and proposes sweeping progress 8 reform**

[CLICK LINKS TO READ STORIES](#)

Disclaimer:

Schools Week is owned and published by EducationScape Ltd. The views expressed within the publication are those of the authors named, and are not necessarily those of Schools Week, EducationScape Ltd or any of its employees. While we try to ensure that the information we provide is correct, mistakes do occur and we cannot guarantee the accuracy of our material.

The design of the digital newspaper and of the website is copyright of EducationScape Ltd and material from the newspaper should not be reproduced without prior permission. If you wish to reproduce an article from either the digital paper or the website, both the article's author and Schools Week must be referenced (to not do so, would be an infringement on copyright).

EducationScape Ltd is not responsible for the content of any external internet sites linked to.

Please address any complaints to the editor.

Email: John.Dickens@Schoolsweek.co.uk with Error/

Concern in the subject line. Please include the page number and story headline, and explain what the problem is.

SCHOOLS WEEK

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

EDUCATIONSCAPE LTD

C/O 1 EDCITY WALK, EDCITY, LONDON, W12 7TF
T: 020 8123 4778
E: NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

ADVERTISE WITH US

If you are interested in placing a product or job advert in a future edition please click on the 'advertise' link at the top of the page on schoolsweek.co.uk or contact:

E: advertising@schoolsweek.co.uk
T: 020 81234 778 or click here



SCHOOLS WEEK

School leaders' favourite newspaper | No bluster, just the facts

Did you know about the Schools Week Daily Bell?

Schools Week also publishes a daily email delivering the top education stories straight into your inbox at 5.30pm. And it's free!

schoolsweek.co.uk | [@schoolsweek](https://twitter.com/schoolsweek)

You can sign up here →



EXPLAINER: CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

THE CURRICULUM REVIEW EXPLAINED

The national curriculum for all subjects will be reviewed and updated for the first time in a decade, after the government accepted most recommendations in Professor Becky Francis's review.

The Conservatives' treasured EBacc league table measure is no more, and Progress 8 will be updated to incentivise arts take-up – despite Francis's review recommending no changes.

The government has also resisted the review's call for mandatory diagnostic English and maths tests in year 8.

While some aligned with former Conservative education secretary's Michael Gove's reforms have accused Labour of education vandalism, many sector leaders have welcomed the review – which promised "evolution, not revolution".

In most subjects, this rings true, with only minor tweaks planned.

Notable exceptions include a triple science entitlement at GCSE, replacing the computer science GCSE and making citizenship mandatory in primary schools. Religious education will also be put in the national curriculum.

The report described its changes as "ambitious but achievable".

Work is moving at pace. The EBacc is already gone. Consultation on draft programmes of study will begin in the spring. The new curriculum will be taught from 2028, with updated GCSEs due to be sat from 2031 and A-levels from 2033.

Below is every recommendation by the curriculum review, and the government's response.

Curriculum and
Assessment
ReviewBuilding a
world-class
curriculum
for all

Final Report

November 2025

CAR POLICIES IN FULL, AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

1. THE 'OVERARCHING' RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduce an oracy framework to complement the existing frameworks for reading and writing



Review and update all programmes of study – and, where appropriate, the corresponding GCSE subject content – to include stronger representation of the diversity that makes up our modern society, allowing more children to see themselves in the curriculum



Programmes of study will be refreshed and published in a revised national curriculum in 2027 for first teaching in 2028

Develop the national curriculum as a digital product that can support teachers to navigate content easily and to see and make connections across key stages and disciplines



Develop a programme of work to provide evidence-led guidance on curriculum and pedagogical adaptation (as well as exemplification) for youngsters with SEND

Involve teachers in the testing and design of programmes of study as part of the drafting process. This must take into consideration the curriculum time that is available, ensuring the national curriculum is ambitious but teachable within a typical school timetable



2. ACCOUNTABILITY: EBACC GONE, PROGRESS 8 ROW

Remove the EBacc performance measures and the EBacc entry and attainment headline accountability measures



Retain Progress 8 (and Attainment 8) with no change to its structure or subject composition. Rename the current EBacc bucket 'academic breadth'



The government will instead develop and consult on an "improved version" of Progress 8 and Attainment 8 that balances a strong academic core with breadth and student choice (see story page 8)

Continue to develop initiatives related to similar schools, with a particular emphasis on supporting inclusive approaches within accountability measures



3. KEY STAGE 1 ASSESSMENT: ENCOURAGE OPTIONAL SATS TAKE-UP

Find ways to encourage take-up of optional Key Stage 1 assessments



KEY



Ministers accepted the recommendation



Ministers rejected the recommendation

Continued on next page

EXPLAINER: CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Explore approaches for assessing progress for the small minority of pupils with certain SEND needs that make the phonics screening check inaccessible



4. KEY STAGE 2: REPLACE GRAMMAR TEST, EXPLORE HEADLINE MEASURE

Explore if access arrangements can be refined for pupils with certain special needs that make the multiplication tables check inaccessible



Develop an improved teacher assessment framework and include a greater focus on writing fluency



Review external moderation processes and look to strengthen peer moderation between schools



Replace the current grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS) test with an amended test that retains some elements of the current GPS test but with new tasks to better assess composition and application of grammar and punctuation



The Department for Education (DfE) said it would ask the Standards and Testing Authority to “amend the test to ensure it better reflects” the areas highlighted by the review

Once the new test is established, DfE may wish to consider whether to explore including the new test in headline measures



5. KEY STAGE 3: INTRODUCE ENGLISH AND MATHS TESTS

Introduce diagnostic assessment for key components of maths and English to be taken during year 8 to support teachers to address students' needs and ensure that they are well prepared to progress into key stage 4. Make mandatory if trials show it is effective



The DfE said it would only “expect all schools to assess pupil progress in writing and maths in year 8 and will support them to select the right products to do this”. (But the already announced mandatory year 8 reading test will go ahead.)

6. KEY STAGE 4 ASSESSMENT: REDUCE EXAM TIME BY 10%

Seek to reduce overall exam time by at least 10 per cent, focusing on assessment design choices to deliver this reduction, and going further than this where possible. This should be considered on a subject-by-subject basis, ensuring minimal impact on reliability, fairness and teaching and learning



Ensure that in implementing the above recommendations, each subject retains at least two assessment components



Continue to employ the principle that non-exam assessment should be used only when it is the only valid way to assess essential elements of a subject



Work closely with the wider education sector to explore how core aspects of subject content can be retained and assessed while managing and mitigating the risk of generative AI



Continue to consider the full range of options for assessment methods, including non-exam assessment, where it would be necessary to mitigate the risks posed by generative AI



Ensure that the DfE and Ofqual continue to work together to explore potential for innovation in on-screen assessment in GCSE, AS and A-level qualifications, particularly where this could further support accessibility for students with SEND and where this could reduce exam volume in the future



Consider how awarding organisations can build accessibility into the design of new specifications for GCSEs, AS and A-levels



Ensure that, when updating maths and science GCSEs, subject experts evaluate each formula and equation to determine whether students should be required to memorise and recall it, or whether assessment should focus on their ability to apply it when provided



7. 16 TO 19 EDUCATION: V-LEVELS

Introduce a revised third pathway at level 3 to sit alongside the academic and technical pathways. This pathway should be based on new V-levels



Consider learners who have SEND or face other barriers to education to ensure that the qualifications are inclusive by design



Continue to work closely with awarding organisations to reduce the assessment burden of T-level assessment in the context of scale-up



Introduce two separate pathways at level 2 (an occupational pathway and a pathway to level 3) each serving different purposes and designed specifically to meet these purposes and improve student outcomes



EXPLAINER: CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

8. 16 TO 19 ENGLISH AND MATHS: STRENGTHEN ACCOUNTABILITY

Strengthen the accountability system and explore opportunities to better incentivise effective practice across 16-19 providers



Introduce new level 1 stepped qualifications for maths and English language at 16-19 to enable learners to make progress towards achieving level 2 in these GCSEs during 16-19 study



9. FUTURE CURRICULUM CHANGES: NO BIG REVIEWS FOR 10 YEARS

Limit the intervals between holistic curriculum reviews to approximately a decade. Supplement holistic reviews with a rolling programme of light-touch minimalist updates of the national curriculum and its programmes of study



10. KEY SUBJECT-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Art and design

Limited revisions to key stages 1 to 3 to clarify and exemplify the knowledge and skills pupils should develop. Clarify the volume and range of coursework students are expected to produce for GCSE

**Citizenship**

Introduce a statutory measure to ensure all pupils are taught a core body of essential citizenship content at primary, including elements of financial and media literacy, and climate change and sustainability

**Computing**

Replace GCSE computer science with a computing GCSE which reflects the full breadth of the computing curriculum



The DfE has also said it would “explore introducing a new level 3 qualification in data science and AI” (not in the review)

Design and technology

Rewrite the D&T subject aims to be more aspirational and clarify the purpose of study. Explicitly include how to achieve sustainable resolutions to design challenges

**English**

Make significant changes to the key stage 4 English programme of study and the GCSE English language subject content. Introduce greater clarity of purpose to focus English language more clearly on the nature and expression of language, and to support critical analysis of a wider variety of text types and genres, including multi-modal and ephemeral text types

**Geography**

Make minor refinements to the programmes of study and GCSE subject content to respond to issues identified. Embed disciplinary knowledge more explicitly at key stage 3, and climate change across all key stages

**History**

Clarify the statutory and non-statutory content requirements to better support teachers. Support the wider teaching of history's inherent diversity, including through the analysis of a wide range of sources and, where appropriate, local history. Ensure assessment is fit for purpose

**Languages**

Update the key stage 2 languages programme of study to include a clearly defined minimum core content for French, German and Spanish. Don't make immediate changes to new GCSE content in those subjects. Schools, trusts and councils should explore a “co-ordinated approach” in local areas to the main language taught



The DfE has also said it would “explore the feasibility of developing a new language qualification which enables

all pupils to have their achievements acknowledged when they are ready rather than at fixed points”. They will “learn from models such as the Languages Ladder”. This was not in the review

Maths

Retain the amount and type of content in the key stage 1 to 3 curriculum, but re-sequence it so topics are introduced in such a way that pupils can master them deeply, with opportunities for more complex problem-solving in each area, and reduce repetition in later years. Redesign key stage 2 maths tests “minimally” to reflect this, with a stronger focus on mental arithmetic and reasoning

**Music**

Revise the content of the programmes of study for key stages 1 to 3 to ensure a curriculum pathway which gives all pupils a rigorous foundation in musical understanding and enables broader access to further study at Key Stage 4. Explore ways to “better optimise” investment in learning instruments and the reading of music

**Physical education (PE)**

Redraft the purpose of study for PE, retaining the importance of competitive sports, but clarifying the significance of providing all pupils with opportunities to learn in a physical environment and emphasising its physical, social, cognitive and emotional benefits. Review the current GCSE PE list to make it more inclusive for all students

**Religious education**

Add RE to the national curriculum in due course. Form a sector-led task group to oversee this. Consider removing the requirement to study RE in sixth forms

**Science**

Ensure more cohesion and consistency across the primary science curriculum, including clearer guidance on what should be taught, to what depth, at each stage. Introduce an entitlement to triple science at GCSE. Consider where content can be streamlined, without affecting rigour



INTERVIEW: CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW

BECKY FRANCIS

Francis explains her curriculum review big ideas

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Professor Becky Francis spoke to Schools Week to explain her thinking behind the curriculum review's key recommendations. Here's the full Q&A

Schools Week: What are the most important recommendations?

Francis: We've tried to do a very holistic piece that improves across the board. It doesn't mend things that aren't broken, but builds on that strong foundation and goes hard on areas where we do need improvement.

The review has absolutely prided itself on the insistence that high standards needs to mean high standards for all young people.

Labour promised to include a creative subject in progress measures. You recommended Progress 8 shouldn't change. Why?

We looked hard at both the EBacc and Progress 8 and the different behaviours incentivised by both.

We thought that the status quo in Progress 8 has a really nice balance between breadth and choice.

The challenge has been for schools to get kids to do the EBacc subjects.

By lifting that restrictive stipulation, the assumption is that young people who would like to take arts, vocational subjects, and indeed the other subjects not currently included in EBacc, will have the choice to do so.

But it would be very strange to force young people to pick an arts [subject], in my view.

You've proposed an entitlement to study triple science. What issue are you trying to solve?

There's really strong evidence of a tight relationship between taking triple science and progressing to study science at A-level and at undergraduate level. And sadly, the reverse is also true.

So given that that has a big impact on young people's remuneration, access to STEM and so forth, in a decision that's been taken quite early at school, we think it's really important all young people have the chance to access triple science should they want to.

Some science subjects have huge teacher shortages – do you think there's a capacity issue?

It may not be as catastrophic as sometimes



perceived, but definitely, there's an issue in terms of supply of science teachers. We've been quite cautious and in our recommendation... that this is done over a period of time to allow schools to prepare, but also that the government finds ways to support that preparation as well.

You've proposed an English and maths test in year 8. How does this align with the government's plan for a year 8 reading check?

The reading test is completely separate and not our recommendation.

By coincidence, the government is also focusing on problems in key stage 3. We've both come up with a proposition for year 8.

In terms of our focus, we are thinking about the well-known challenges with progression from key stage 2 into key stage 3. And then especially the significantly widening gap for socio economic attainment moving through key stage 3.

We're interested in that momentum issue, but also we're interested in narrowing the pipeline or the funnel of young people that come into their GCSEs age 16 and don't succeed in a grade 4 or above at maths and English.

The idea with our diagnostic tests is that they're a tool for teachers, focused on diagnosing problems around core competencies in English, core concepts in maths.

We recommend that they have to be piloted before any roll-out. We can see the risk of unintended consequences if they're not got right.

The review also talks about encouraging more schools to run the non-statutory key stage 1 assessments. What would you say to criticism over more testing?

I wish we didn't necessarily have to see it like testing. Of course, if something becomes an accountability measure, or is really important for young people's futures, that high stakes element becomes a stress for everybody.

But assessment is an absolutely essential tool in every practitioner's portfolio, and must continue to be so.

Something like 60 per cent of schools are already using and actualising the key stage 1 tests. Good for them. We're just saying this is a nationally available resource, freely available to schools. Why not use it?

The only place where we are an outlier is in the volume of testing at age 16. Only Singapore has anything like how much we do through GCSE.

So you see our recommendations there as well [to cut GCSE exam time by 10 per cent].

You've recommended the replacement of the year 6 grammar, punctuation and spelling test. What are your concerns about the test?

We heard quite a lot and saw quite a lot of evidence that writing has had less attention than reading, and that actually young people are often struggling more with writing, so this needs attention.

We also heard a lot of concern that the GPS test as stands encourages lots of theoretical memorisation, but actually doesn't sufficiently test young people's application and practice.

We're steering towards less attention to incredibly technical memorisation of terminology and constructs, and rather thinking about grammar as successfully applied in writing.

Labour overrules Francis to reform progress 8 and boost arts

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

The government is proposing sweeping reforms to Progress 8, the main league table measure for secondary schools, in a bid to boost arts take-up.

The move runs counter to Professor Becky Francis's review, which recommended that the subject make-up of Progress 8 be left alone.

At present, schools are given a progress score based on pupils' improvement since primary school in eight subject "buckets".

The first two are English and maths, and three more have to be EBacc subjects – including sciences, languages or humanities. The remaining three are "open" buckets for any other qualifications.

But ministers will scrap the EBacc – as proposed by the Francis's Curriculum and Assessment Review – and "develop and consult on an improved version of Progress 8 and Attainment 8 that balances a strong academic core with breadth and student choice".

The government will "consult in due course" on the proposals and publish its response in the summer term next year "so that schools can take the revised measure into account when determining subject choices for pupils who will start their GCSEs in September 2027".

The Department for Education (DfE) has clarified that this means the new Progress 8 measure would first apply to GCSEs sat in 2029.

It means any schools that run three-year GCSE courses will need to take it into account during subject choices for the current cohort of year 8s.

Under the government's proposal, English and maths will remain the first two buckets, but two buckets will be created specifically for science qualifications, including double science, the separate sciences and computing.

The remaining four would be new "breadth" buckets, and these would have to include a subject from two of the three categories of humanities, creative subjects and language (see image).

The proposals for Progress 8 reform represent a divergence from Francis's recommendations.

Her review stated that "our

Laura Trott

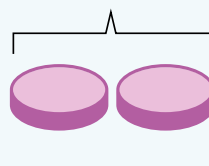
Progress 8 and Attainment 8 proposal

English Maths

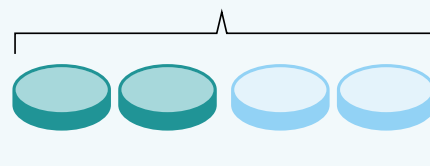


The English and Maths slots are double-weighted. In the English slot, a pupil must take both English Literature and English Language for the higher grade to be double-weighted. The lower grade can count in a breadth slot.

Science



Breadth



At least two breadth slots must include subjects from 2 of the following 3 categories:

- Humanities
- Creative subjects
- Languages

We're interested in the sector's views as to whether there should be a 4th science category which also includes computer science

SCHOOLS WEEK

view remains that it supports both students' progress and curriculum breadth.

"We therefore recommend making no changes to the structure of Progress 8 or the composition of the 'buckets'. We recommend only that the 'EBacc' bucket is renamed 'academic breadth'."

Speaking to journalists this week, Francis acknowledged that she and the government "have two slightly different positions on what Progress 8 might look like".

"They've said they'll consult, so hopefully that will be true of any areas of difference, and everybody will have the chance to have their say."

Laura Trott, the shadow education secretary, challenged Bridget Phillipson about her decision to over-rule Francis.

"We have been here before. Under the last Labour government standards fell, ambition shrank and the attainment gap widened."

But Phillipson insisted the "improved Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measures will ensure that students retain a strong academic core, but with a breadth to expand into further study".

As part of the proposals, the DfE has also said it would also seek views on the potential need for a fourth category of science subjects which could count in buckets five and six along with creative, humanities and languages.

This would "allow more choice and specialisation in science", the

department said.

It would also look at whether design and technology, currently classed as a creative subject, could move to that category.

Its proposals would also see religious studies GCSE classed as a humanities subject under Progress 8 for the first time.

But a decision by the DfE to only have academic qualifications count towards buckets five and six of the revamped Progress 8 has drawn criticism. Vocational qualifications would only be able to sit in buckets seven and eight.

Ben Parnell, chief executive of the Athena Learning Trust, said the move created a "potentially disastrous dilemma for secondary schools".

He said: "While the DfE aims to boost the arts, by making only academic GCSE arts qualifications count toward the core creative requirement in slots five and six, schools are strongly incentivised to prioritise running GCSE art, GCSE drama, or GCSE music."

He said the change would "effectively compel" schools wanting to offer vocational courses to "run two separate curriculum streams for the arts".

"The inevitable result for all but the largest secondary schools is a splitting of student numbers. Neither the GCSE arts group nor the vocational arts group may reach the class sizes required for the subjects to run efficiently, potentially leading to the cancellation of one or both, or the effective marginalisation of the vocational route."

NEWS: CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Phillipson admits triple science needs specialists

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

The education secretary has admitted that more specialist teachers will be needed for schools to deliver on a new entitlement to offer triple science to all pupils.

The government accepted a Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) call for schools to offer an "entitlement to triple science at GCSE, so that any student who wants to study it has the opportunity to do so".

But experts say chronic science recruitment and staffing issues pose a significant issue.

Ministers have pledged to "work with schools to understand the barriers to entry for triple science, including workforce challenges, and support schools to develop a triple science offer, ahead of introducing a statutory entitlement".

But there is no sign of additional support.

'More to do on recruitment'

Bridget Phillipson told BBC Breakfast on Wednesday that "really good progress" was being made on recruitment and retention, but conceded

"there is more to do".

The policy will have to be "implemented carefully" she said. "We will need more specialist teachers to do it."

Just 31 per cent of the required physics teachers were recruited into initial teacher training in 2024-25. Chemistry hit 62 per cent of its target.

Professor Becky Francis, who led the CAR, told Schools Week that science teacher supply was "an issue".

She said the triple science entitlement should be introduced "over a period of time to allow schools to prepare, but also [so] the government finds ways to support that preparation".

Almost one in 10 state schools do not currently offer triple science, the CAR found. In schools that do, some pupils report being pushed towards taking double science.

The CAR said pupils taking triple science are nearly four times more likely than their double science counterparts to study science at A-level and nearly twice as likely to study a science subject at degree level.

About 10,000 fewer GCSE

pupils took individual sciences this year, while some 10,000 more opted for the double science award – which rolls biology, chemistry and physics together and is worth two GCSEs.

'More barriers to tackle'

Laura Daly, education programme manager at the Royal Society of Chemistry, said: "Unless we tackle the barriers around attainment, timetabling, and teacher resourcing, making triple science available but not mandated to all will likely still result in access shaped by postcode."

She estimated that many schools would "need to recruit more than one additional member of staff".

But already, 45 per cent of physics teachers, 28 per cent of chemistry teachers, and 12 per cent of biology teachers teaching GCSE had no relevant post-A level qualification.

Pav Aujla, Creative Education Trust's quality of education leader for science, said: "If we truly want students studying triple content to engage deeply – including through practical science – they need at least ten hours a fortnight."



Bridget Phillipson



CAMBRIDGE

Identify if your students have additional needs

As part of a formal diagnostic test, Cambridge Insight baseline assessments can identify if your students have additional needs early, so you can put the right support in place to help them unlock their potential.

Find out
how

RE will be put on national curriculum – if sector can agree

RUTH LUCAS
@RUTHLUCAS_

Ministers have accepted the Francis review call to bring religious education into the national curriculum – but have said the sector has to “reach consensus on whether this is achievable”.

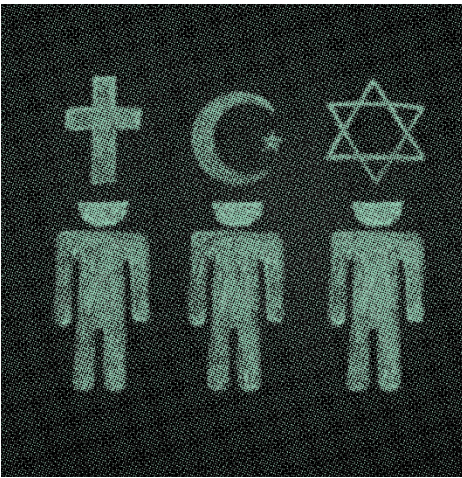
Professor Becky Francis’s review has called for the government to set up a taskforce to develop a national curriculum for Religious Education (RE).

Currently, all state schools must teach pupils the subject up to the age of 18, but the syllabus is determined at a local authority level.

Sector leaders said it was a “landmark moment”, and the government confirmed it would accept the proposals – but only if the “sector reaches a consensus on whether this is achievable”.

Francis called for the government to implement a staged approach to the introduction of RE into the national curriculum.

The sector would be invited to form a task and finish group, led by Dr Vanessa Ogden, chief



executive of the Mulberry Schools Trust, and a panellist on Francis’s review.

Ogden has since been appointed a regional director for the Department for Education (DfE), and Schools Week has asked for clarification over whether she will still lead the group.

The expert group would then draft changes to the curriculum, and consider whether to remove requirements for sixth form pupils to study RE. This would be consulted on.

The DfE said it “will be shaped and guided by the sector on this important issue”.

It added: “If the sector reaches a consensus on whether this is achievable, we will consult on the content of a draft RE curriculum and on proposed changes to the legislative framework within which RE sits.”

Richard Kueh, a former RE teacher and Ofsted inspector for the subject, said the proposal was a “landmark moment” which teachers have been “hoping for and wanting”.

Kueh said comparing “complex, local arrangements” is like “trying to match pairs of socks, blindfolded, in a dark room”.

“I think this actually simplifies RE and makes it more attractive as a subject to teach,” he added.

But Kueh suggested the government “needs to put the money where its mouth is” and reinstate the £10,000 bursary for trainee RE teachers.

Andrew Compton, chief executive of Humanists UK, said a “key challenge will be guarding against any suggestion of opt-outs for faith schools that might arise throughout the implementation process, and to make sure this recommendation is applied across all schools”.

RUTH LUCAS | @RUTHLUCAS_

Primaries get citizenship lessons as voting age cut

Primary schools will be required to teach citizenship lessons to pupils, covering topics of climate change, misinformation and preparing for the introduction of votes at 16.

The Department for Education (DfE) said citizenship lessons “need to start from an early age” and it would “look at the earliest opportunity” to make them a statutory requirement in primary.

Professor Becky Francis’s curriculum and assessment review said such lessons should cover financial and media literacy, democracy and government, laws and rights and climate change and sustainability.

Secondary schools have been required to teach citizenship content since 2002. But less than a third formally teach the subject as standalone lessons, according to a report by the political literacy campaign group Shout Out UK.

It comes as the government looks to lower the voting age to 16, which campaigners said

would need to be met with better citizenship education in schools.

The Francis review also said financial literacy lessons should help pupils understand risks, core financial concepts, responsible practice and using digital tools.

Only a third of children can recall learning about money in school and finding it useful, according to the Government-backed Money and Pensions Service.

But these topics should be introduced in maths lessons before citizenship, the review added.

Citizenship should also cover misinformation and disinformation, as well as “critical engagement with all forms of media”, the review said.

Lessons on democracy should focus on British values and develop awareness of plans to lower the voting age to 16. Other lessons should focus on why rules and laws are important, who makes them and the

consequences of not following them.

“Age-appropriate issues” on sustainable habits and climate justice should also be covered, the review said.

The DfE said the secondary curriculum “will both mirror and be a graduation” of what is taught at primary level.

Liz Moorse from the Association of Citizenship Teaching said the review put forward “a very concrete, comprehensive and momentous set of reforms that will be positive for education as a whole, positive for children, parents and carers, and society as a whole”.

She said the review focuses on areas “that students really need to be well prepared in for life and for work”.

But Moorse said there was a “desperate need” for more teachers.

The number of citizenship teachers across the UK has dropped dramatically in the past decade – from 9,958 in 2011-12, to 4,156 in 2021-22 – according to DfE data.

NEWS: CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

'New Labour' plan resurrected for languages

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

A New Labour-era assessment tool is the main inspiration behind a surprise announcement of plans for a new languages qualification.

The Department for Education (DfE) said this week it was "exploring a new language qualification which banks progress and motivates pupils to want to continue studying, complementing existing GCSEs and A-levels".

The curriculum review did not recommend creating such a qualification.

But education secretary Bridget Phillipson said she believed a new stepped qualification "will provide a useful route for more young people to move on to study languages at GCSE".

The DfE said it would "learn from models such as the Languages Ladder, which supported and recognised progress in languages".

Languages Ladder was a New Labour-era initiative designed to recognise achievement in language skills at all levels of competence for all ages of pupils.

It involved pupils being assessed against a



framework of "can do" statements for four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, ranking them across 17 grades from "breakthrough" through to "mastery".

The DfE added that it was "working closely with stakeholders to establish the viability of such a qualification...before making any decision on whether to introduce it".

Professor René Koglbauer, chair of the Association for Language Learning, said many members had supported calls for "alternative assessment routes alongside GCSE and A-level for languages, modelled on previous qualifications and accreditations schemes".

The government's curriculum response contained another surprise qualification announcement, too.

The DfE said it would "explore introducing a

new level 3 qualification in data science and AI, to ensure that more young people can secure high value skills for the future".

The qualification was not recommended by the review itself, which stated that the "best approach to future-proofing students' learning is to ensure they have a strong foundation in core knowledge".

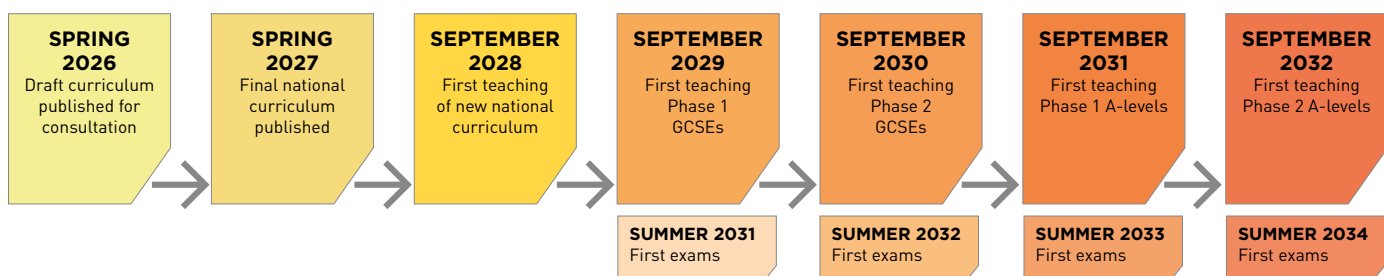
The review actually recommended "minimising references to specific products or versions of fast-evolving technologies".

Tom Richmond, a former DfE adviser, said the government had "completely ignored this sensible advice and has proposed the idea of 'a new qualification in data science and AI for 16- to 18-year-olds'".

He warned against "designing new qualifications that match the latest shiny tech thing" adding: "ChatGPT was launched three years ago and has already upended a range of careers, but it would take two to three years to design a new GCSE or A-level – by which time the content is out of date."

The government has also confirmed it will continue with plans to consult on subject content for a new natural history GCSE. Its development was delayed after the election last year.

The curriculum review reforms timeline



SCHOOLS WEEK

SCHOOLS WEEK

FE WEEK JOBS

Powered by education week jobs

Endless Scrolling For Jobs?

No need- we'll notify you

www.educationweekjobs.co.uk


@EduWeekJobs



NEWS: CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Ofqual silent on plan to cut exam time by 10%

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

EXCLUSIVE

The exams regulator will not publish detailed modelling that informed a key curriculum review policy to reduce the time pupils spend taking GCSE exams by about three hours.

Ofqual provided the Francis review with advice that the reduction – which works out as cutting 10 per cent of exam time on average – was “feasible with current content levels” for the average student taking eight or nine GCSEs.

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, told the Commons that Ofqual had “been clear” the reduction “is more than achievable while at no point compromising the integrity or the high quality and standards of the system”.

But when asked by *Schools Week* to provide the analysis, the regulator refused. It added it does not routinely publish technical regulatory advice submissions which is “standard practice for policy development processes”.

Ofqual said it would be transparent about its regulatory approach as the reform programme develops, including through consultation and stakeholder engagement.

But Saqib Bhatti, the shadow education minister, said: “Ofqual must publish the evidence behind Labour’s exam reduction proposals so we can see their full impact.”

The review found students in England typically sit between 24 to 31 hours of external exams.

Only pupils in Singapore, which has topped international league tables for attainment, spend as many hours sitting exams.

The review points out that exam time is 16 hours in Ireland, 18 hours in New Zealand and just 10 hours in Canada.

The Francis review also said that, in combination with its recommendations on curriculum content, it believed it might be possible to go further than cutting 10 per cent.

But it must be done “while

maintaining high levels of reliability and without a negative impact on fairness, system resilience, students’ experience, and teaching and learning”.

On how it could be achieved, Francis told *Schools Week*: “It depends, subject by subject to some extent, which ironically will probably mean that in practice some kids are affected more than others.”

Bhatti said the government’s plans to cut exams “risks undermining” fairness “and weakening standards”.

However, Phillipson told the *Today* programme that “many other high performing countries have fewer hours in terms of exams than we will have even at the end of this process”.

Myles McGinley, managing director at the Cambridge OCR exam board, said the plan will “likely mean shorter exams, rather than fewer exams overall”.

Claire Heald, chief executive at The Cambridge Academy Trust, said the reduction would “hopefully enable more flexibility, choice and support for learners, particularly the vulnerable”.



Saqib Bhatti

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBOTH

School leaders slam ‘dumbing down’ critics

School leaders have criticised claims that curriculum changes such as scrapping the EBacc are “dumbing down” schools, although some point to concerns that it could cause a dip in language take-up.

The *Daily Mail*’s front-page headline on the review declared “Labour dumbs down schools”, with shadow education secretary Laura Trott accusing ministers of “education vandalism”.

They singled out reforms such as scrapping the EBacc, a school accountability measure introduced by Michael Gove in 2010 encouraging pupils to take GCSE English, maths, science, a humanity and a language.

But Sir Jon Coles, chief executive of United Learning trust, said those arguing that the review was “dumbing down” or “woke” have “either not yet managed to read the report or are in need of support with their reading comprehension”.

He added that public service reform needs to be “rational, evidence-based action with a ‘continuous improvement’ mindset”, which governments don’t often do.

Sir Hamid Patel, chief executive at Star Academies, added that the review provided

the opposite of “dumbing down”, saying: “It is a compelling road map to elevate our education system from good to great.”

The Francis review said the EBacc had “to some degree unnecessarily constrained students’ choices” and limited access to arts and vocational subjects.

But ex-schools minister Nick Gibb called its removal a “deeply retrograde step” which would “weaken academic standards” and widen the attainment gap.

It would also lead to a “a precipitous decline in the study of foreign languages” with them “increasingly” only studied in private schools among “children of middle-class parents who can afford tutors”.

Since the EBacc’s introduction by the Coalition government in 2010, GCSE language take-up has risen from 40 per cent to 46 per cent, however it has plateaued in recent years.

However, the EBacc did halt a previous slide in languages take-up after the previous Labour government made them non-compulsory.

For French, German and Spanish, take-up rose from 43 per cent in 2009-10, to 44 per cent last academic year.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson used these figures to claim the EBacc “did not have the outcome that was intended in improving languages take-up”.

She added a new “stepped” languages qualification would “provide a useful route” for more pupils to study GCSE languages (see page 11).

But Suzannah Wharf, education director at Education South West, said a strategy to stem the reduction in MFL take-up would be “sensible”.

The government is also replacing the Key stage 2 grammar, punctuation and spelling test with an amended version.

It believed that some of the Gove reforms, such as fronted adverbials, often “lead to clutters and fussy sentences if not used properly”.

Gibb said the review was a “deeply underwhelming document, low on vision and a slide towards the ‘soft bigotry of low expectations’”.

Mouhssin Ismail, founding principal of Newham Collegiate, warned that the “ill-conceived reforms... threaten to drag England’s schools back 15 years”.

Helping every learner use AI responsibly

AI didn't wait to be invited into the classroom. It burst in mid-lesson. Across UK schools, pupils are already using it to plan homework, summarise texts, tidy up grammar and even generate essays – often with varying levels of guidance from their teachers.

The AI genie is well and truly out of the bottle.

AI's influence isn't creeping in quietly. It's moving fast, reshaping how young people learn and create. Yet the national conversation remains cautious, often focused on risk rather than readiness.

The question now isn't if students use AI – it's how well they use it, and whether we're helping them to do that.

Confidence isn't competence

The *Pearson School Report 2025* shows that 51% of secondary students feel confident using AI. But confidence and competence aren't the same. Fewer than half feel confident choosing the right tools or judging whether AI outputs are accurate and fair.

Nearly a third want to learn how to use AI more effectively. Teachers see what's coming: 57% believe AI will play a bigger role in education, yet only 9% feel confident teaching students how to use it.

While some learners are already confident with AI, many are still experimenting – copying, pasting and refining prompts without clear guidance.

Why responsible use matters

This isn't about banning AI or fearing it. It's about helping students build the judgement to use it wisely and fairly.

As AI becomes part of everyday school life, familiar priorities – from academic integrity to digital literacy – are being reshaped. Can students recognise bias? Credit their sources? Spot when a chatbot is bluffing? Those are the skills that turn AI from a shortcut into a learning tool.

Pearson

POWERED BY ACTIVEHUB

AI Essentials

Think smart. Use it right.

Help students to use AI confidently and responsibly.

Get AI Essentials



A small step with big impact

Basingstoke College of Technology (BCoT) recognised early that students needed structure and support to use AI with confidence. Supported by Pearson, they developed AI Essentials – a short, self-paced course designed to build curiosity, digital awareness and practical skills.

It's a 60-minute introduction that fits easily into induction or tutorial time, exploring practical questions such as:

- What is AI and where do we encounter it?
- What makes an AI response helpful or harmful?
- How can students use these tools fairly and responsibly?

Richard Harris, a Digital and IT Lecturer at BCoT, saw the impact immediately. "It was fantastic to see students not just getting excited about the topic but really starting to think critically about the content they consume every day."

The model has already sparked interest from schools looking for simple, adaptable ways to start these conversations. While AI Essentials was designed for college learners, its discussion-based approach works just as well in secondary settings. What matters isn't

where it's taught, but giving students the space to pause, question and reflect.

What's at stake

A recent report from the Institute for the Future of Work highlights AI literacy as a top employer priority. They're not just looking for coders – they want young people who can think critically, use technology wisely and understand its limits.

Schools can play a vital role in building that kind of digital confidence through small, thoughtful steps that make time for discussion and reflection.

Anthony Bravo OBE, Principal of BCoT, added: "This isn't about being cutting edge. It's about being responsible. Our job is to get students ready for what's next – to help them make smart, informed choices with AI, now and in the future."

The genie is already out of the bottle. We don't need to put it back in. We just need to learn how to work with it – and help students do the same.

Find out more about the AI Essentials course developed by BCoT and supported by Pearson.

[Access your sample pack](#)

Ministers plan £3m SEND research centre

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

EXCLUSIVE

Ministers plan to launch a £3 million “education neuroscience research centre” to help inform policymaking in key reform areas such as SEND, Schools Week can reveal.

The Department for Education (DfE) is looking to pilot a new “research centre” to help government officials better understand how brain development, learning processes, mental health and special needs impact pedagogy and policy.

It follows calls for a special educational needs and disabilities evidence “custodian”, similar to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence’s role in generating guidance and quality standards for the NHS.

The Educational Neuroscience Research Centre would be launched alongside another focused on the “economics of education research” – but there is little additional information about the latter.

Jo Hutchinson, co-director for early years and wellbeing at the Education Policy Institute, said a neuroscience centre would be a “very positive step towards better evidence-based policy”.

“To see how relevant this is, we only have to consider this week’s curriculum and assessment review, which acknowledges gaps in our understanding of how to teach children with SEND effectively.

“The adverse consequences of excluding personal, social and emotional development



from the current curriculum might have been understood if we had more of this research available.”

Tender documents reveal the centres will produce “high-quality, timely, policy-relevant evidence”.

The programme of work would be “agreed in advance” with government officials, but the centres would also “retain capacity for responsive work”. This suggests they would not be independent, like NICE.

However, the government already funds the Education Endowment Foundation to independently test education policy evidence.

David Thomas, former DfE policy adviser, said if the government “wants to retain that responsibility for themselves, then having a body to provide academic evidence to support standard setting feels sensible”.

But Nick Johnson, chief executive at the British Educational Research Association, said it was vital “any proposed research centres maintain genuine independence”.

He said: “Research should not be shaped solely by immediate government priorities or reduced to a demand-and-supply dynamic.

“There is often a natural tension between

short-term policy goals and the findings of rigorous research, and it’s precisely this independence that allows research to challenge, inform, and ultimately strengthen policymaking.”

Others pointed to existing research on these topics. For example, the UCL Institute of Education’s Centre for Educational Neuroscience, formed in 2008.

Susan Castro Kemp, director of the UCL Centre for Inclusive Education, said there was a risk it could “create more competition rather than bringing people together, who are already producing high-level research evidence on these topics”.

The DfE said the centres would “enable close work in direct partnership with external experts across science and analysis”.

It added that the “exact structure and research programme are still in development” saying: “We’ll set out more details soon.”

The two research centres would cost £6 million and run for two years, the tender states.

While there are few details about the economics of education research centre, a DfE “area of research interest” document in April said economic expertise was required to “understand and improve the cost effectiveness of educational and care services to ensure that they deliver” benefits.

It said: “We are particularly keen where applicable to see research which includes cost benefit analysis, which provides findings in terms of lifetime earnings or months of progress, for example.”

EXCLUSIVE

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBOTH

Heads say SEND league tables will not help

Three in four headteachers don’t believe that rating schools on how well their school supports SEND pupils in league tables would improve provision, a survey suggests.

It follows a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), which is influential in Labour circles, calling for performance tables to give “greater weight” to how well schools work alone and in partnership to support pupils with additional needs.

Researchers said inclusion should be measured “as rigorously as other aspects of schooling and use wider measures of success that give a fair reflection of what a school does”.

However, 57 per cent of nearly 5,000

respondents to a Teacher Tapp poll said this would “probably not” or “definitely not” improve special educational needs and disabilities provision in their school.

This rose to 75 per cent for headteachers. Just nine per cent of heads said “definitely”, and 11 per cent said “possibly”.

Special educational needs coordinators and classroom teachers were more positive about the proposal, with a third saying definitely or possibly. But more than half were opposed to the idea.

Pepe Di’lasio, general secretary of the ASCL school leaders’ union, said the adverse reaction was “likely to be a result of educators facing major resourcing issues in delivering SEND

provision and feeling that dealing with this should be the priority”.

He said: “The government’s SEND reforms cannot rely on accountability measures in order to be successful, and must be supported with sufficient investment, training, and access to specialist staff.”

The previous government shelved plans to use performance league tables to reveal how inclusive mainstream schools were.

The proposal followed concerns that some schools were not doing enough for these children.

The Department for Education said the proposal had “mixed feedback,” with concerns it could “risk generating perverse incentives”.

NEWS: LEADERSHIP

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Do schools really have too many assistant heads?

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

Ministers have suggested rising numbers of assistant heads could be the place to target cost-cutting as schools are forced to make savings to fund future teacher pay rises. So what's behind the rise, and is a cut do-able? Schools Week investigates...

In evidence to the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB), which makes recommendations on teacher pay and hours, the Department for Education (DfE) recommended pay rises totalling 6.5 per cent for teachers over the next three years.

But the department was clear there would be no more cash over and above what was announced at the three-year spending review earlier this year.

While savings required will vary by school, the government said "several common themes have emerged" from those who have saved money.

That includes "reconsidering the composition of their leadership teams".

"There has been a 45 per cent increase in assistant headteacher positions since 2011-12, indicating some room to drive better value from spending," the government highlighted.

Rise of the assistant headteacher

Analysis of DfE figures show there were 22,652 full-time equivalent (FTE) assistant heads in the 2011-12 academic year, rising to 32,905 in 2024-25.

Pupil numbers have also risen in that time – but only by 11 per cent. It means there is one assistant head for every 255 pupils, compared to one for every 337 in 2011-12.

Professor Qing Gu, director of the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership, said reasons for the growth "might include larger school size in the secondary sector, with more school mergers and the growth of multi-academy trusts."

The average number of pupils in a state-funded secondary has risen from 939 in 2015-16, to 1,062 last year, DfE data shows.

'Schools are doing more'

Pepe Di'Iasio, general secretary of the school leaders' union ASCL, said pupil population growth had also "been accompanied by ever-rising expectations on schools and a fierce accountability regime – while schools have



frequently had to pick up the pieces from gaps elsewhere in local support services".

He said: "Assistant headteachers take on a range of whole-school responsibilities in areas such as behaviour and attendance, inclusion, and wellbeing."

Di'Iasio added that parental complaints were increasingly taking up senior leadership time. The number of complaints to Ofsted and also the Teacher Regulation Agency have soared in recent years.

But the biggest growth in assistant head positions was in primary schools, and occurred in the early 2010s.

Toby Greany, professor of education at the University of Nottingham, said this was when overall pupil numbers were "increasing most sharply ... and when many schools were becoming academies and when local authority services were reducing".

Between 2012-13 and 2015-16, the workforce increased by an average of 1,365 additional FTE assistant heads each year, peaking in 2014-15 with more than 2,075.

Since 2016-17, growth has averaged at about 600 annually, but there was a notable spike of 1,150 a year across 2022-24.

Greany said this jump was largely in secondary – and could either be due to rising pupil numbers or to meet post-pandemic pressures.

Recruitment and retention factor

John Howson, who runs DataforEducation, added that schools struggling to recruit heads of department – typically in shortage subjects – may also use the leadership pay scale "to attract them to apply for such posts".

Meanwhile, Dr Cat Scutt, deputy chief executive

of education and research at the Chartered College of Teaching, said that as well as being a response to challenging recruitment times, it could also reflect an era where headship is "perhaps increasingly unappealing".

"Developing AHT and other specialist leadership roles has," she added, "been a mechanism to avoid losing excellent teachers and develop a pipeline of future leaders".

Assistant heads 'mostly sinking'

But studies show assistant heads say they are also overworked.

The University of Nottingham's Sustainable School Leadership report, published in September, asked leaders if they are "thriving, surviving or sinking".

Assistant and deputy heads were more likely to be "mostly sinking" (11.4 per cent) than headteachers (7.1 per cent). Around 30 per cent were "sometimes" or "mostly" sinking.

Greany says this makes clear that "leaders today are hugely stretched", and warned against assuming there are "easy savings for schools to make".

On the DfE's leadership saving comments, Di'Iasio added: "Make no mistake this is a cut, not an efficiency saving. It means having to do more with less, which risks professional burnout and poorer staff retention."

Scutt stressed growth in assistant heads "has been driven by need" and is "not something that schools can just cut without having a considerable impact and increasing costs elsewhere".

However, Howson said assistant head numbers may fall anyway with declining rolls, as schools "manage the turnover, so that if somebody leaves they're not replaced".

NEWS: FUNDING

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Ministers accused of 'ignoring reality' on pay pressure

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

Labour has been accused of ignoring the "reality" that schools are under "immense pressure" after "yet again" telling leaders to make cuts to fund future pay rises.

Ministers are pledging to offer schools advice to "maximise value for money" as it prepares to leave them to foot the bill for a planned 6.5 per cent wage increase over the next three years.

Union bosses are urging the government to tear up the proposals and instead fully fund "above-inflation awards in each year of this Parliament", with budgets already "stretched to breaking point".

A joint letter sent to the government by unions representing teachers and school leaders – NASUWT, NEU, NAHT, ASCL and Community – said: "Any award that is not fully funded will inevitably result in further cuts to staffing and essential provision, undermining the ability of schools to deliver high-quality education for all pupils."

"This would be at odds with the government's stated commitment to improving standards and outcomes."

Ministers published their evidence on pay for the next three years to the School Teachers' Review Body last week.

Despite repeatedly referring to the "challenging fiscal context", they said schools will need to find savings to cover a proposed 6.5 per cent wage rise over the period.

The government added that schools would face a particularly "challenging affordability position" in the 2026-27 financial year, given big pay rises for the current and past year.

This means they propose "weighting towards higher awards" in 2027 and 2028, to "give schools a longer timeframe to plan for changes to their operations, provisions or staffing".

The government expects "most schools will need to implement plans to realise and sustain better value from existing spend", in addition to the funding increases announced in the spending review earlier this year.

Luke Sibietta of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said the spending review allowed "spending per pupil



to be maintained in real terms over the next three years".

He said this meant the 6.5 per cent rise was "almost certainly affordable within existing funding plans".

But he cautioned that schools "will need to cut costs in line with falling pupil numbers", which "is feasible but does require some tough choices".

Meanwhile, increasing SEND need could grow "even faster than expected", reducing the amount available for teacher pay rises.

And due to such uncertainties, the government may need to revisit the pay awards as they "might end up needing to be higher or lower than expected at the moment", Sibietta said.

The Confederation of School Trusts' (CST's) annual survey of 390 trust chief executives, published in September, showed financial sustainability was leaders' number one priority this year.

Over half of respondents are considering cuts to classroom staff to balance the books, with 60 per cent looking at reducing teaching assistant hours and a third considering school leadership changes.

NASUWT general secretary Matt Wrack said it was "unacceptable to ask schools to fund pay awards from budgets that are already stretched to breaking point".

CST chief executive

Leora Cruddas added that she was "concerned by the government's suggestion that further pay increases can be met within existing budgets".

She said: "The sector broadly supports the government's ambition for schools to drive opportunity for every child, but that needs to be matched by proper funding to succeed."

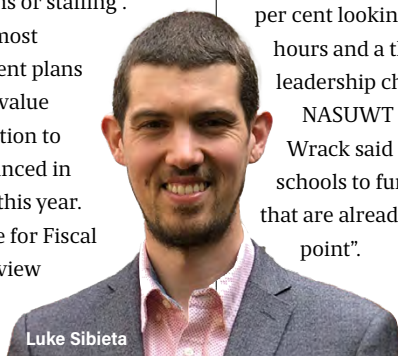
The government said schools could make savings by reviewing their reliance on supply and "reconsidering the composition of their leadership teams".

It wants to launch a new programme "to help schools and groups seize opportunities to maximise value from every pound" in commercial spending, reserves, workforce deployment and technology.

The Department for Education also said that it was "aware of trends of increasing [academy trust] executive pay and monitors this through an annual engagement exercise". It said there were "opportunities to drive value for money in this area".

James Zuccollo of the Education Policy Institute noted that "schools are being told to find savings yet again to fund blanket pay rises" after "years of efficiency drives".

He said: "This approach ignores two realities: first, schools are already under immense pressure to meet growing needs. Second, uniform pay rises waste money by overpaying where recruitment is healthy and underpaying where shortages are acute."



Luke Sibietta



Matt Wrack

SUBSCRIPTION

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ANY TIME ANY PLACE.

EducationScape Training & Events are offering expert-led, flexible professional development for schools, colleges, and training providers.

More than training—it's a whole professional development ecosystem.

FIND OUT MORE

 educationscape.com/subscription



Unlimited users



Scalable for any organisation



High-impact. Global reach



Discounts on bespoke training



Access to an on-demand webinar catalogue



Delivered by world-class facilitators



NEWS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Enrichment pledge dropped on cash-strapped schools

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

The quality of enrichment activities will be assessed by Ofsted – as record numbers of schools slash extracurricular activities to save cash.

The Department for Education will publish a set of enrichment benchmarks for schools across five categories: civic engagement; arts and culture; nature, outdoor and adventure; sport and physical activities and developing wider life skills.

Ofsted will consider whether schools are meeting expectations as part of its inspections, with information made available to parents through new school profiles.

But it comes as a record number of school leaders report being forced to cut trips, sports and extracurricular activities due to funding constraints, according to a Sutton Trust survey.

It is also at least the fifth set of school expectations announced by Labour since they took power 16 months ago.

The government has already announced it will set expectations for behaviour and parental engagement in the upcoming schools white paper, as well as post-16 study and new careers education targets.

General secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, Pepe Di'lasio, said the "randomly announced" benchmarks "will be added to the many expectations over which schools are judged without a word about how this will be resourced".

He added: "The stark reality is many schools have had to cut back extracurricular activities



because government funding is so desperately inadequate."

The DfE said the benchmarks would ask schools to "ensure every child has access to activities across the five categories of enrichment".

Civic engagement can include volunteering and democracy activities, while arts and culture can mean visits to museums and galleries.

For nature, outdoors and adventure, the DfE said activities could be climate education, time outdoors and residential camps. For developing wider life skills, examples of cooking, debating, managing finances and coding were given.

The announcement came alongside the newly published curriculum and assessment review, but was not part of Professor Becky Francis' recommendations.

Participation in enrichment activities increase the likelihood of young people entering higher education and securing work, the Education Policy Institute has previously found.

But the Sutton Trust said half of schools

reported cutting spending on trips and outings last year, while 27 per cent spent less on sports and other extracurricular activities.

The charity said in April 2024 that cuts to spending were at the highest level since it began polling in 2017.

School profiles that include information about enrichment activities will be created for parents, the DfE added. They will be piloted with small user groups this academic year, before being fully launched in 2026/27.

Natalie Perera, chief executive of the Education Policy Institute, said enrichment "provides longer-lasting benefits to young people", but the government will "need to set out how disadvantaged young people are fully able to access such activities, as they often have both direct and indirect costs to parents".

Ruth Marvel, chief executive of The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, said she was delighted by the Government's enrichment entitlement pledge, describing it as a "watershed moment".

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

Unity names new CEO to replace Coulson

The chief executive of a group representing private school headteachers is set to succeed Dr Tim Coulson at the Unity Schools Partnership academy trust. The 40-school trust has named Dominic Norrish as its new CEO after long-term boss Coulson left to become director general of the Department for Education's regions group.

Norrish – who will move into the position in the new year – said he is "excited ... to play a role supporting the brilliant work done by staff" across the trust's secondary, primary and special schools.

"Having spent almost all of my adult life living in East Anglia, I feel privileged to contribute to the success of its next generation."

Having trained as a history teacher, Norrish worked in classroom and leadership roles in a number of state schools. He was a member of United Learning Trust's executive team for 10 years, working as its COO for the latter half of that period.

Norrish is currently CEO of IAPS, a headteachers' association representing 650 independent schools in the UK

and overseas.

Unity's board highlighted his "wealth of experience and deep commitment to the organisation's core values".

Trust chair Chris Quinn also thanked "everyone who has provided support and leadership during the recent interim period".

"Their commitment and resilience have been vital in maintaining the stability and momentum of our schools."



Dominic Norrish

Court rejects union call to review new Ofsted rules

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS
@LYDIACHSW

A union has been refused permission to launch a judicial review over new Ofsted report card inspections.

School leaders' union NAHT general secretary Paul Whiteman said it "will now consider an appeal and will be consulting our members on industrial action".

The NAHT filed a claim for judicial review at the High Court in May, warning that its members feared the increase in the number of sub-judgments under new report cards "will only increase high-stakes accountability and pressure".

The union opposed the report card proposals on legal grounds, "arguing that adequate consultation has not been conducted regarding the plan for a new five-point scale to grade schools".

Last month, school unions the NEU and ASCL announced they were supporting NAHT's action, and would provide witness statements.

But on Monday it was confirmed that the High Court had declined NAHT's request.

'Not matters for the High Court'

The Honourable Mr Justice Saini, filing his decision on Monday, said "the merits of Ofsted's report card grading system" and "its approach to

the well-being issues raised, are not matters for this court".

He said a judicial review court must ensure a public body "acts in accordance with the standards of procedural fairness the law requires, including not predetermining the outcome before consultation".

He said: "In my judgment, there was no arguable error on these matters."

Mr Justice Saini argued that "the true complaint in this case concerns matters of policy choice and system design".

He said it was "for Ofsted to decide how to conduct its inspections in the way which, in its expert judgment, is most effective, while taking account of the risk to the well-being of teaching staff and leaders". He added: "The evidence does not persuade me that its approach to these risks involved any arguable public law error."

'Disappointing decision'

Paul Whiteman described the decision as "disappointing", but added that the case "was always being brought forward on a very narrow point of law relating to the validity of Ofsted's consultation process for their new framework".

"The decision today doesn't detract from our valid and reasonable concern about



the damage to the mental health and wellbeing of school leaders and staff of the new report cards," he said.

"This is an acute and basic health and safety issue recognised by an independent report commissioned by Ofsted itself, which has not been dealt with at all."

Whiteman claimed both Ofsted and the government "have failed to address the very real risk posed by the new framework to school leaders".

Ofsted chief inspector Sir Martyn Oliver welcomed the court's decision.

Ofsted had "consulted extensively" on its reforms, he added. New report card inspections are due to be launched on Monday.

Oliver said the report cards would be better for parents, "giving them more detailed and useful information about their child's school, nursery or college". He added: "And, crucially, they will be better for children and older learners – helping to raise standards of education for all, particularly those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable."

"I have every confidence that headteachers will recognise the changes are fair, that inspection takes staff well-being fully into account, and that the whole experience is collaborative and constructive."

"We will continue to engage constructively with all representative bodies as we roll out our reforms."

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

Ofsted alters inspection rules days before launch

Ofsted has tweaked its inspection framework to tackle concerns raised during pilot inspections – just days before its new report cards are due to be rolled out.

The watchdog has this week published findings from 115 pilot inspections it carried out using the new report cards and inspection framework to be launched on Monday.

In a narrative summary, Ofsted claimed that feedback had been "really encouraging", but said some leaders "did raise concerns".

"A few mentioned increased workload and pressure on staff, particularly in smaller schools or those with more complex circumstances, where logistics could be challenging. Others had worries about how

achievement is evaluated," it said.

Ofsted has now taken "steps to address concerns".

It originally said inspections lasting two days would have an additional inspector on-site during day one – meaning there would be three, instead of two inspectors.

Given capacity concerns, small schools will now have two inspectors on both days when inspections start next week.

Small schools had raised concerns about "unrealistic" demands new inspections will have on heads with small staff numbers.

The inspections will include three learning walks and at least five "reflection meetings" with leaders, and will be preceded by a planning

call that can take up to 90 minutes.

Concerns have also been raised about the new "achievement" area that schools are to be judged on.

Ofsted has now added the word "typically" to one of its "expected standards" for achievement.

The toolkit now reads: "On the whole, pupils achieve well. Typically, this will be reflected in their attainment and progress in national tests and examinations, which are broadly in line with national averages, including for disadvantaged pupils."

Ofsted said this change "helps to acknowledge that sometimes, due to limitations in the data, pupils' achievement might not be fully reflected in published outcomes".

ANALYSIS: FUNDING

'Savings platform' plan to help schools get better reserve returns**JACK DYSON**

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

The government plans to "signpost" cash-strapped schools to "savings platforms" offering high-interest savings accounts to help ease funding worries by "unlocking" the sector's "substantial reserves".

Department for Education (DfE) officials are urging companies to come forward and tell them what they can offer schools as they target leaders' "under-utilised assets".

Schools will be forced to find more savings to deliver teacher pay rises over the next three years, which the government has suggested should be 6.5 per cent in total.

Schools Week analysis shows that trusts' investment takings have increased to almost £140 million. But nearly a third of academy chains did not make a penny from investments.

DfE to signpost schools to invest

In a new tender, DfE noted so-called "savings platforms" could be "a useful solution for some" schools to "improve their banking arrangements" by earning interest on cash balances.

The services allow schools to access rates from several banks in one place, without needing to set up new accounts.

This allows "them to benefit from the best deals in the market", the department said.

It wants to speak to the suppliers of these platforms to "understand in detail" what they offer and how they work.

"Our intention is to then signpost schools to those we consider to be the most suitable," the tender added.

"In return we will be asking suppliers of those platforms to provide us with regular data to show take-up of their service by schools, and the amount of interest earned."

'Under-used assets'

The department will not "itself be entering into contractual relationships with providers" or receive payments from the signposted service.

In its evidence to the School Teachers' Review Body, the government identified "significant potential in under-utilised assets across the school sector, including sizeable financial reserves and physical assets such as land and buildings".



Some of the opportunities "include better banking solutions and, in particular, making use of the substantial reserves in our system, which totalled more than £6 billion in 2023-24".

This equates to "10 per cent of core schools budget, which could be unlocked and used to benefit children directly".

Academy rules state leaders "may invest to further the trust's charitable aims, but must ensure investment risk is properly managed".

They must "exercise care and skill" when making decisions, taking advice where appropriate, and ensure "exposure to investment products is tightly controlled so security of funds takes precedence over revenue maximisation".

£136m from investments

Analysis of government data suggests trusts generated just over £136 million in investment income in 2023-24 – a sharp increase on £52 million the year before.

A report by the Kreston group of accountancy firms attributed the rise to higher interest rates, which "has encouraged trusts to focus on deposit returns". But it is "only in the last year that good treasury management has become more widespread" it said.

Andi Brown, of academy consultancy firm SAAF Education, said in some cases £100,000 of additional revenue could "make the difference between retaining staff or needing to reduce headcount in the future".

Twelve trusts made more than £1 million last year.

United Learning Trust (£5.5 million), Harris Federation (£3.7 million) and Oasis Community Learning (£3.3 million) brought in the most.

United Learning Trust said the cash – the majority of which was generated through bank interest – was "ultimately spent in our schools". The trust is "careful with these investments and the returns are proportional to the size of our reserves as [England's] largest MAT".

30% not investing

Oasis chief executive John Barneby added that the sum his trust generated came "generated through low or no-risk, short to medium term investments with our banking partner".

By earning "interest on temporary yet reliable balances, we maximise resources without compromising security or compliance" he said.

But he added: "Not all trusts have the same capacity or structures, which explains variation across the sector. Like many large organisations, we manage significant cash flows, and it is both responsible and expected that we steward these funds wisely."

Kreston's research showed the largest trust was generating £35 per pupil, compared with £25 generated per pupil for small MATs.

However, our analysis shows 30 per cent of trusts (714) generated nothing from investments. Nonetheless this figure was down from 44 per cent (1,068) the year before.

But schools 'need more cash'

Julia Harnden, deputy director of school leaders' union ASCL, said many schools' reserves had been eroded by squeezed funding.

While the DfE initiative was done with the "best of intentions ... the underlying problem doesn't go away" she said.

Leora Cruddas, chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, added that any money made through investments is "a fraction of the costs schools are facing".

The DfE said it aimed to launch a new programme "shortly" to help schools to "maximise value from every pound".



Leora Cruddas

INTERVIEW: ACADEMY TRUSTS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

'The best-kept secret in education': Hobby on his new TKAT vocation

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Russell Hobby has previously been dubbed a "teaching Benjamin Button", with each career move taking him closer to the classroom.

He's gone from being an arm's-length education consultant, to running the National Association of Headteachers, to working with new recruits at Teach First.

He's taken another step closer to those classrooms in his latest role, where he is now in charge of 45 schools across the south and east of England as CEO of the Kemnal Academies Trust (TKAT),

Despite the chain's size – only eight other MATs are larger – the 53-year-old calls it "one of the best-kept secrets in education".

'Where's the action?'

Hobby's move into the trust sector was a surprise. Since 2017, he had been CEO of Teach First, the education charity tasked with recruiting top graduates for England's poorest schools.

When asked why he decided to go, he responds: "Eight years."

He had "done a lot there ...but it gets to a point where it's someone else's turn".

"When I'm making career choices, what I'm looking at is where's the action, where can we make a difference? I can do more in a trust than I could in almost any other role in the system," he explains.

"It seems to me that after years of devolution and with all the resource constraints that central government has, the levers of change are much closer to schools now."

The 'big pressures'

After taking the reins at TKAT, Hobby set himself the target of visiting all the trust's schools by Christmas. Two months in and he's through 20.

"You know my background. I'm not going to walk into a classroom and give a teacher feedback on what they're doing," he says.

"My job is to build a strategy for the next five



Russell Hobby

'The levers of change are much closer to schools now'

to seven years. These visits are telling me what are the big pressures on the system."

Cash is "tight". SEND diagnosis is up and provision "is increasingly stretched", with the trust "entering into some very adversarial relationships as a result".

Pupil numbers are also "rising and falling in different areas" and then "you've got more of a sense now that school is more of an optional activity post-Covid. The attendance crisis is very real".

However, the trust is "in a relatively robust position organisationally", with "healthy" finances. He credits this, in part, to its size.

"That's where scale comes into play – we can support individual schools with particular challenges. It feels like a very firm foundation."

'Stealing' from other trusts

While Hobby's been visiting the TKAT academies, his senior team "has been out there meeting as many other trusts as we can". They've

been told to "steal everything that we can" from the likes of United Learning, Ark and Oasis.

"To be honest, I don't have to steal it because they're queuing up to say, 'This is what we do, how can we help?' People talk of a competitive system, but it doesn't feel very competitive to me."

Two of his directors recently visited The Regis School in Bognor Regis to look at its "aspirations curriculum". There, every child "gets their career aspirations assessed at the start [in year 7] and that helps to shape their provision", according to Hobby.

"You've got to think about careers, the earlier the better. I would start in primary to be honest. If you fancy a career in medicine, if you're not doing the right GCSEs then that's ruled out already."

The autonomy tightrope

Hobby says TKAT "is already excellent in some areas", too, highlighting its special, early years

INTERVIEW: ACADEMY TRUSTS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

and primary provision.

For these, it is “in a position where people should be coming to have a look at what we’re doing and people should be trying to steal from us”.

But he’s identified secondary outcomes as an area for improvement. He’s yet to meet “a single headteacher who doesn’t agree”.

To aid this, the trust “needs to put some focus on” introducing “shared” curriculum materials for key stage 3. He also wants to convert teacher recruitment into “a shared enterprise across [the] trust”.

But Hobby will walk a “tightrope” to preserve heads’ “autonomy”.

“Every great head I’ve met is a little bit unusual in some way,” he says. “We cannot wring the spirit out of the system.

“You don’t really want it eroded through the finance system, human resource decisions, the IT and technology – that’s where a large trust can free heads up to be the leaders of learning.”

Four RISE schools

Four of Kennal’s secondaries have been added to the Department for Education RISE school improvement programme, after being identified as ‘stuck’.

Stuck schools are those rated ‘requires improvement’ following an earlier inspection that resulted in a grade below ‘good’. Previously, they could have been in line for academy orders or trust rebrokerages.

But the government has seconded 65 experienced turnaround leaders as advisers who are appointed to specific RISE schools in their region to identify priorities and propose an outside organisation to deliver support.

Hobby believes it’s a “good way forward”, given the advisers have “a track record of school improvement, given there’s a judgement being made and it’s adapted to the school’s need and when you think what the alternatives will be for a school that’s struggling”.

He adds: “Sustaining school improvement is a never-ending job and schools go through cycles as well. Knee-jerk reactions to early signs of challenge are not the right thing to do, which is not about having low ambitions.”

Two of the TKAT schools were adjudged not to require the additional input from a supporting organisation, while the others have been paired with neighbouring trusts.

Hobby insists that “when people tell us something needs to improve, it’s not a reflection on our values, our leadership, our own mission



‘They’re queuing up to say ‘this is what we do, how can we help?’

– it’s just a piece of data that we can use”.

And “if it comes with some extra resources attached to it, even better”.

“I’m never going to turn away help... so bring it on. The pupils, staff and parents know exactly what is going on in these schools.

“Whether the government has spotted it or not, they know the truth, so there’s no point in hiding from any of this.”

White working-class communities

Hobby says the debate over the results for white working-class children “is very real” in many of his schools.

Star Academies CEO Sir Hamid Patel, who is co-chairing the inquiry into white working-class outcomes, said last month the youngsters “seem the most resistant to the transformative work” of schools.

Hobby thinks the differences aren’t “about race or class”. Instead, it’s an issue of “place and communities we have not served as a society very well for a long period of time”.

“I think families are making quite rational choices around what jobs are [available locally], what job am I going to get after school, is it worth me giving up my summer evenings for revision, what will that qualification get me.

“It’s not a lack of ambition at all. They’re

saying, ‘There’s nothing for me if I do that.’”

With schools “the last institution standing” in many areas, they must try to solve the problem, Hobby says.

“We shouldn’t have to do it, but we have to. It’s very hard for young people when networks don’t exist to know all of the jobs that are available.

“Some of that social network is lacking, and I think we can do that sort of thing.”

Moving out of the shadows

Hobby believes the trust could help shape debates around this and other hot-button issues, like inclusion.

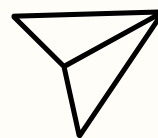
He points to the trust’s use of its two special schools, whose leaders regularly visit the chain’s mainstream settings and advise on the building of “specialist resource provision”.

They will also “have a role to play” in the development of the trust’s shared key stage three curriculum, as well as its “teaching and learning frameworks”.

“TKAT is one of the best-kept secrets in education. People put their head down and just get on with it,” Hobby continues. “I want to honour that sense of it being a trust that gets on with things, but I see it as part of my job to get it the recognition it deserves.”

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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



Letter of the week



False economy

The government's proposal that schools can absorb 6.5 per cent teacher pay awards through efficiency misunderstands the system ([DfE believes schools can make savings in leadership teams](#), October 31).

Their error is to see the sector in aggregate. There are opportunities for efficiency and examples of large reserves, but these are not uniformly distributed, whereas the cost of teachers is.

As primary school rolls fall – staff, buildings and overheads remain locked in inefficiency. Some of this can be defended as scarcity in low-density areas, but much is because the government will not engage in a school closure and amalgamation programme.

If the government wants to allocate money more efficiently, it needs to allocate its demands more efficiently as well. But there is no evidence

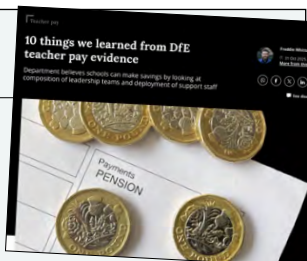
of a let-up in the bureaucratic burdens placed on schools.

Also, government pointing to support staff as the source of salvation ignores the considerable SEND and safeguarding work schools now do in place of local authority services.

Nor is it helpful to suggest weighting the 6.5 per cent towards the later years. This looks more like an acknowledgment of the electoral cycle than the school business cycle.

The trust system is best-placed to deliver efficiency and to ensure collaboration does not unravel with a change of head, but schools can help one another through collaboration short of merger, which is right where diversity of choice matters.

Tomas Thurogood-Hyde, director of corporate services, Astrea Academy Trust



High Court rejects NAHT's Ofsted report card challenge

Leaders' union to consider appeal and will consult members on industrial action after judicial review application refused



The Big Resist

Following the High Court's rejection of NAHT's report card challenge ([High court rejects NAHT's Ofsted report card challenge](#), November 3) the struggle to establish a reformed, not just renewed inspection system, is more urgent than ever.

Apart from supporting any NAHT appeal, all professional associations should urge, not merely request, their members to desist taking the role of assistant inspectors until an agreed inspection system is in place.

They might go even further and agree to suspend the membership of would-be assistant inspectors? That would jeopardise, even sink Ofsted's roll-out.

They should also call on their members not to seek appointment as HM Inspectors for the time being.

At the very least a totally independent evaluation of the early stages of the new arrangements needs to be commissioned by a consortium of the unions, or perhaps established through crowd-funding.

More controversially, a small number of headteachers (perhaps very close to retirement?) should be asked to resist the entry of Ofsted into their schools, with legal expenses, if necessary, covered by the unions.

A chance of professional immortality for the heads concerned?

Colin Richards,
joint lead of the Alternative Big Listen

CURRICULUM REVIEW SNAPSHOT VIEWS ...



"An incredible, landmark moment to reverse the fortunes of an important, but beleaguered, subject."

Dr Richard Kueh, chief education officer of CAM Academy Trust, on calls to bring RE into the national curriculum.

"Without investment in high-quality professional development and practical classroom resources, the potential benefits of this policy will not be fully realised."

Dani Payne, head of education at Social Market Foundation, on financial education lessons in primary schools.

"Given the particular challenges in science teacher recruitment, this will need to be accompanied by more ambitious, targeted teacher training bursaries as well as a renewed emphasis on teacher retention."

Billy Huband-Thompson, head of research and policy at the Sutton Trust, on the introduction of an entitlement to triple science at GCSE.

"This is a great aim, but we know how hard it is to teach critical thinking in the abstract – we need to see what the programmes of study will look like."

Daisy Christodoulou, director of education at No More Marking, on teaching pupils to spot misinformation.

"The priority should be exposing children to the best that has been thought and written, not necessarily seeing themselves reflected."

Adrian Hilton, conservative academic, on making the curriculum more diverse.

Send your letters here:
LETTERSTOTHEEDITOR@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

SCHOOLS WEEK FE WEEK JOBS

Powered by education week jobs

Recruitment made easy

Get in
touch



Contact: **Clare Halliday**

+44 (0) 7834 165 664

clare.halliday@educationscape.com

Built by the makers of **Guardian Jobs**

Annual packages **from £999**



www.educationweekjobs.co.uk

@EduWeekJobs



PART OF



EducationScape
INVESTIGATE · INFORM · INSPIRE

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



SEAMUS MURPHY

CEO, Turner Schools

Why we've got 'stuck' schools all wrong

Stuck schools often get a 'hero' leader, but there are much better solutions, argues Seamus Murphy

The notion of 'stuck' schools is at the top of the political agenda. But having spent pretty much my entire professional life working with schools who would likely be regarded as stuck, I find the current narrative problematic. This includes both the supposed causes of why such schools struggle, and the notions of the leaders they require.

What's more, whilst politicians, academics and system leaders are quick to diagnose the characteristics of stuck schools – they are less keen to outline the tensions in the system that actively contribute to their creation.

So, what has the system got wrong?

The wrong diagnosis

The first challenge is that the acquisition of knowledge, as demonstrated by higher qualifications such as degrees,

remains the sole marker of success.

Worse, this success is usually framed as the result of virtuous self-improvement and therefore thoroughly deserved when, in fact, the picture is much more complex.

For example, children of graduates are 20 times more likely to achieve a higher degree than those from non-graduate families.

Consequently, it is not unusual that in our most deprived and challenged communities, many struggle to buy into a vision of education that appears alien to them, especially when they are characterised as feckless or undeserving.

Secondly, it's unsurprising that many 'stuck' schools are located on the peripheries; in coastal or post-industrial towns and therefore isolated from not just educational but wider employment and social opportunities.

Unsurprisingly, these schools have higher incidents of poverty and more children who are identified with special educational needs.

Finally, those schools that are at the greatest risk of being stuck



“ Transformation is usually by changing the intake

are usually the least popular with parents. That means they are hard-pressed financially and likely to be in receipt of casual admissions of pupils from families who need extensive support.

The wrong medicine

Too often the medicine applied to these schools is the imposition of the transformational leader, or their more recently nationally accredited version, the 'system leader'.

These heroic individuals set about the school with a tested formula that frequently includes removing long serving leaders; setting challenging targets for the end of key stages; and upgrading the behaviour policy to be 'zero tolerant'.

Sure enough over time, the new

leadership transforms the school.

But, more often than not, this is by changing the intake so that the 'stuck school' no longer serves its core community, especially if the local families are not deemed aspirational enough.

Whilst London Challenge was very successful, it is hard to find examples of turnarounds where there is no evidence of significant pupil mobility and/or admissions management.

There is another way

In my new book on stuck schools, I suggest there is another way. Whilst stuck schools need support and help to enhance their leadership capacity, there are a wide range of factors that need addressing to bring about sustainable change.

Continued on next page

Opinion

First, leaders must be able to clarify the complexity that exists in their stuck schools to address the root causes of long-term failures.

Secondly, leaders should create a culture that welcomes challenge and accountability, that is clear-eyed and ambitious – but driven by governance rather than a fear of the regulator.

Thirdly, leadership must be unleashed. Not just creating capacity to support senior leaders, but also subject leaders and teachers all the way through to education support staff.

Staff who choose to work in our most challenging schools are not lazy or unproductive, but simply overwhelmed by the scale of daily challenges they face.

Therefore leaders must embrace the workforce they have and focus on making everyone better every day, making do and mending their staff body.

Too often leaders in stuck schools blame parents, poverty of opportunity or the system for why schools cannot improve. Whereas those leaders who capture their community find that far from being a barrier, the community becomes a significant asset and persistent problems such as attendance are more easily overcome.

The government's recent guidance on parental engagement is an excellent starting point.

The competition challenge

However, unless schools across a town or an area collaborate and



“ Brave leaders take risks to adapt the curriculum

work together to meet the needs of those pupils who face the strongest headwinds, the twin forces of competition and parental choice create at least one school where the scale of the challenges become unmanageable.

Collaboration creates the opportunity to co-construct the most appropriate provision for those pupils who are struggling to be in school, rather than assume that these pupils are someone else's problem.

Hopefully, the role of RISE advisors will be focused on co-designing the most appropriate support for their target schools, although we are still in the early days of this policy.

But perhaps the biggest tension for stuck schools is the way we measure success, based on a curriculum model that fails to meet the needs of the 'forgotten third'.

Take risks

Brave leaders take risks in stuck schools to adapt the curriculum to best meet the needs of the pupils they serve, but too often stuck schools are exhorted to rigidly apply the curriculum without acknowledging context.

In addition, there is an unresolved tension between the current administration's drive to make schools more inclusive and rigidly sticking to the previous administration's standards agenda.

The current over-focus on key stage 4 is unhelpful and what is far more important for pupils and families is actually accessing high quality level 3 provision that leads to meaningful employment, further education and training that is not exclusively focused on university.

The recent post-16 white paper is especially encouraging and should

the proposals come to pass, would provide a welcome boon for schools that are at risk of being stuck.

For some pupils with additional barriers; access to a level 3 qualification by 19 will mean that they can gain employment, live independently and contribute to society.

The recent policy announcements, including at the Labour conference, are definitely encouraging, though it remains to be seen whether the funding to support the proposed alternatives to A-level is in place to achieve these laudable goals.

Making stuck schools unstuck

Throughout my career, and increasingly of late, I hear that the problem of stuck schools is that they are just too complex, and that they are just part and parcel of our educational system. This is plain wrong.

Leaders of stuck schools with the right framework and support can provide the communities they serve with a great education. But to gain and sustain success, leaders need to be brave and take risks.

They need to make curriculum choices that benefit their pupils, focus on inclusion and ensure access to further qualifications that lead to meaningful employment.

Ultimately, the best test for these schools is whether they truly make a difference to the communities they serve over generations, rather than with one set of results or an individual inspection report.



HANNAH
CARTER
Headteacher, Orchards Academy

Banning phones in schools is a lazy opt-out

No one disagrees unfettered use of smartphones in schools is a bad thing, but indulging in a moral panic misses opportunities to prepare young people for life, says Hannah Carter

The moral crusade against the smartphone in schools is a baffling phenomenon. The most recent is a request from our local MP Laura Trott for a nationwide ban.

Every few months, I encounter people deeply committed to the 'anti-smartphone' movement, convinced that they have uncovered some kind of shocking truth: allowing children access to a device capable of distraction, danger, and social complexity is a problem.

My confusion stems from the fact that virtually no one disagrees with the core principle: children should not have unfettered access to personal smartphones during the school day. The consensus among educators and parents is solid.

The real debate isn't whether to manage phones; it's whether a blanket, national prohibition is a genuine solution or merely a symbolic surrender that distracts from the deeper work of education.

The money-making machine

When you scratch beneath the surface of the moral panic, the whole endeavour starts to look less

like a policy solution and more like a collective industry seeking to profit from parental and governmental anxiety.

If a school mandates a 'phone-free' environment, it needs a system. Enter the entrepreneurs. We are seeing an explosion of products like magnetic locking pouches and high-tech storage solutions – all designed to manage a problem that, arguably, schools could handle with existing disciplinary policies.

These companies have a powerful, vested interest in keeping the 'ban them all' narrative alive, as every new school represents a significant contract.

Schools, already on razor-thin budgets, are pressured into spending thousands on locking devices to enforce a rule that should be about expectation setting and conduct. The focus shifts from pedagogy to asset management.

The horse has already bolted

The 'ban' narrative also entirely ignores reality. Children already own and use smartphones. They are the primary tools of communication, organisation, and entertainment for most teenagers.

This leads to the most illogical parallel drawn by ban proponents: the 'would you let your child smoke or drink alcohol?' argument.

Of course not. But this analogy fails spectacularly. This is an exercise in false equivalence,



“ Anti-smartphone crusade is nostalgic yearning for a simpler time

designed to invoke maximum moral outrage, not reasoned debate. Alcohol and tobacco are substances with inherent, immediate, and unambiguous physical toxicity. A smartphone is a complex, essential tool for life outside the classroom.

Moreover, a ban simply drives the behaviour underground. Teenagers, particularly those predisposed to risk-taking, enjoy pushing boundaries. Prohibition merely makes monitoring and addressing the problem harder.

The lazy opt-out

Banning something is always the easiest, most expedient answer. It allows the institution to completely opt out of the messy, difficult, and profoundly important job of education. The push for a total ban is fundamentally lazy because it ignores the core responsibility of schooling in this age: digital literacy and digital citizenship.

We are educating children for a world where they will navigate social media, manage personal data, identify misinformation, and use mobile technology for work and communication.

If we ban the device entirely

for seven formative years, we are sending them into the digital deep end without ever teaching them how to swim.

The challenging but necessary approach is to teach them proper use. This means explicit lessons on privacy settings, responsible digital communication, and how to put the phone away when focus is required.

It's messy. It requires effort from teachers and parents. But it is the only responsible way forward. A ban is an admission of failure: a declaration that we, the adults, are incapable of teaching our children how to use a modern tool.

Imposing a sweeping, national legal mandate would create an administrative nightmare, diverting even more precious resources away from teaching and learning and toward enforcement, storage, and litigation.

Ultimately, the anti-smartphone crusade feels like a nostalgic yearning for a simpler time that never truly existed. The solution isn't a ban that relieves us of our educational duty; it's a commitment to effective, nuanced, and persistent teaching about responsibility in a digital world.

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



HELENA BROTHWELL

Director of education,
Windsor Academy Trust

We must call pupils in, not out, on conspiracy theories

While teachers need training in how to react, they should meet conspiratorial claims with curiosity, not judgment, says Helena Brothwell

Miss, but how do you explain the trails in the sky if planes don't spray things?"

It is said lightly, halfway through a geography lesson, but the room goes quiet. A few pupils nod. Another – curious rather than confrontational – says they saw a video about chemtrails online. These are not deliberately disruptive moments; they are quiet tests of trust.

Anyone who has spent time in a classroom over the past couple of years will know moments like this are common. Sometimes they feel easy to deal with, but others lead to anxiousness, paralysis even, in how to respond.

It shows exactly why teachers told the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools they need training and support to feel confident in how to engage with conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation.

It was pleasing to see our research cited in the curriculum review – including our recommendation to embed media literacy across the curriculum.

The Department for Education's Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) guidance was also updated

recently to include misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories as potential safeguarding harms.

Getting the terminology right is important. A conspiracy theory explains events through the secret actions of a powerful group and resists contrary evidence.

This is distinct from misinformation, which is shared in error, and disinformation, which is shared deliberately. Getting these distinctions into shared staff language helps teachers decide whether a classroom moment needs teaching, challenge or escalation.

One of the starkest findings of the report was that the online world looks very different for young people than for people my age. My algorithm sends me holidays and menopause influencers. The algorithm acts very differently towards a 14-year-old girl.

It can feel daunting, impossible even, to keep up. Recently during a lesson walk a teenage girl said that 'you wouldn't even understand half of the language or slang that we use' and our polling indicates that there is certainly a gap.

Young people require better support to navigate the digital world safely, but adults need guidance to know how to help the young people in their lives who are online.

The evidence shows the adults young people trust most are their



“ Over the teenage years, trust in adults generally declines

parents, and teachers are trusted far more than news or Wikipedia. However, over the teenage years, trust in adults generally declines.

It is important to separate healthy debate from conspiratorial thinking. Pupils questioning what they learn about politics, history or science is a sign of curiosity and good teaching welcomes that.

The challenge comes when a claim shuts down the use of evidence and insists that facts cannot be trusted. At that point it could be a safeguarding matter, because the pupil may be drifting towards voices that undermine trust in others and isolate them from reliable sources of help. The right response is pedagogy, not punishment.

This approach is not about calling pupils out, but calling them in.

These discussions may happen out of curiosity, but teachers told us that they often feel uncomfortable addressing them without clear guidance.

Updating KCSIE is a great first step, but our report recommends the DfE reviews political impartiality guidance as teachers often worry

that questioning disinformation, particularly of a political nature, risks breaching these rules. Reassurance is needed.

Changes to the guidance mean safeguarding leads should now treat online misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief in the same way they would any other pattern of risk, with clear reporting routes and time for staff discussion.

Ultimately, this is about protecting trust. When pupils bring half-understood claims into the classroom, they are often asking whether adults can be relied on to tell them the truth.

Meeting that with calm curiosity rather than fear or judgement is one of the most powerful safeguarding acts a teacher can perform. If we want young people to keep faith in evidence, institutions and each other, we first have to model that faith.

This article is part of a Schools Week series on countering conspiracies. Read them all [here](#).

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



STEVE
WREN

Former HMI

There's a sweet spot to be found in setting inspection consistency

Achieving consistency is fraught with complexity, warns Steve Wren; go too far and you can rinse insight from Ofsted inspections

The pledge to 'go further' to ensure the consistency of inspections in a Schools Week opinion piece this week was a welcome step forward. It recognises the complexity of the issue and outlines practical measures to strengthen and test reliability.

But if inspection is a form of assessment – and it is – then Ofsted must go further. They need to instigate a serious, open debate about what consistency really means – and be honest about what would be lost if consistency becomes the ultimate goal.

When thinking of reliability in examinations, one central question we ask is about inter-rater reliability: would two examiners award the same mark to the same script?

The inspection equivalent is whether two inspectors – or two inspection teams – would reach the same judgments based on the same evidence. Ideally, yes. But what would that take?

Just as we could turn a history GCSE into a series of unambiguously right or wrong multiple-choice questions, we could turn inspection into a checklist

of binary indicators: Is Progress 8 above zero? Is attendance above the national average? Are suspensions declining?

All unambiguously yes, or no. But in doing so, we'd strip away the very nuance and professional insight the system is meant to capture.

Variation in judgement isn't a flaw to be fixed – it's an inherent feature of complex evaluation. Even with rigorous training and calibration, some degree of difference will always exist.

So the real challenge is not to eliminate variation by ever narrowing the field of view, but to find the sweet spot – the level of inconsistency we can tolerate while preserving validity.

Too much variation undermines trust. Too little judgment turns inspection into a formulaic exercise.

If we're serious about consistency, we have to be honest about that trade-off.

In any assessment, where the sweet spot lies depends on how the assessment outcome will be used. The lower the stakes, the more variability we will naturally accept.

It's easy to see why people call for absolute inspection consistency. In a high-stakes system, consistency feels like fairness.

But perfect uniformity comes at a cost. The only way to achieve absolute consistency in inspection outcomes is to remove professional



“ We risk turning inspection into a tick list

judgment altogether – a move that would deliver predictability, but at the cost of validity.

In chasing perfect consistency, we risk turning inspection into a tick list, rewarding what's easily measured and sidelining much that truly matters.

The result? Distorted school behaviours, narrowed priorities, and inspections that miss the point of providing a rounded picture of school effectiveness, to complement published data.

We need clarity about the threshold Ofsted will apply when reviewing judgments. In the past, students could request a re-mark of their exam script: a senior examiner would re-mark the paper, and their view would replace the original.

Today, students can only request a review, where the question asked is not 'what mark would I give this work?', but "is this mark justifiable?". If yes, the original mark stands. A much lower threshold for consistency.

So which threshold will Ofsted use?

Does the senior inspector's view override all others, with any deviation from it labelled as inconsistency? Or will a judgement be deemed consistent if it is defensible (even if it differs from the senior inspector's opinion)?

The difference matters. If Ofsted is using the latter, it should say so. If it's using the former, it should explain why.

More importantly, we need an open, professional debate about where the sweet spot lies – the point at which consistency is strong enough to reassure, yet the process is flexible enough to preserve validity.

That conversation must include inspectors, school leaders, researchers and policymakers. It's not a technical detail. It's a question of trust, fairness and educational integrity.

We need a shared understanding of what consistency should mean. Otherwise, we risk chasing uniformity at the expense of insight – and losing sight of what inspection is for.

THE LEGAL LEADER

Expert advice on education and the law



Use common sense to deal with an angry AI-created legal request

Claire Archibald

Legal director,
Browne Jacobson



Subject access requests have become common but new legislation provides guidance on how to react sensibly, says Claire Archibald

When I first started auditing schools, I'd suggest they practise handling a subject access request (SAR) "just in case". That suggestion would be laughable today.

Despite new legislation providing a clearer framework for managing this burden, schools are struggling to keep pace with the changing landscape.

Understanding the SAR surge

A SAR is triggered when an individual requests a copy of their own personal data under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), exercising their right to access their personal data being processed by an organisation.

Experience shows that SARs typically arise from unhappy employees during grievance or disciplinary procedures, as well as from parents concerned about their child's special educational needs, behavioural incidents or a school's handling of issues.

Increasingly, any complaint, disciplinary action, exclusion or accident on school premises is followed by a SAR.

Requests are handled by staff with additional responsibilities within schools or trusts – school business managers, office teams, special educational needs co-ordinators, headteachers, CEOs and COOs.

There have been several attempts to change the law to make SARs less burdensome, including one abandoned proposal that would allow organisations to refuse "vexatious" requests.

However, the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025, passed in June and being rolled out gradually over the coming months, provides schools with a clearer framework by requiring only "reasonable and proportionate" searches when responding to requests.



The AI-generated requests problem

But a key issue is that requesters increasingly use AI tools like ChatGPT to generate requests.

While this democratises access by giving people confidence to submit requests, it can overcomplicate the process.

AI-generated SARs and follow-up correspondence are often threatening in tone and request irrelevant information, going beyond what an SAR should be – a simple request for personal information held.

Common sense about what's reasonable and proportionate is essential.

One SAR we handled included a request for every staff meeting minute mentioning the requester's daughter. When we asked whether they'd ever discussed this pupil in staff meetings, the answer was no – so no search was needed.

Sounds obvious, but the request (and its tone) had put the organisation into a spin about what they needed to search through.

So how can schools better handle SARs?

1. Prioritise human conversation

The Information Commissioner's Office, during a session on SARs at its annual Data Protection Practitioners' Conference in October, recommended acknowledging the use of AI in correspondence when handling a request. Rather than responding to every aspect of a long AI-generated request, instead asking for a human-led discussion on what specifically the requester really wants can often resolve a deadlock.

2. Clarify, clarify, clarify

Don't rush into searching. Spend time analysing the request carefully, determining exactly what's wanted and the best data collection strategy.

3. Don't treat the request as a search map

The requester states what they want; the organisation determines what to search for using a reasonable and proportionate strategy.

4. Do intentional searches, not just e-searches

While e-searches can be useful, restrict them to particular mailboxes, drives or timeframes. Consider manual searching – asking a teacher or line manager which emails and records they may have about the requester – with e-searches supporting rather than leading.

5. Know when to stop

The ICO doesn't expect organisations to have ongoing, never-ending correspondence with an unhappy requester. Review decision-making processes to ensure communication beyond an initial SAR response is indeed reasonable and proportionate.

Taking back control

The Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 provides schools with the legal backing to take a more reasonable and proportionate approach to SARs.

Having a complementary strategy for responding to SARs and searching for information will ensure schools don't fall victim to the volume of requests.

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

FRIDAY:

A newsletter dropped today from the REACH consortium – which is overseeing the trialling of government SEND reforms under what is known as the Change Programme.

One key update was under the header 'what is the Change Programme and what is it trying to achieve?'

Good question. We've been asking both the group, and government, the same one for weeks, with no answer (FYI, the article doesn't answer the question either).

The programme was trialling a load of Tory-era SEND reforms which have now been ditched.

The programme has now pivoted to focus on different policies, but trying to find out which ones have remained (if any at all) has been met by radio silence.

MONDAY:

Journalists were well briefed on Becky Francis's curriculum review – getting the key recommendations today and the full report on Tuesday, giving us plenty of time to put together considered pieces on what was in it.

Unfortunately, the same can't be said about the government's response – which is arguably much more important, as this is the stuff that will actually become policy.

We got a thin press release sometime on Tuesday with vague commitments, but had to wait until 9.30am (three hours after the review had actually been published on Wednesday) to see the full response.

Just another day in government comms!

TUESDAY:

Former free school founder Peter Hyman is spending his days since being booted out as Sir Keir Starmer's policy adviser by ...offering Starmer advice on his policies.

A new Substack by Hyman, who also

advised Tony Blair, lists ideas for how the PM could hit social media stardom.

As reported by Politico, ideas include Starmer doing a debate with 25 "Reform-leaning voters", and "unfiltered" videos from his Downing Street flat and a Starmer podcast.

It looks like education secretary Bridget Phillipson might have picked up the memo.

She posted a video last week on Twitter (yes, we'll keep calling it that forevz) where she lifted a box up to reveal nostalgic items from the 2000s.

This included stuff like Tamagotchis, Game Boys and an iPod Shuffle (with every reveal being met by an 'ahhh' from Our Bridget). It was all a (definitely not Super Cringey) segue way into the government's Sure Start 2.0 policy (Sure Starts were also big in the 2000s).

Welcome to the new world of political campaigning.

WEDNESDAY:

The government has played up the importance of having an independent, and evidence-based curriculum review.

But it has ignored some of the recommendations (such as on progress 8 and year 8 diagnostic tests), and also just promised things that weren't even in the review (such as new AI and languages qualifications).

Helen Hayes, education select committee chair, makes quite a good point: "it is important that government set out why this is the case and their own evidence that they have relied on in reaching a different conclusion".

Shadow education secretary Laura Trott pushed Phillipson on the point during parliamentary questions today, particularly on why the government overruled Francis to instead reform progress 8 – but answer came there none.

Totally mad overreaction of the week goes to the Daily Mail. Its front page today read: 'Labour dumbs down schools'.

"Ministers have been accused of 'education vandalism' after tearing up Tory reforms aimed at making the curriculum more rigorous," the story read.

This is because the review suggested shaving 10 per cent of the overall amount of time pupils spend being examined at GCSE (currently one of the highest in any country) and that the EBacc should be scrapped (an accountability measure dreamt up by Michael Gove in a few hours so he had a policy to announce on a TV interview).

They also seemed to suggest undoing the EBacc will lead to pupils taking more 'Mickey Mouse' subjects like ...art.

Many sector leaders, who have spent the past decade supporting and implementing Gove's reforms, thankfully took to social media to call out this nonsense.

Meanwhile, while we were busy digging into the ins and outs of the first curriculum review for a decade – the national media was writing stories about what a popstar thought about the changes.

At one point, the story that Ed Sheeran liked the changes WAS LEADING THE BBC'S COVERAGE OF THE CURRICULUM REVIEW.

Deary me.

Sheeran praises curriculum changes which mean more kids will study music



SCHOOLS WEEK

FE WEEK | **JOBS**

Powered by education week jobs



Annual Recruitment Packages From £999

Unlimited basic listings



www.educationweekjobs.co.uk

**Get in
touch**



Contact: **Clare Halliday**
+44 (0) 7834 165 664
clare.halliday@educationscape.com

@EduWeekJobs



PART OF

