

'Enrichment
benchmarks will be
boost, not burden'



THOUSANDS OF RETIRED TEACHERS DIE AMID PENSION WAIT



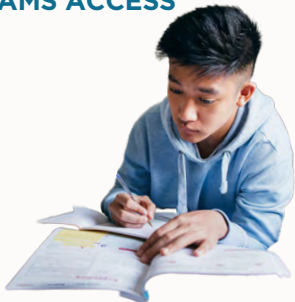
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'IT'S TIME TO TURN SEND INSIDE OUT'



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DOES CURRICULUM REVIEW MEET SEND NEEDS?



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SOLUTIONS

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'Vast majority' of Ofsted consultation responses not analysed for sentiment

- New consultation analysis details emerge (but findings still secret)
- Most individual responses 'not directly coded by sentiment'
- Unions say admission 'adds fuel to fire' as inspections rolled out

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

EXCLUSIVE | Page 4

SCHOOLS
WEEK

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With the curriculum review out of the way, and the white paper and SEND reforms pushed back until January – this term is suddenly a lot less manic.

But there is still one, quite seismic, reform hitting schools. New report card inspections started this week for schools brave enough to volunteer for one.

Early feedback reaching *Schools Week* was somewhat mixed. One reader described it as “a deep dive – but for inclusion”.

As the inspectorate awaits a potential public battle over its new visits, we are continuing to push the watchdog to reveal how the sector responded to its proposals.

Alas, Ofsted has (again) refused to publish the qualitative analysis it holds – which is based on the sentiment of responses (page 4).

But we did eek out some more (potentially quite worrying) details. Ofsted admitted it did not code the “vast majority” of responses based on their sentiment (ie, were people positive, negative, neutral).

The inspectorate maintains its own method to do this (using AI to look at the ‘themes’ of responses to each question, and then rating the

themes) was a more sophisticated model.

There is validity in picking out key themes. The consultation had open-ended questions, and many answers may have included both positive and negative feedback.

But not quantifying the strength of feeling, which appears to be what Ofsted has done, makes it (conveniently) difficult for us to understand how respondents felt about the plans.

The case also hits upon a wider issue. The use of AI to collate feedback in public consultations is now rife. But does it work?

Elsewhere this week, we dive into a concerning development that potentially stops children educated at home from gaining vital qualifications (pages 5 and 6).

We’ve also got a heartbreaking investigation revealing thousands of retired teachers have died while waiting for potential compensation in relation to a pension ruling made seven years ago (page 9 and 10).

And our back pages look at whether the curriculum review did enough for pupils with additional needs, why enrichment benchmarks should be welcomed, and why you shouldn’t bother with question-level analysis.

Most read online this week:

- [Can schools really afford to cut assistant heads?](#)**
- [Appoint staff contact for uniform issues, schools told](#)**
- [AI to set minimum attendance targets for all schools](#)**
- [Curriculum review: All the key policy recommendations](#)**
- [Curriculum review: The subject-specific policy proposals](#)**

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SCHOOLS WEEK | School leaders’ most-read: Teacher Tapp survey in June of 607 headteachers on education media read in past month

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NEWS: OFSTED

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Ofsted slammed over consultation analysis method (and still keeps it secret)

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

EXCLUSIVE

Ofsted has again refused to release data showing how many people supported or opposed its report card inspection plans – saying the “vast majority” of the 6,500 responses were not actually categorised by “sentiment”.

Legal experts on public consultations have said the admission means there is a “risk” decision-makers at Ofsted were not “provided with the relevant information” to inform their inspection overhaul plans.

The watchdog’s use of AI to code responses is also now facing scrutiny over accusations it could be “unreliable”, with potential wider implications for the use of such technology in government consultations

Ofsted refuses release (again)

Responding to the findings, Pepe Di'Iasio, general secretary of leaders' union ASCL, said the process was “very flawed”.

“It is difficult to see how decision-makers could have had a granular understanding of the consultation responses,” he added.

Ofsted’s inspection consultation ran from February to April. It consisted of 102 open-ended questions about proposed changes to inspections, which have started in schools this week. Three-quarters of respondents were education professionals.

Ofsted only published a narrative summary of its consultation findings in September, despite saying it had “sentiment” data on responses.

Schools Week requested this data under the Freedom of Information Act. We asked for overall responses based on Ofsted’s sentiment categories of positive, negative, mixed and neutral. We also asked for this broken down per individual question.

‘Most responses not coded’

In its response, sent on Friday, Ofsted again refused to release the information. However, it provided new details on its analysis.

Ofsted used a “hybrid approach” to look at the “vast amount of qualitative data”. Human coders analysed a “small proportion” of the early responses. They did code each individual response “by theme and by sentiment”.

An AI model was then used to “analyse all



responses” once the consultation closed. However, AI instead “produced several themes per question” and then “described each theme, rather than individual response, by sentiment”.

In its FOI response, Ofsted said: “The vast majority of responses were not directly coded by sentiment at the individual level.” It added that the hybrid approach “provided an overall understanding of sentiments and views”.

Ofsted also refused to release the sentiment data collected by the human coders because it was “not representative”.

“Releasing the sentiment data of early respondents in isolation would be misleading and potentially lead to incorrect conclusions being drawn by the public,” added Verena Braehler, Ofsted’s deputy director or research.

National Education Union general secretary Daniel Kebede said the response “only adds fuel to the fire”.

“Accurate analysis of all responses was the very least we should have expected and we can’t even guarantee that was the case,” he said. “The many teachers who took part should at least be able to have had faith in their responses being read.”

‘We weren’t counting boxes ticked’

However Ofsted said the theming method was “just as meaningful” as coding individual responses by sentiment.

The consultation “wasn’t a quantitative exercise and we weren’t counting boxes ticked – this was free text and people expressed a range of views and sentiments within and across their individual responses, which were all captured in our analysis and reflected in our response to consultation”.

When shown details of Ofsted’s FOI response, Sam Hart, an associate at law firm Sharpe Pritchard LLP, said: “There is a risk that the

decision-makers within Ofsted [were not] provided with the relevant information.”

The ‘Gunning Principles’ are case law that lay out standards for how consultations should be conducted. The fourth says “conscientious consideration” must be given to responses before a decision is made.

Hart said Ofsted’s response must be “sufficiently robust to ensure that individual responses are being conscientiously considered”. He added there is “a risk that AI may overlook or deprioritise minority viewpoints even in circumstances”.

Andrea Squires, a partner at law firm Winckworth Sherwood, added there is a question over whether Ofsted “was acting reasonably” in its use of AI.

Use of AI is becoming increasingly common in analysing government consultations. One tool used by government departments – Consult – states a recent evaluation found it accurately identified themes in 60 per cent of consultation responses.

Schools Week asked Ofsted for details of the accuracy of the AI model it used but it declined to provide this information.

A spokesperson said they “use AI lawfully, ethically and responsibly. We ensure there is meaningful human control and validation of AI processes, and appropriate human oversight of the use of AI.”

Surveys, focus groups, test visits and stakeholder meetings also informed their inspection decisions.

Leaders’ union NAHT is considering whether to appeal a refusal by the high court to pursue a judicial review over Ofsted’s new inspections.

General secretary Paul Whiteman said: “We have repeatedly called on Ofsted to fully publish all its analysis of the consultation responses. The fact that they won’t speaks volumes.”

INVESTIGATION: HOME EDUCATION

Home-schooled children forced to travel miles to sit exams

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

EXCLUSIVE

A surge in home education has left many families struggling to find places for their children to sit GCSEs, with some “reduced to begging” as overwhelmed exam centres shut their doors.

Children not educated in school must be entered as private exam candidates to sit GCSE and A-level tests. But the few exam centres who do accept such pupils have been overwhelmed by surging demand, experts say.

Analysis shows at least 10 centres have closed to private candidates in the past year – leaving families scrambling to find a place.

Others are being forced to travel dozens of miles to sit exams to gain vital qualifications – with costs also rising.

‘There’s nothing you can do about it’

“There’s no backstop with a responsibility to make sure exam access is available to all,” said home educator Katie Finlayson. “Access relies on either commercial viability or the generosity of schools ... home educators are very vulnerable to a school or centre closing its doors, because when it comes to it everyone can just say no and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) has an interactive search tool to find exam centres based on postcode and exam board. Finlayson, who runs the Home Educators Qualification Association (HEQA), said this listed 180 centres overall in July 2025 but that there are another 27 not listed by JCQ, taking the total to 207.

Analysis shows 69 of these have a limited offer, such as only offering core subjects or little access arrangement. At least 10 have stopped accepting private candidates in the past year.

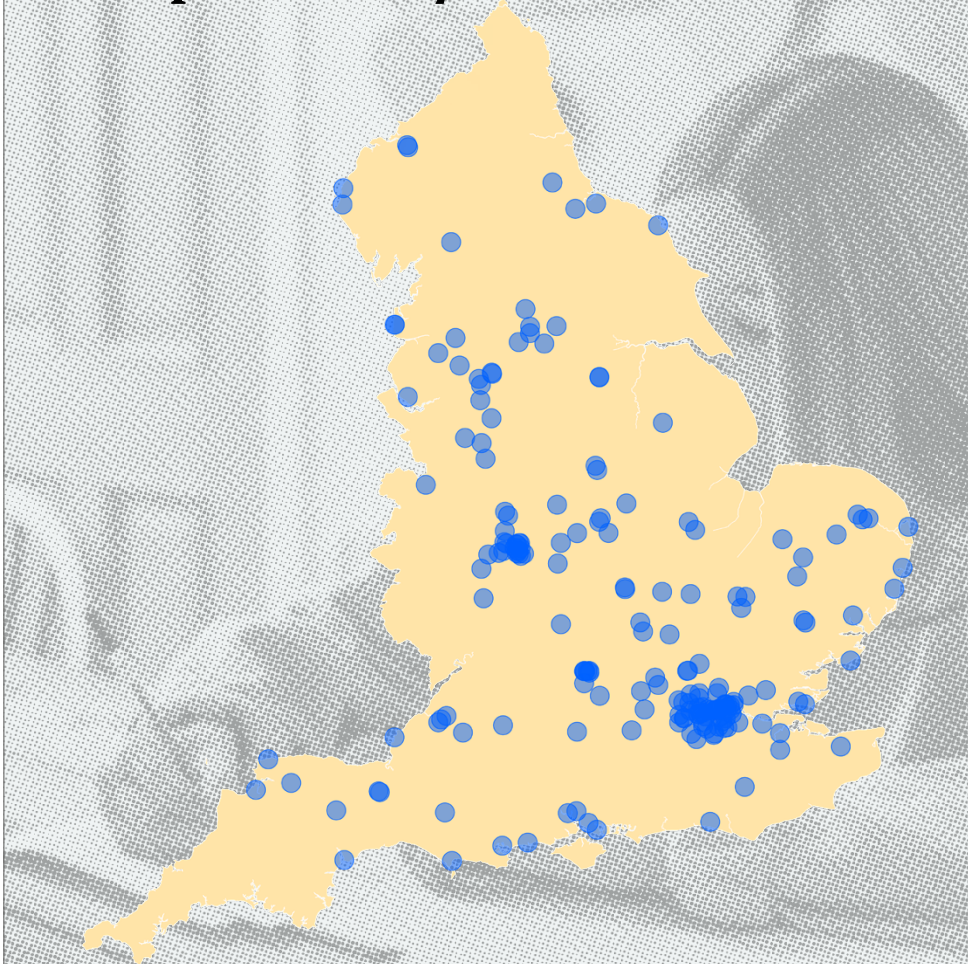
All but one of the closed centres did not respond to requests for comment about why they shut.

But Finlayson said it was likely because they were “unable to cope with rising demand.” A school near her in north Wales has already seen 25 enquiries for next summer and a centre in Norfolk reported having 130 requests for 18 spaces.

An estimated 111,700 children are now being home educated, with numbers rising 20 per cent last year alone.

Finlayson pointed to “increasing in-school pressure on exam officers, invigilators and

Centres offering private candidate exam places this year



Source: Data collected in July 2025 by the Home Educators Qualification Association

‘It’s soul-destroying not being able to help’

exam rooms”.

LBC Tuition Centre, in Keighley, temporarily closed to private candidates because it has been unable to replace an exams officer who left.

‘It’s soul-destroying’

Mohammed Nadeem, from LBC, said it was still experiencing calls “every day” for candidates and they had seen a “massive increase” in demand. It plans to open another building in Shipley to house the exams once they have enough staff in place.

Faregos Home Education Group, in Hampshire, had a 45 per cent increase in private exam candidates in the past two years. For the upcoming summer maths GCSE, the centre has accepted 120 candidates – and turned away more than 200.

“It’s soul-destroying not being able to help,” Sarah Large from Faregos said. “We are turning away people in vast numbers, and this year has been far and away the worst year ever.”

Finlayson added many centres now “reach capacity long before exam entry deadlines”

INVESTIGATION: HOME EDUCATION

'Reduced to begging'

Clare Emmerson, who taught her four children at home in Cumbria, said she has been "reduced to begging on an annual basis".

Two of her children had to make a 40-mile round trip for their tests in 2022 and 2023. She wanted them to sit them at their local school but plans fell through after the exam officer retired. Her youngest sat exams at a local agricultural college in 2023.

According to analysis by HEQA, two-thirds of 120 home educators surveyed travelled 20 to 50 miles away for exams in 2022, while 10 per cent said they travelled more than 100 miles. The analysis also suggested that 85 per cent of respondents paid between £100 and £200, with the average cost being £160.

Ofqual analysis found that the cost of a GCSE for pupils in school was £57.

Clare O'Connell, from Telford, has already started planning for her 14-year-old daughter to travel to Birmingham to sit her GCSEs in 2027, a 70-mile round-trip. Her daughter has autism and hearing difficulties, and exams with access arrangements can cost about £300.

"She won't be able to cope with other people ... I've paid £1,000 for her to sit an exam paper that she hasn't done," she added.

'Additional cost for schools'

Home educators have called on schools to take more private candidates. But a spokesperson from school leaders' union NAHT said providing support "comes at an additional cost to schools who are working within the constraints of



'I've paid £1,000 for her to sit an exam paper that she hasn't done'

already insufficient budgets".

However, Joanna Merritt, a researcher in home education at the University of Exeter, said: "Home education is another school choice, and it holds equal weight in law ... so why are they not given equal access to exams when they're the key marker for moving forward?"

NAHT suggested councils could fund schools to open their exam halls to more private candidates.

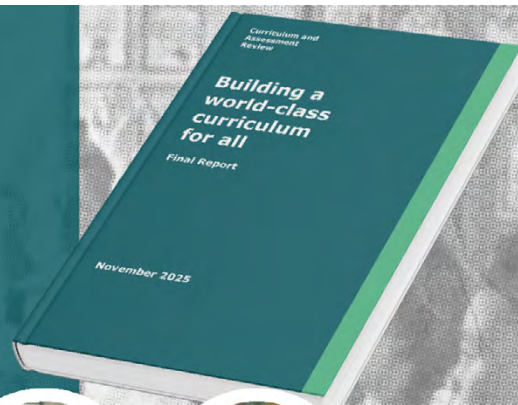
Merritt added: "If there was a duty on local authorities to provide a place to take your exam and fund any additional cost of reasonable adjustments, that would probably be the best of all scenarios."

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SCHOOLS WEEK

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SEND safety valve 'success story' racks up £4.5m deficit

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

EXCLUSIVE

A council cited as a "success" story of the government's controversial £1 billion SEND spending bailout scheme for mostly clearing its deficit is facing a £4.5 million black hole.

Richmond upon Thames was given £20 million over five years as part of the "safety valve" scheme. The council was expected to eliminate its high-needs deficit by March this year and reach a balanced in-year budget on its dedicated schools grant by next March.

Richmond was singled out by Susan Acland-Hood, the Department for Education's top civil servant, during an education committee last year for "all but eliminating their deficit".

The council had whittled down its deficit to just £300,000 at the time. Richmond later said it had been "highlighted by the DfE as a success" of the safety valve scheme.

However, council documents now show Richmond predicts a £4.5 million overall deficit at the end of this financial year.

André Imich, a former government SEND adviser, said the evidence is "increasingly pointing" to the safety valve scheme missing its aims.

The programme has been hugely controversial. While councils have been given multi-million-pound bailouts, they come with strict strings attached to slash SEND provision costs. One council involved in the scheme said proposed cuts risks them breaching legal duties to vulnerable children.

Imich added the scheme "shows that the overspend issues are not down to inefficiencies or leadership issues in individual local authorities – who have been provided with additional funding and expert advice, monitoring and challenge from external specialist SEND and financial advisers – but to more fundamental system-wide issues".

More than half of councils predict they will become insolvent when an accounting loophole to keep high-needs deficits off their balance sheets comes to an end in 2028. Estimates suggest councils' overall deficit could soon amount to £5 billion.

SEND campaigner Rachel Filmer said the safety valve programme "was an ill-advised



experiment borne of desperation that has demonstrably failed, entirely as predicted".

"The SEND system now resembles a leaking bucket. The only way to resolve this is with substantial investment that reduces escalation of need and prevents placements breaking down. This is achievable through early intervention and giving children the right support, right away."

Despite making headway, Richmond warned in January last year there was a "high risk that within five years the borough will be in the same financial position it was before" the safety valve scheme was introduced.

A few months later, the council was forecasting a best-case scenario deficit of £36 million and a worst-case £54 million. The minutes did not state what date this estimate related to.

Council minutes in January this year also added "that the DfE's latest communication indicates an acknowledgement that the [safety valve] model has not brought local authorities to the financial situation they had envisaged when the programme started". But it was "working hard to balance the ongoing need for cost reduction/cost mitigation with the statutory duty to effectively support young people".

Lucy Kourpas, chief operating and financial officer at Achieving for Children, a community interest group that runs Richmond's children's services, said the overspend "will accumulate each year to create a much larger cumulative debt position".

Richmond was one of the first councils to get safety valve bailouts. Others have fared worse.

Kingston upon Thames' bailout ended last year but it still has an £8 million deficit – and predicts this will rise to £18.7 million by March.

The council said it plans to "continuously improve SEND provision and mitigate costs to narrow the local funding gap".

Hammersmith and Fulham said while the programme "supported the removal of the historic deficit, it did not address the structural gap in our high-needs block allocation compared to our statistical neighbours". It is predicting a £6.5 million deficit by March.

York council ended last year with a £592,000 surplus, because of the safety valve contribution. But the council's accountant told the January schools forum that "when those contributions ceased, there would be a significant shortfall".

Councillor Bob Webb, York's children's lead, said while they met deficit reduction targets, "this has not addressed the underlying pressures that exist nationally and that is only a short-term solution".

The government said last year it will not enter into any more safety valve agreements "pending wider reform of the whole system to prioritise early intervention".

Five councils that had their payments suspended are still in limbo.

A DfE spokesperson added: "This government inherited a SEND system left on its knees, which is why we are listening closely to families and teachers as we work to make sure more children can achieve and thrive in their local school."

NEWS: ATTENDANCE

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AI deployed to enforce minimum attendance targets

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

Government will use AI to set minimum attendance targets for schools to meet this year in the latest bid to crackdown on absence.

The targets will not be published, nor shared with Ofsted. But schools that fail to meet the new attendance expectations will be referred for support through regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE) teams.

Schools will be set 'attendance baseline improvement expectations' from this month.

The target will be set through an AI-generated report considering things like location, pupil needs and deprivation levels.

But general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders Pepe Di'lasio urged the government "to understand the realities in schools rather than issuing yet more diktats dreamt up in Whitehall".

He said many factors are contributing to absence are beyond school control, adding: "Setting them individual targets doesn't resolve those issues, but it does pile yet more pressure on school leaders and staff who are already under great strain."

This year's targets will be on a "test and learn basis". Government said "progress will be interpreted thoughtfully given attendance levels can sometimes be hit by local 'shocks'."

The "AI powered" reports "aim to help lift the floor on school performance, as part of a ladder of progress helping schools and wider services back to Pre-Covid levels of attendance – without capping ambition", government said.

Leaders will also be given examples in their report of similar schools in the region with better attendance "offering further insight to drive improvement".

Schools Week has asked the DfE whether top schools will be informed about being named in struggling school's reports.

Government said the targets will not be published externally or made available to Ofsted.

Instead, targets will be used to provide support through RISE behaviour and attendance hubs.

The government plans to open a total of 90 hubs, reaching 5,000 schools and giving targeted support to 500 settings. The scheme is



spearheaded by ambassadors Tom Bennett and Jayne Lowe.

There are already 21 hubs operating since September, with 36 more announced this week.

Meanwhile, schools will also be given 'best practice toolkits' targeting transitional moments between primary and secondary school, and Year 7 and 8.

King's Leadership Academy Warrington, is one of the best practice examples in the new toolkit. The school "creates an environment where all children can belong and thrive with weekly enrichment sessions where pupils choose activities including crochet, gardening and sign language".

Another best practice school, CHS South in Manchester, "encourages strong starts to secondary school by creating a sense of community with parents and pupils" with family cooking classes in the summer before year 7.

The target strategy is part of the government's drive to get attendance levels back to pre-pandemic levels.

While overall and persistent absence rates have fallen in the past year, severe absence levels have risen.

But Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders union NAHT, added schools are already doing all they can and "issuing them with yet more targets will not help them with that work and is the wrong way to go."

It is also just the latest expectation placed on schools. That includes new expectations for behaviour and parental engagement in the upcoming schools white paper, as well as post-16 study and new careers education targets. Last week it also said schools would be judged on enrichment benchmarks.

But education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said "we're tackling variation head-on. Our best schools already have a brilliant approach to attendance, and now we're driving that focus everywhere so that all children are supported to attend school and learn."



Pepe Di'lasio

The 36 new behaviour and attendance hubs

Charnwood College, David Ross Education Trust
Granville Academy, Affinity Learning Partnership
Sir Jonathan North Girls' College, Lionheart Education Trust
The Newark Academy, Nova Education Trust
Church Lane Primary School & Nursery, LA Maintained
Sneinton St Stephen's CofE Primary School, Transform Trust
Riverside School, Partnership Learning
Swansea School, LA Maintained
Mulberry Shoreditch Academy, Mulberry Schools Trust
St Edward's Church of England Academy, Unity Schools Partnership
Cumberland Community School, Community Schools Trust
Croftway Academy, Wise Academies
Hawthorn Primary School, LA Maintained
St Bede's Catholic Academy, Bishop Hogarth
Dyke House Sports and Technology College, Northern Education Trust
Belmont Community School, LA Maintained
Macmillan Academy, Endeavour Academies Trust
Dean Trust Ardwick, The Dean Trust
Our Lady's RC High School, LA Maintained
Workington Academy, Cumbria Education Trust
Oasis Academy Harpur Mount, Oasis Community Learning
St Barnabas and St Paul's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School, LA Maintained
Webster Primary School, Webster Primary School
The Langley Academy, The Arbib Education Trust
Glenmoor Academy, United Learning
Hazelwood Academy, Lift
Avonbourne Boys Academy & Avonbourne Girls Academy (joint), United Learning
Somervale Secondary School, Midsomer Norton Schools Partnership
Five Acres High School, Greenshaw Learning Trust
Moat Farm Junior School, Stour Vale Trust
The Khalsa Academy, One Multi-Academy Trust
St John's CofE Primary School, Bradford Diocesan Academies Trust
Spring Grove Junior and Infant School, LA Maintained
Carr Manor Community School, LA Maintained
Royds Hall, A Share Academy, Share Multi-Academy Trust
Corpus Christi Catholic Primary School, LA Maintained

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**SCHOOLS
WEEK**

INVESTIGATION: PENSIONS

Thousands of retired teachers die before pension row settled

BILL CURTIS AND FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

EXCLUSIVE

Thousands of retired teachers and leaders potentially entitled to better pensions following the landmark McCloud ruling have died before even receiving statements outlining what they could receive.

New data obtained under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act reveals the scale of the backlog in remedy cases facing the Teachers' Pension Scheme's (TPS) embattled administrators Capita, with tens of thousands of retirees awaiting statements.

Madeleine Dowling, technical team lead at financial advice firm Wesleyan, said the issues were "taking a real financial and emotional toll" on retired teachers.

"After years of service, retirement should be something that teachers look forward to. Instead, many are left facing uncertainty and worry."

Most remedies not yet issued

The McCloud remedy scheme was designed to correct age discrimination caused by 2015 public sector pension reforms. The 2018 court judgment ruled that previous changes made to public sector pensions treated younger workers unfairly.

To fix this, the government promised to pay back more than £17 billion to those affected. This involved issuing "remediable service statements" (RSS) to retired teachers, asking whether they would like their pension entitlement to be calculated based on their current scheme, known as the "legacy" option, or the new "reformed" scheme.

Data obtained under the FOI Act shows that as of March, 64,917 such statements had been sent to retired TPS members. But 77,654 statements remained unsent.

Of the outstanding statements, 5,973, or 7.7 per cent, are due to the families of TPS members who have died since 2015 – the year to which the remedy is back-dated. Some will have died before the 2018 ruling and before the remedy was formally announced in 2021. But it is likely a large number have also died since then, while awaiting news of potential compensation.



'Every month this drags on, more people die'

Delays plague thousands of unwell retirees

It comes after Schools Week revealed in June that just two retired teachers had received the money or pension increase they were entitled to.

Delays are also plaguing thousands of unwell pensioners. Of the outstanding statements, 3,539 are due to pensioners who are in "ill health", FOI data shows.

Paul Heap, a retired teacher, said he was owed "around £14,000 from the original case, plus £7,000 in losses because of delays".

"Some teachers have died waiting. Others, like me, are watching our health decline. Every month this drags on, more people die. We've worked our whole lives as teachers, and this is how we're treated – like we don't matter anymore."

The delays have left a lasting mark on Graeme Humphrey, who retired in 2022 after 35 years in teaching.

He suffers from generalised anxiety disorder, and "this whole process has made it worse", he told Schools Week.

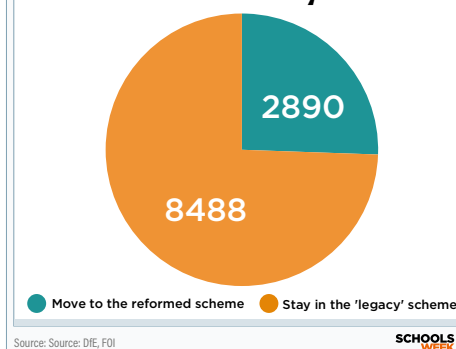
"TPS seems to have contempt for the legal process and is seemingly disinterested in delivering legislated monies within any reasonable time scale."

McCloud remedy statements for retired teachers as of March 2025

Issued	64,917
Not yet issued	77,654
Not yet issued to members who have died	5,973
Not yet issued to members in 'ill health'	3,539

Source: Source: DfE, FOI

SCHOOLS WEEK

Teachers' decisions on the McCloud remedy so far

Source: Source: DfE, FOI

SCHOOLS WEEK

Retirees return to the classroom

For other former leaders and teachers, delays in receiving payouts have prompted a forced return

INVESTIGATION: PENSIONS

to the classroom.

Former headteacher Gary Watson retired in 2022, but is owed £31,000 that should have formed part of his lump sum. He says he has had to “go back to work to supplement my income”.

“I don’t think any private sector pension provider could get away with this. Trustpilot reviews are incredibly damning, and many retired teachers [are] simply despairing at either the incompetence, under-staffing or perhaps a combination of both.”

On Trustpilot, the Teachers’ Pension Scheme has an average score of 1.1 out of five, based on 739 reviews. Ninety-five per cent of reviews give just one star.

Emma Mitchell, who taught history and geography for 30 years, has been waiting nearly a year to hear back from the TPS about her McCloud paperwork.

“I’m owed just over £10,000 as a lump sum and about £2,000 a year,” she said. “I’ve had to dip into my savings to pay for roof repairs. As a single parent, that money really matters – but it’s not extra. It’s ours. You give everything to your students, to your school, to the community and you expect the system you’ve paid into to be there when it’s your turn.”

Watson added: “This is scandalous. To compound matters the communication from TPS is abysmal. When will these dues be settled?”

The TPS has been run for most of the past 30 years by outsourcing giant Capita.

The £233 million, 10-year contract was due to transfer to Indian IT firm TCS in October, but Schools Week revealed earlier this year the handover had been pushed back to next summer.

‘Government turning blind eye’

Delays to McCloud settlements aren’t the only administrative issue affecting TPS members. For example, teachers have reported delays to cash-equivalent transfer values – needed to finalise divorces. Others reported being locked out of accounts, or their details being lost entirely.

Diane Tonkins, 60, sobbed over half-marked schoolbooks as she recalled being told by TPS she did not have a pension.

Decades of records, including her private pension and £2,000 in contributions, were “lost”. Worth about £30,000, the missing funds forced her to keep working while caring for parents with dementia and Alzheimer’s.

“Because of their mistake, I couldn’t retire,”



‘The backlog is thousands deep’

she says. During Covid, her parents died in care, confused and alone, she said.

Heap said the TPS under Capita was “understaffed, lacks communication and is failing, but the government has been turning a blind eye.”

“The backlog is thousands deep. They’re processing around 40 cases a month when thousands are depending on the money the government took from us.”

Dowling added Wesleyan is “increasingly seeing delays not just in the issuing of remediable pension saving statements, but in processing pensions themselves.

“This data, and our own experience, shows many are entering their retirement without an accurate understanding of how much they have in their pension – a precarious position for anyone to be in that’s only compounded if they have dependents, ill-health or care needs that mean they’re particularly reliant on this pension income.”

Calls for hardship fund

Heap said he asked officials to create a hardship fund for struggling retirees but was told there was “no need for one”.

“I went six months without glasses because I couldn’t afford new ones,” he said. “Every month, I have to spend a quarter of my pension on paying interest that is only owed because my pension correction wasn’t completed on time. I

just about manage to cover council tax, energy bills and food.”

Kate Atkinson, national secretary for school leaders’ union NAHT, said it had been “contacted by members with life-limiting conditions that are part of the backlog. Clearly any further delay for these individuals is unacceptable and we have asked for a ‘fast-track’ approach to be taken in relation to anyone in this group – we are hopeful that this can be achieved.”

A spokesperson for Capita acknowledged “that some members have experienced delays in receiving their remediable service statements and subsequent payments, and we sincerely apologise for this”.

However, they said the delays were “largely due to the complexity stemming from the McCloud remedy ... and dependencies outside of Capita’s control.

“We are continuing to work with the Department for Education to implement measures to improve the service, which includes automation and updated communications to members.”

‘Complex legal issues’

The DfE said transitional protection remedy was “complex” due to its size. The “retrospective nature” had resulted in “a number of technical and legal issues” that “needed to be resolved before guidance could be provided to the scheme administrator”.

Officials are in touch with Capita to “address” rising numbers of enquiries.

However, a spokesperson added: “We understand that this has caused frustration and are continuing to work closely with Teachers’ Pensions to resolve this issue as soon as possible.”

It was also “reviewing arrangements for the issuing of the remaining remediable service statements”, but would give no further details.

The FOI data suggests most retirees who have received their statements and responded have opted to stick to the legacy pension scheme.

As of March, 8,488 respondents had chosen to stick with the legacy scheme, compared with 2,890 who opted for the reformed scheme.

The schools sector, which employs almost a million people in England, is not the only part of the public sector facing issues with the McCloud remedy.

Workers in the NHS, which employs about 1.5 million people in England, have reported significant delays. The British Medical Association has warned the backlog has left many members with “no knowledge of their pension-saving

NEWS: MATS

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Ormiston trust gives up founding school

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

One of England's biggest MATs is set to give up a founding school in a move that shows how important regional clusters are for national trusts.

Ormiston Academies Trust has applied to the Department for Education to transfer its only academy in Thurrock to the Unity Schools Partnership (USP) next year.

The multi-academy trust (MAT) leadership believes the deal will allow the secondary, called Ormiston Park Academy, to "benefit even more directly from [USP's] additional local capacity and collaboration". The trusts have worked together informally to drive improvement.

Education consultant Lucia Glynn believes the case highlights the shift towards MATs organising "themselves and their resources into local clusters".

"There was a priority historically for big trusts to grow and grow and grow ... but I think it's much more strategic now.

"[It's] more cost-effective for them to



operate in a cluster model because they can have local finance, HR, estates, school improvement and shared services at a local level."

When it launched in 2009, Ormiston took on three schools. One of these was Ormiston Park. But since then, it has remained the trust's only Thurrock school.

In 2016, Sir David Carter, the then national schools commissioner, attributed some of the troubles large trusts had in the early days of the academy movement to geography – noting some didn't have a family of schools to cluster around.

More recently, ministers have attempted to be more strategic. *Schools Week* revealed in 2022 that officials were working on plans to package up "clusters" of schools eligible for government

intervention to be moved en masse into large academy trusts. Then academies minister Baroness Barran later said she would place fresh emphasis on how government sees "geographic coherence"

in strong trusts.

She stressed this was not "trusts operating in a single area", but instead

trusts having clusters of schools. This was so they could "benefit from some of the collaboration that can take place between schools that are close to each other."

In documents shared with parents, Ormiston said the school started working with Unity in February 2024, shortly before it was downgraded to 'requires improvement' by Ofsted. By transferring the school over, it will "join a trust with strong local presence and capacity ... creating opportunities for staff to collaborate, share ideas and best practice".

An Ormiston spokesperson said the academy has worked with Unity "to support and deliver a series of improvements at the school".

The proposed move is "about deepening that relationship further and building on the progress made to date, enabling the academy to benefit even more directly from the additional local capacity and collaboration".

A USP spokesperson said the academy's "values and visions are closely aligned", making it "a natural and logical fit to join our family of secondary, primary and special schools".

SCHOOLS WEEK

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NEWS

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DfE looks to reduce MIS 'legal risk' amid £200m turf war

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

The government is bidding to shield schools from the £200 million management information system (MIS) turf war by drawing up a new framework through which leaders can purchase the edtech.

Officials have launched a consultation on how they can simplify the process of buying the software – which collects attendance, payroll and admissions data – and reduce the “legal risks” schools face.

It follows a string of costly court fights, involving local authorities and some of England's biggest academy trusts.

'Minefield'

Education consultant Duncan Baldwin argued that “navigating procurement for these systems is a minefield” for many schools.

“If this framework provides a simpler, less risky route then it's a good thing, so long as fairness and openness for suppliers is maintained,” he said. “Nobody – schools or suppliers – wants the complexity and cost of legal wrangles.”

The Department for Education told leaders this week it “understand[s] buying management information systems can be difficult”. Officials “want to hear” from them as it looks “to create a simpler purchasing route that reduces costs and legal risks with suppliers”.

During a webinar with suppliers on Thursday, officials revealed the framework – which will have “no limit to [the] number of suppliers” – will help “all schools and trusts use transparent buying processes, guidance and pricing”.

**Improve data sharing**

Slides shown during the event, seen by Schools Week, said they want to ensure data “flow[s] smoothly across school, trust, local authority and national levels”. They also hope to “ease” information transfers when schools move trusts and simplify “contract exit around [the] transfer of data while protecting relevant supplier IP”.

The emergence of cloud-based suppliers has led to big changes in the MIS world, estimated to be worth about £200 million. SIMS, which has long dominated the sector, has seen its market share shrink to 34 per cent, down from 74 per cent in 2021, according to analysis by the Bring More Data blog. It has been eclipsed by Arbor (39 per cent), while rival Bromcom's share now sits at 16 per cent.

Legal turf war

The changing hand in suppliers has led to high-profile legal disputes. United Learning Trust, England's biggest trust, lost a high court battle with Bromcom in 2023 after a judge ruled the business should have won a £2 million MIS

contract. This was despite ministers handing ULT £1 million to challenge Bromcom as it tried to protect the wider academy sector, amid claims the firm had “a history of litigiousness”, trust correspondence with the government said.

Ali Guryel, Bromcom's executive chair, previously said the “litigious” comment was “unfair and defamatory”.

Lift Schools, previously called Academies Enterprise Trust, settled a three-year legal battle with Bromcom just over 12 months ago.

The Competition and Markets Authority was pulled into a dispute last year after SIMS announced its customers would be breaching their contracts if they sent copies of their databases to third parties.

Firms welcome change

Guryel said the government's plans for a new framework was a “vital step forward”. His company “remain[s] committed to supporting a transparent, competitive, and user-focused marketplace that empowers schools to make informed decisions without fear of legal entanglements or restrictive contracts”.

James Weatherill, of Arbor, said his company “has always recommended frameworks as they ensure compliance and value for money, so we support any initiative that simplifies the way schools buy ... and ultimately helps [them] choose the system that is right”.

However, ParentPay Group chief executive Lewis Alcraft, whose organisation owns SIMS, warned: “It's vital that the framework protects genuine choice, not only in suppliers, but in how schools access and procure their systems.”

EXCLUSIVE

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

£5.4m scheme for early years maths boost

The government hopes to launch an “evidence-based” maths programme to improve numeracy outcomes for children in early years settings.

A Department for Education tender shows it is seeking organisations interested in bidding for a contract to deliver the programme “to at least 5,000 settings”. The £5.4 million contract is due to run for three years and five months, from April 2026 to August 2029.

The tender notice says: “Early maths skills are strongly linked to later academic achievement and workforce success, yet many children begin school without the expected

level of development in maths.

“Despite its importance within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), maths remains one of the lowest-performing areas, partly due to limited training and confidence among educators.”

The notice says the programme must be “backed by robust evaluation”.

Beth Silver, chief executive of early years maths charity Number Champions, described the initiative as “good news”.

“We know from our experience how, by the age of seven or eight, children can not only fall behind, but then get left behind, due to the

cumulative nature of the maths curriculum,” she said.

“Lack of self-belief with numbers holds children back and often persists into adulthood. We would therefore urge the DfE to include improvement in confidence as an important measure of effectiveness.”

An Education Endowment Fund (EEF) study of Maths Champions in 2021 explored the impact early years interventions can have on maths attainment. It found children in nurseries that received the charity's interventions made three months' additional progress in maths, compared to those at other nurseries.

NEWS

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New legal duty for schools to record seclusion use

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

Schools will face a legal duty to record their use of non-disciplinary isolation and report it to parents under plans being developed by the government.

The decision to legislate for the new duty, which will not cover the use of isolation as a punishment, has delayed the publication of final guidance on restrictive interventions in schools, which is being re-drafted.

Isolation is often used to describe both “seclusion” and “removal”, but the two are different.

Seclusion is defined by government as the “supervised confinement and isolation of a pupil, away from other pupils”. Whereas “removal” is “where a pupil, for serious disciplinary reasons, is required to spend a limited time out of the classroom”.

Ministers consulted in February on new guidance that will require schools to record every “significant” use of reasonable force against pupils and report them to parents “as soon as practicable”.

The draft guidance, which was supposed to come into force in September, stated that restrictive interventions “may include use of seclusion”. It defines seclusion as the “supervised confinement and isolation of a pupil, away from other pupils, in an area from which the pupil is prevented from leaving of their own free will”.

However, the draft guidance also stated that the law “does not require schools to record and report instances of restrictive interventions where force was not used”, stating only that it was “best practice” to apply the same policy for all interventions.

However, the Department for Education told Schools Week it plans to legislate for a separate, specific duty “to ensure the use of seclusion is recorded and reported to parents”.

As a result, the draft guidance “is being further updated to include additional advice about this new statutory duty, as well as reflecting findings from the consultation. We aim to publish the



guidance and legislation by the end of the year.”

Charlie Blackman-Doyle, a local authority specialist teacher, said: “If the delay reflects a genuine effort to incorporate sector feedback, then it should be welcomed.

“The inclusion of a new reporting and recording duty for incidents of seclusion is a positive and necessary addition to the DfE’s proposed guidance. Its success, however, will depend on the clarity of the final guidance.”

It is not clear why the government is planning a legal duty to record and report seclusion but not isolation as a punishment – which has become an increasingly controversial behaviour management tactic.

Behaviour guidance states schools “should collect, monitor and analyse removal data internally in order to interrogate repeat patterns and the effectiveness of the use of removal”. But that guidance is non-statutory.

The news comes after research published by the British Educational Research Journal found spending time in isolation rooms due to poor behaviour is resulting in pupils feeling reduced



belonging, having poorer relationships with teachers and some reporting lower levels of mental wellbeing.

The research found one in 12 pupils reported being placed in isolation, also known as internal exclusion, per week. The average time spent in isolation was 8.5 hours a week.

It also comes after pupils who spent up to half a year in “unpleasant and distressing” isolation rooms lost a High Court battle against their school’s “rigorous” behaviour policy.

High Court judge Justice Collins Rice called the practice “stigmatising” and “deliberately under-stimulating” – but found John Smeaton Academy in Leeds had not “crossed the boundaries of what the law or good practice permits”.



SOLUTIONS

RECRUITMENT

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Rise of the teacher intern: a recruitment solution?

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

EXCLUSIVE

Increasing numbers of university students are taking up school internships to get a taste for teaching, new figures show.

But are any of them going on to teacher training, and how much does it all cost? Schools Week investigates ...

Rise of the teacher intern

Established in 2016, the Department for Education-run Teaching Internships Programme gives university students studying degrees in “relevant priority subjects” experience of teaching before potentially committing to it as a career.

Three-week internships take place in June or July, and interns are paid £455 a week. Schools receive £700 per intern to cover “coordination and delivery costs”.

The Get Into Teaching website states interns get “a feel for what life as a teacher is like” through shadowing, joint lesson planning and teaching, and one-to-one mentoring.

The government said the scheme “supports a pipeline of future teachers”.

Figures obtained by Schools Week through a freedom of information (FOI) request show the scheme’s popularity has grown. In 2021, just 450 students took part. But in both 2023 and 2024, nearly 1,000 pupils interned in classrooms.

The rise comes amid a wider slump in graduate opportunities.

Internships were offered in just maths and physics until 2022, but have since been expanded to include computing, languages and chemistry.

How many go on to teach?

The department does not hold data on how many interns become trainees, but does track those who apply to initial teacher training (ITT).

Of the 2,147 interns who did the scheme between 2020 and 2023, about 26 per cent (556) had applied to ITT by the end of September 2024.

Students can do internships from their second



‘We want to encourage and engage with uni students and hopefully inspire them to consider teaching as a career’

year of university but can only apply to teacher training from their final year.

Looking at the interns in 2020 and 2021, about 35 per cent in both years have since applied to teach – which may be a more accurate figure.

The DfE said some interns may have changed their email address or name before applying to teacher – so they could be missing from the data.

A department spokesperson said interns “have become increasingly important as part of entry to the graduate labour market and professional training”, across the entire student population.

Emma Hollis, chief executive of the National Association of School-based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT), said the “positive” scheme can be a “valuable way to build relationships with future applicants”. She added it “may not always have an immediate return, but may build longer-term pipelines”.

Does it work for schools?

The number of “lead schools” taking part has fallen.

As of 2024, 63 lead schools helped run the scheme, down slightly from 68 the year before and 66 in 2022. Leads typically partner with local schools or their trust to deliver the programme and host interns.

Hollis said: “Hosting interns can be resource-intensive for schools and providers – requiring significant time for coordination and placement management when capacity is already stretched in both schools and providers.”

Schools have continued to receive £700 per intern – despite sky-high inflation pushing up costs. However, the rate paid to interns by government has increased significantly as the national minimum wage has risen. In 2022, interns were paid £900 for the three-week scheme. For 2026, they will now get £1,365.

Liz Wylie, director at i2i Teaching Partnership SCITT, said she feels the current funding “is proportional to what we need to do”.

“We want to encourage and engage with uni students and hopefully inspire them to consider teaching as a career. We manage our costs



Emma Hollis

carefully and spread the work through our team.”

However, Hollis added: “To continue to add real value, internships must be adequately funded ... clearly structured and linked to wider recruitment pipelines.”

The classroom barriers

Claire Amed, learning and development manager at Creative Education Trust (CET), said the programme needs “considerable internal administrative capacity”. She suggested the “potentially lucrative talent stream” could be “more efficiently managed via a central agency”.

Wylie added putting interns in classrooms with teachers already juggling high workloads remains her “biggest challenge”.

Wylie said the SCITT tries to “show teachers that this is another pair of hands in your classroom ... [and] kind of look at the positive”.

Interns at i2i are given online training in pedagogy by the SCITT’s central team. Then when in the school, they shadow form tutors, plan and deliver part of a lesson, and have access to a mentor.

“They’re really ... at the chalk face,” added Wylie. “They get that real experience.”

Dr Chris Tomlinson, CEO of Co-op Academies, said the scheme is “making a real impact” at his trust. It allows students to “experience school life first-hand and discover whether teaching feels like the right path”.

More than a fifth of interns have since started teacher training, with the rate improving each year, he added.

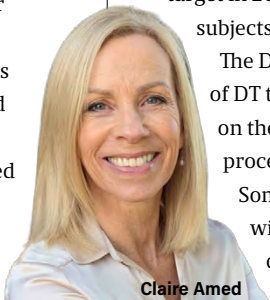
Value for money?

So is the scheme value for money?

Between 2020 and 2024, a total of 3,104 interns completed the scheme (although just 80 took part in 2020 because of Covid).

Government spent £5 million on the scheme across those years – about £1,600 per intern. However, if we assume the rate of interns who go on to teacher training is about 35 per cent, this average cost is closer to £5,000.

But Amed said as well as providing a “a valuable opportunity” into school life for undergraduates, the scheme can have a wider positive impact on schools. Interns “bring with them energy, innovation and capacity at a much-needed point in the school year”. They also give inexperienced ITT mentors the chance to “hone their skills” before guiding teacher trainees, she added.



Claire Amed

How many interns apply for teacher training?

Year	Number of Interns	% who applied to ITT in 1st cycle post-internship	% who applied to ITT by end of Sept 2024
2020	80	15	35
2021	450	25	36
2022	667	19	27
2023	950	19	19
2024	957	Not yet available	Not yet available

Source: DfE

SCHOOLS WEEK

How interns break down per subject

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Subject	Interns	Interns	Interns	Interns	Interns
Maths	48	274	371	346	352
Physics	22	114	176	125	112
Maths & Physics (combined)	10	62	41	16	8
Computing*	-	-	63	97	112
Languages**	-	-	16	193	189
Chemistry***	-	-	-	173	184
Total	80	450	667	950	957

*Computing was introduced in 2022

**MFL was piloted in the NE in 2022, then rolled out nationally in 2023

***Chemistry was introduced in 2023

Source: DfE

SCHOOLS WEEK

Internship expansion calls

The DfE recently invited schools to bid for a three-year grant to deliver internships in from 2026.

Only schools able to host at least five interns eligible. They must also offer internships in maths and physics as a minimum.

FOI data shows maths had the most interns in 2024 (37 per cent), followed by languages (20 per cent) and chemistry (19 per cent).

From 2026, the scheme will include a design and technology (DT) internship.

DT hit just 39 per cent of its ITT recruitment target in 2024-25 – among the lowest of all subjects.

The DfE said the number and location of DT teaching internships will depend on the outcome of the procurement process.

Some schools are now calling for a wider expansion to meet growing demand.

i2i had around 39 applicants for just 12 places last year. Wylie welcomed the DT expansion, and called for more shortage subjects to be included in the scheme, such as business studies.

This could also help schools benefit from a worsening labour market, amid AI-fuelled job cuts and a stagnant economy.

UK graduates face the toughest job market since 2018, analysis by jobs website Indeed in June found.

Wylie said: “It would be really great to touch with more undergrads...to really show them how enjoyable it is to be a teacher.”

Meanwhile Co-op Academies Trust is now offering its own unpaid internships in English, history, geography, RE, music and art.

“This growth reflects how rewarding the experience has been for everyone involved and our continued commitment to finding, developing and supporting great teachers,” Tomlinson added.

NEWS

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School's intake cut blocked despite £2m deficit fear

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

A school has been refused permission to cut its intake by a quarter despite estimates of a "catastrophic" £2 million deficit after the local authority opposed the plans.

Winsford Academy wanted to slash its published admission number (PAN) amid falling numbers of pupils choosing the school.

It is the only secondary school in the local area rated 'requires improvement'. However, the Office for the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) refused the application, despite admitting the change may help the school "attract more students".

The OSA sided with Cheshire West and Chester Council, which said any reduction in the school's roll would put their duty to provide sufficient places "at risk".

Sector leaders believe the case is a "symptom of the system sailing so close to the [financial] wind", with budgets expected to get tighter as schools look for more savings to cover potential unfunded pay rises.

'Catastrophic losses'

Winsford Academy wanted to cut its year 7 PAN by 25 per cent to 180. This came after it welcomed 168 year 7s this September, well short of its PAN of 240.

The Halliard Trust, which runs the secondary, believes the school is on track for a "catastrophic" £2.2 million deficit by the end of 2031. It blamed this on the fact per-pupil funding is lagged, with allocations based on numbers from the year before and continual under recruitment. The move would also allow it to be "confident" of admitting about 180 children each year.

It could then restructure and "staff on the basis of six classes per year group in most subjects", giving it "stability in staffing [and] possibly increasing the quality of the provision through continuity". It would also be eligible for additional "growth" funding should the school then be oversubscribed.

Places 'risk' and £60k bus costs

However, Cheshire West and Chester council argued the plans "risk the local authority failing to meet its statutory duty to provide sufficient school places". It pointed to forecasts showing



space for more than 180 children – but below 240 – would be needed in future years.

The council added it would also have to stump up about £60,000 more a year in transport costs to bus children elsewhere under the plans. This is because its other secondaries are more than three miles from Winsford Academy.

Schools adjudicator Deborah Pritchard upheld the authority's objection, despite acknowledging the academy's "educational reasons have merit".

"A lower PAN would make it more likely that the school is oversubscribed," Pritchard said. "An oversubscribed school is often perceived to be a better school and this can attract more students and staff."

However, Pritchard ruled the trust's finance concerns "are not sufficient to justify the potential lack of places", adding the council must "plan ahead".

Haliard chief executive Jeremy Spencer said the verdict was "not what we would have hoped for".

The trust has "a very good relationship with the local authority" and plans "to keep talking" to "find a solution that will help Winsford Academy continue on its journey of improvement".

A Cheshire West and Chester spokesperson said it is "required to ensure that there are sufficient school places for all pupils in

our local area". It will "work in partnership with all our schools to fulfil that duty".

Schools 'sailing close to wind'

Another factor in the case was that the local authority signed a £135,000 agreement with Halliard last year, "which secured a permanent PAN of 240 in receipt of capital funding from the council".

Institute of School Business Leadership CEO Stephen Morales believes the Winsford case is a "symptom of the system sailing so close to the wind. In an environment where there was headroom these kinds of things wouldn't be such a problem, but that's not the situation we find ourselves in."

In its evidence to the School Teachers' Review Body, the Department for Education said schools must find savings to cover a proposed 6.5 per cent wage increase over the next three years.

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



Jeremy Spencer

NEWS

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Ministers urge primaries to consider childminders on site

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

Ministers have urged primary schools without space for a full nursery to consider teaming up with a childminder to provide early years provision on their sites.

The country's largest childminding agency has said opening such settings in schools can have benefits for staff returning from parental leave, whose children can be prioritised for places.

Under the Department for Education's school-based nurseries capital grant programme, schools can apply for up to £150,000 to repurpose disused classrooms into nurseries. The funding can also be used to convert space to host a childminder in schools that might not have room or the expertise to run a full nursery.

The news follows a law change last year that means childminders no longer have to work from their home – which experts say schools are unaware of. The publicity around the scheme also focuses on nurseries, rather than the option for childminders.

Schools have until 5pm on December 11 to apply for the second wave of funding and are being reminded they can team up with childminders.

Early education minister Olivia Bailey told Schools Week such partnerships "are a great option for schools with limited space who want to take part in the next phase of our school-based nursery rollout, helping to create more high-quality childcare options for families across the country.

"We've already made it easier for childminders to work from schools and community spaces, and we're going further to make sure they get the support they need."

Government guidance on the second wave of funding states schools "may choose to lease buildings to a private, voluntary, or independent provider, childminder or group of childminders to operate from.

"These partnerships can bring additional benefits such as flexibility to offer nursery provision that better meets demand."

It states local authorities "will be best placed to help you locate potential partners to take up this offer.

"Childminder agencies may also be able to help establish collaborations."

One such agency – Tiney, the country's largest – said there were benefits for school staff too as their own children can attend, making it easier for them to return from parental leave.

Brett Wigdortz, the organisation's chief executive, said the teaching profession was "full of parents and, like any working parents, they need reliable childcare.

"This childminding model helps schools offer flexible, affordable care, often in the same building as older siblings, easing the return to work for new parents and supporting those already juggling family life."

He said teachers could be "given priority access, but plenty of local families will benefit, too. As a result, schools become even more embedded into the community from a child's earliest years and they build a natural pipeline into reception."

Schools with poorer intakes and top Ofsted grades are being prioritised for funding in the second phase of the nurseries grant.

The Department for Education allocated £37 million last year in capital investment to create 300 new or expanded nurseries on primary school sites in England.

But of those, just 27 are due to work with a private, voluntary or independent childcare provider.

The data also does not break down how many of these are due to be nurseries and how many are childminders.

The second phase will see £45 million allocated to create a further 300 new or expanded nursery classes, which the government said would offer "up to 7,000 more places" from September 2026.



RUTH LUCAS | @RUTHLUCAS_

'Real danger' to Labour's early years readiness goal

The government's school readiness target is "risky" and could leave poorer pupils further behind, experts told the education committee on Tuesday.

The committee is investigating how government can improve the support given to children and families during the early years.

Committee members asked representatives from the Coram Group, Education Endowment Fund, Education Policy Institute and the University of East London about the target for 75 per cent of reception pupils to reach a 'good' level of development by 2028.

Early development is measured across areas such as language, personal

development, maths and literacy.

In 2022-23, 52 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals and 72 per cent of non-eligible pupils achieved a good level of development.

However, Professor Eva Lloyd from the University of East London said the 75 per cent ambition was "risky".

She said children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with English as an additional language or with special educational needs made up the majority of those who do not reach the benchmark.

Because of this, there might "be a tendency or pressure to concentrate ... on the ones

who are closest to the line" rather than those pupils "who have a very long way to go".

Dr Tammy Campbell, early years lead at the Education Policy Institute, agreed the target had a "real danger" that the "marginal children will be pushed".

"What we don't want is children with special educational needs and disabilities, children from low-income families or who have other needs being neglected because they see as being unlikely to make this very specific threshold target, and we don't want to incentivise these children being ignored in early education."

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Stephen Morales****Chair at East Midlands Academy Trust****Start date:** October**Concurrent role:** chief executive, Institute of School Business Leadership**Interesting fact:** Stephen is a keen surfer but missed the best surf conditions in a decade to attend his interview as bursar at Watford Grammar School for Girls nearly 20 years ago.

Movers & Shakers

Your fortnightly guide to who's new and who's leaving

**Sophie Kayani****Director of external relations at E-ACT****Start date:** September**Previous role:** Head of strategic partnerships, E-ACT**Interesting fact:** Sophie used to manage DJs in the 90s, worked in Athens for a Greek shipping magnet family as an au pair and had to organise a piano to be shipped into the basement of a restaurant in Chelsea for Li Ka-shing, the Asian billionaire, to play.**Phil Humphreys****Chief education officer at GLF Schools****Start date:** January, 2026**Previous role:** Director of education, Lift Schools**Interesting fact:** Phil and his wife get remarried on their wedding anniversary each year. They've been remarried on a gondola in Venice and a Transylvanian castle with Vlad the Impaler overseeing proceedings.**Patrick Alexander****Chief executive officer at Schools Alliance for Excellence****Start date:** November**Previous role:** Interim assistant director, Hackney Education**Interesting fact:** Patrick had a tough day at the London marathon this year, after failing to spot a very low kerb just before the Cutty Sark. Alas, he did not get the time he wanted, but would like to make clear that he still finished ahead of John Terry.**Nick Stevens****Chief operating officer at AQA exam board****Start date:** November**Previous role:** Chief finance and corporate services officer, AQA**Interesting fact:** Nick's main running partner is a Jack Russell called CookiePlease let us know of any new faces leading your school, trust or education organisation by emailing news@schoolsweek.co.uk

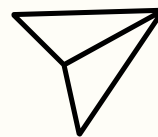
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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



Letter of the week



Science for all

The plan to [offer all pupils the opportunity to study triple science from 2028](#) is welcome in as much as it tackles longstanding inequities.

Only about 13 per cent of disadvantaged pupils take triple science, compared to 28 per cent from more affluent backgrounds.

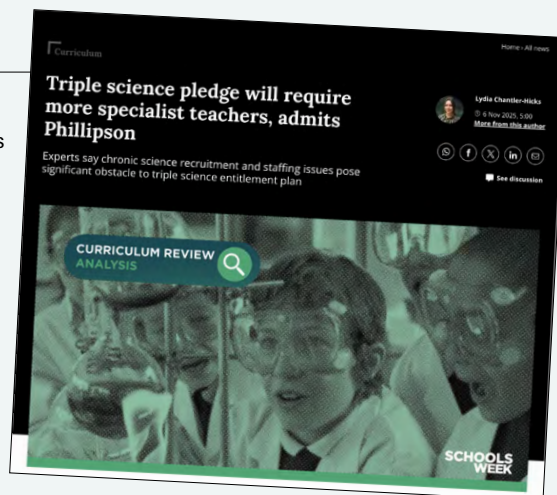
Plus, too many under-resourced schools cannot offer it at all, despite the evidence that triple science is associated with greater science uptake for A-level and degree studies.

Only a quarter of post-16 students study enough science to continue into science-related degrees or careers. For most, GCSE science is their final formal encounter with the subject and many of these students complain of a lack of relevance.

The curriculum must therefore serve two purposes: to prepare future scientists and to ensure all young people can apply scientific reasoning, understand uncertainty, identify misinformation and weigh evidence in their everyday and civic lives.

If triple science is to be an entitlement, we also need a parallel route that recognises a different aspiration; one that assesses scientific literacy and systems understanding, not just recall of disciplinary content.

A reimagined single science qualification could provide this, ensuring that every student leaves school with science that is both meaningful and measurable.



Gareth Shackleton, science teacher at Berwick Academy

Mind the language gap

The curriculum and assessment review leads off with fine words about the purpose of its proposals and our education system.

It reads: "Our diversity and commitment to equality of opportunity and fairness are some of this country's greatest strengths. Throughout the Review we are seeking to deliver a curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring all children and young people are represented, whilst also exposing them to a wide range of perspectives that broaden their horizons."

All this matters, not least in a society fractured by a lack of respect for diversity.

But it is passing strange that the report makes

but just one reference – in footnote 229 – to the great diversity, which central to our society, of multilingualism. More than 20 per cent of primary pupils are categorised as English as an additional language (EAL), and that massively understates their multilingualism.

Instead of constructing a language curriculum to value, explore and celebrate that diversity, the review has re-asserted the centrality of European languages in a world that is changed utterly.

John Cloughton, former chief master of King Edward's School, Birmingham, and co-founder of World of Languages, Languages of the World

Teaching fatigue

When I read about all these new initiatives it makes me feel so relieved I am retired ([Heads say SEND league tables won't improve provision, November 6](#)).

I don't think anyone who hasn't actually taught understands how exhausting and demoralising it is to be effectively told you're doing it wrong and 'we'll tell you what you need to do'.

League tables, Ofsted, continuously measuring results – where else is there this level of negative scrutiny?

I loved teaching. In the end it was poor senior leaders and parents that forced me out – both incited by the media portrayal and government attitudes.

Teresa Knight, retired secondary teacher



Seeing ourselves

The recommendations to make the curriculum more inclusive are to be welcomed ([Curriculum review: All the key policy recommendations, November 4](#)).

If we are to turn the tide on the rising school absence, suspensions and exclusions, we must increase pupils' sense of belonging, and make sure that young people can see themselves in the authors, artists, mathematicians and scientists they learn about.

Updating the curriculum is essential to making sure all young people feel welcomed and included at school.

But this commitment to inclusion must also be reflected in recruiting the teachers who pupils see every day in their classrooms – 60 per cent of our schools have an all-white teaching team.

Jason Arthur, Chief executive at Mission 44

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Feature

RUTH LUCAS | @RUTHLUCAS



Auditing austerity

Despite its outward affluence, York suffers a wide equality gap between its richest and poorest. Ruth Lucas reports on a project to build a picture of poverty and find solutions by talking to pupils and training auditors to visit school

York schools are launching a local-authority wide poverty proofing audit to address the “persistent advantage gap” for pupils living in deprivation.

While York has a higher attainment rate than the national average, the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils’ outcomes is particularly wide.

Pupils in seven schools will be asked about the barriers they face during the school day, including around the cost of school trips, food and drink, and extra-curricular activities.

Auditors will make specific recommendations of changes to each school, and there are plans to collate lessons learned from a public website by researchers at York St John University.

Dr Carole Pugh, senior lecturer at York St John’s, said “by listening to the voices and experiences of children and parents, that will help us to demonstrate that poverty is an issue in York”.

‘We don’t understand disadvantage issue’

The city of York is one of the least deprived areas of Yorkshire, according to census data, but around 3,500 children are living in poverty.

“York is quite a small area, but I don’t

think we really understand the disadvantage issue we have,” says Matt Smith, headteacher at Huntington Secondary School and leader of the poverty proofing project.

Department for Education data shows while around 75 per cent of York pupils achieve at least a C in English and maths at GCSE – far higher than the national average of 56 per cent – there is a 34-percentage point gap between those in the authority’s most and least affluent wards.

According to City of York Council, 17 of its smaller areas – known as ‘Lower Layer Super Output Areas’ – are within the most deprived areas of the country in terms of educational outcomes.

This has led to a “persistent advantage gap”, according to the council’s Schools and Academies Board.

“It feels like a different city to live in, in terms of being on the breadline... maybe as a city we’re not geared up to tackling that, in the same way that bigger cities are,”

Smith says.

Schools can support their disadvantaged children through pupil premium funding, available to those eligible for free school meals.



Dr Carole Pugh

But measuring poverty just by the numbers of pupils on free school meals can be a simplistic measure, Smith suggests.

“I think since the pandemic, there’s a layer of young people and their families that sort of sit above that threshold. I would still argue [they are] living in poverty and with financial constraints, that really impacts their enjoyment at school and what they can access in terms of opportunities”.

Also working on the project is Dr Carole Pugh, a senior education lecturer from York St John’s University, with a specialism in child poverty.

She says: “We don’t have a large population of disadvantaged students – we don’t hit any of the indicators that say this is a very disadvantaged area.

“[But] we know we do have some very disadvantaged families here, and we know that what we are doing is not effectively supporting them.”

‘Subtle barriers’

Smith set out to understand how to better support his disadvantaged pupils last year – and was exposed to things he and staff members “just didn’t see at all”.

Charity Children North East, which developed the concept of poverty proofing eight years ago,

Feature: Poverty proofing

carried out a day-long audit of his school.

Auditors spoke with every pupil at Huntington, as well as some parents and staff. Children were asked to go through their school day and unpick all policies and practices at the school. Their interactions were also observed at lunch break and after-school clubs.

All conversations were then taken away and collated into key findings for the school, including what it was doing well and what it could improve on.

"A lot of these barriers were really subtle barriers, and I think it's almost when you put the culmination of all these barriers together, you think goodness me, for a child who's living in poverty, you can see how school could be quite a difficult place," Smith admits.

Huntington's audit found the school was already serving disadvantaged pupils effectively through free transport, offline homework and low-cost celebrations and school photos.

But families expressed anxiety around the costs of school trips, particularly how quickly money had to be paid, and the price of lunches.

The school took on a lot of the audit recommendations, and plans to implement more over the next five years.

One idea is to make sure there is at least one payday between telling students about a trip and payment deadline, with better communication about the breakdown of all costs to parents.

Pupils will also be more closely supervised in queues for school lunches, where prices for food items will be displayed.

And Smith has introduced a free breakfast club ahead of the national government rollout, while training for staff has changed the way letters to parents are written to be more inclusive towards those struggling financially.

He says parents "have really noticed that shift of how the school is operating", but "you can't change it all overnight".

Widening the scope

Smith wants to take lessons learnt in his school and widen the scope to other settings across the city.



'I don't think we understand the disadvantage issue we have'

The council's Schools and Academies Board is working in partnership with Children's North East on the project and has trained 15 local auditors.

The first pilot school will be visited later this month, with the rest audited by the end of May.

Dr Pugh said training local people as auditors will give them "a much better understanding of the local area... there's that level of knowledge about certain streets that if you are a local, you know what that means in a way that other people don't."

She added that by following the process, they could understand the benefits of a local-authority wide approach.

"A lot of audits focus on the single location," she says. "Schools themselves can make changes and can definitely do stuff to address the exclusion that some families who are less well-off feel, but there are limits to that".

Dr Pugh believes that by highlighting patterns across schools, leaders can make wholesale changes with external providers for school meals, or transport.

The university will lead focus groups throughout the process to understand the benefits of the audits, and the impact

they could have on changing perceptions around poverty in the city.

Dr Pugh says her team "are hoping that by focusing on poverty proofing and particularly by listening to the voices and experiences of children and parents, that will help us to demonstrate that poverty is an issue in York."

"That it has an impact, and there are changes that we can make that will help schools."

Smith adds: "I think what we're really hoping for is that we'll get some sort of sense of the challenges within the city of York."

The £25,000 scheme is funded by the council, and subsidised by the Children North East charity.

Cllr Bob Webb, City of York Council's executive member for children, young people and education, said: "Tackling poverty and its generational impact is one of our key priorities, and I'm pleased that this pilot will support our ongoing work to reduce the impact of poverty on children and young people in our city."

"The pilots will enable us to review how we can better support young people living with poverty to ease some of the barriers, anxiety and challenges they face at school."



Matt Smith

Opinion

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CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW



JO
HUTCHINSON

Co-director for early years and wellbeing, Education Policy Institute

Curriculum review was missed opportunity to improve SEND crisis

The review promised to remove blocks to deliver good outcomes for children with special needs – but it has failed in two key areas, says Jo Hutchinson

The curriculum and assessment review was an opportunity to tackle a primary driver of rising SEND numbers and the resulting demand for special school places. You might be wondering, what does the curriculum have to do with SEND? The answer is: a lot.

To make the connection, consider the definition of SEND: when a child has needs that call for more than the ordinarily available provision in school, they have SEND.

If that “ordinary” provision narrows, it is reasonable to assume that the number of children failing to meet its standards will grow. Taken to its logical extreme, if provision becomes narrow enough, we could end up with 100% of children being identified with SEND.

As things stand, over a third of children are identified with SEND at some point between reception and year 11. This is not to downplay their very real needs. It is to highlight that when a curriculum is not calibrated to all children (including those in special schools), the task

of meeting those needs becomes unnecessarily challenging.

The point is not about lowering standards. It is about setting standards that are meaningful for all and mindful of differences in children’s development.

How well did the review grasp this opportunity? While some important improvements were adopted, the results are mixed.

The planned reduction of GCSE content, for instance, is both sensible, and unsurprising for veterans of the last curriculum review in 2014. If there is barely time to introduce children to all the facts in the syllabus, as is the case in some subjects, then there is certainly no time for adaptive teaching.

The latest review has placed a lot of eggs in the adaptive teaching basket, having done less to adapt the curriculum itself for children with SEND.

A significant exception is the planned introduction of an oracy framework to complement the literacy framework. Speaking and listening are vital precursors to reading and writing and fully deserve the attention.

The policy should be taken further, ideally coupled with a national assessment and adjustments to the primary phonics and reading curriculum to make space for these



“ Underpinning the review is a lack of curiosity

skills early in a child’s development. Nonetheless, it is an important step forward.

Underpinning the review, as with education policy broadly, is a lack of curiosity and ownership regarding SEND, and the children these policies affect. Consequently, the review has fallen short for young people with SEND in two key areas.

First is the continued omission of personal, social and emotional development (PSED) from the curriculum after age five. This is a glaring gap with particular resonance for children with SEND. Our research has showed that PSED is the early learning goal most likely to be missed by children who later require a statutory Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

The second failing is its refusal to consider how narrow qualification requirements create curriculum inflexibility which, in turn, drives a deficit in inclusion.

The government’s proposed reforms to Progress 8 are a positive step, but changing the prominence given to any particular subject does not address a more fundamental issue.

Since the Wolf review took

effect in 2014, there have been no qualifications approved at key stage 4 designed to meet the needs of disabled young people and enhance their preparation for adult life.

The review notes that around four percent of young people – a similar proportion to those with complex needs – take level 1 or entry level qualifications post-16, many in the personal and social development and employability category.

But it says nothing on whether these qualifications should be more readily available earlier. If the government wishes to see more children with SEND in mainstream education, it must not make young people wait until they have left school to access qualifications relevant to their needs.

SEND is always treated as someone else’s responsibility or a job to be tackled later. This passivity must end.

The curriculum programmes of study may be the last chance for a decade to make good on the PSED curriculum gap, and updating available qualifications is a key test of the government’s resolve to make mainstream schools more accessible.

Opinion

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CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW



TIM
OATES

Chair of the national
curriculum review expert
panel review, 2010-13

Beyond EBacc: how to get the next accountability shift right

Since performance measures create unintended consequences, policymakers must stay alert following reforms around EBacc and Progress 8, says Tim Oates

As history has shown us, any new public policy performance measure leads to the system adapting its behaviour.

With the five A* to C GCSE grades performance measure, we saw borderline C/D candidates targeted by schools – to the detriment of those below this group.

I remember a story arose in policy circles about one metropolitan borough that sent letters home to all households with C/D borderline candidates, encouraging a focus on exam preparation prior to GCSEs.

This was not what had been intended in the adoption of the performance measure, and was at odds with the values that motivated its design.

But the measure was retained for many years even after clear research showed that it was damaging and distorting.

Credit to Conservative education ministers who ushered in a new era of performance measures that were based on the value schools added to pupils' attainment.

These were not originally

created by the state, but by highly competent academics, concerned about improving equity and really identifying which schools were making the most contribution to young people's learning.

The promise of these measures in encouraging educational quality for all was spotted by government and carefully used to refine the basket of measures that we now have.

Some continue to criticise having any performance measures at all, but these voices fail to engage in two simple facts.

First, England's education system is big, complex and diverse.

Second, England is not an outlier; high levels of accountability are present in Singapore, whose high performance continued to rise during COVID, unlike almost all other nations.

And the myth of high autonomy of schools in Finland is belied by the high levels of compliance and local accountability that have been a long-standing feature of its governance.

But note that both Finland and Singapore are small. They have populations half the size of London. There is a high proximity of policy to practice.

Whereas in England, government must gather and scrutinise data to understand good trends and amplify them, and to spot worrying



“ Spot worrying developments before they grow

developments before they grow.

Targets and performance measures are not a mark of obsessive control, they are a means of nudging and encouraging the system in the light of evidence.

They provide a means of connecting labour market trends to curriculum balance in schools, and allow equity and quality policies to be delivered without detailed intervention in school planning and teaching.

The EBacc was designed to increase triple science participation, nudge the system towards high-progression and high-return subjects, reverse the decline in modern foreign languages, and retain balance. It delivered this.

And back in 2010, STEM skill shortages were a top national priority for many groups and government departments. Let's not forget the zeitgeist on which EBacc was forged.

But specific measures will always produce collateral effects, often unanticipated.

With concerns about music in particular, and the EBacc plateauing at 40 per cent of schools, it was inevitable that the curriculum and assessment review would take stock.

The government's plan to now also adjust Progress 8 can deliver wider impact and incorporate changed views regarding curriculum balance.

EBacc was treated as an opt-in voluntary measure: some were in, many weren't. Progress 8 holds the potential for universality, if reinforced across Ofsted inspection, MAT review processes, etc.

However, overseeing a revised Progress 8, we must note Singapore's approach to innovation.

If an educational innovation is not working, they take immediate action.

They are far more vigilant and proactive than other nations, and we should be too. Performance measures in England can swiftly be refined as no change in law is required.

I would advise the same approach to managing the risks in removing the EBacc and using Progress 8 to deliver vital policy on equity, progression and curriculum balance.

Design it well, collaboratively, and monitor its impact diligently.

Review, and reform the moment that things look as if they are not as intended or off track. That's good statecraft.

Opinion

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LIZ
ROBINSON

CEO, Big Education



RUTH
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CEO of Duke of
Edinburgh's Award;
co-convenors of
Enrichment for All



New enrichment benchmarks will be a boost, not a burden

Government recognition of the importance of enrichment gives us all the chance to rebuild the provision that gives education its spark, say Liz Robinson and Ruth Marvel

Ask any teacher what they remember from school or college and it won't be a test score.

It will be the play they performed in, the sports team they joined, or the social action club where they felt they belonged.

Those moments of discovery and connection stay with us for life.

As leaders working across education and youth, we've seen first-hand how enrichment transforms confidence, belonging and aspiration. That's why the government's commitment to an enrichment entitlement for every child matters.

It signals a shift towards valuing every part of learning – including those that take place beyond the classroom – to help young people connect knowledge and skills whilst exploring their passions and discovering their purpose.

Some school and college leaders have raised understandable concerns about workload and funding as the government introduces new enrichment benchmarks. Others worry about Ofsted oversight.

But rather than viewing this as another burden, this is an opportunity for the sector to shape a

policy that reflects what schools and colleges already do best.

Why now is the right time

We're still waiting for full details of how the benchmarks will work. But the Enrichment for All coalition – with partners across education, youth, arts, sport, outdoor learning and social action – has developed a framework that we know is informing the government.

Our shared goal is that every young person, wherever they grow up, can:

- express creativity through arts and culture
- connect with nature, outdoors and adventure
- take part in sport and physical activity
- build skills for life and work
- contribute to their community through citizenship and social action.

School and college leaders have long understood that enrichment isn't an optional extra – it's what gives education its spark, helping pupils feel motivated, confident and part of something bigger.

Recent recommendations from the Education Endowment Foundation reinforce what so many already know: engagement in enrichment activities improves attendance, wellbeing and outcomes, especially for pupils eligible for Pupil Premium funding or children and young people facing financial or socio-economic barriers.



“ Those moments of discovery stay with us for life

Cash to rebuild ecosystem

For more than a decade, schools and colleges have held together the fabric of youth and community life as local provision has fallen away.

They cannot, and should not, rebuild that ecosystem alone.

Enrichment works best when organisations work together in a community – teachers, youth workers, cultural and sports organisations, employers and families – to create experiences in collaboration with schools and colleges.

The real opportunity is to ensure that these new benchmarks become a framework for collaboration, not compliance.

The government's £135 million Dormant Assets Youth Fund, delivered by the National Lottery Community Fund, will fund the first step towards rebuilding the support around schools and colleges – so they're not expected to deliver enrichment alone.

Used well, this investment will rebuild the community provision that sits alongside schools and colleges.

Schools and colleges are already showing what purposeful enrichment looks like in action.

At Surrey Square Primary, enrichment is integral: by working with external providers the school taps outside expertise in gardening, chess, dance and youth clubs, listening to pupils and the community to shape offers that work.

In Sunderland, Laidlaw Schools Trust's Pennywell Fellowship links six schools with civic, business, cultural and community partners to pool resources and provide opportunities no single school could deliver alone.

Oasis Community Learning embeds enrichment through its community hub model, employing youth and family workers and partnering with local and national organisations.

STAR Academies' Five Foundations of Leadership guarantee every pupil takes part in sport, the arts, volunteering and culture.

Many schools also use The Duke of Edinburgh's Award to personalise enrichment, nurture passions and celebrate achievement.

From benchmarks to belonging

The government's new benchmarks are an invitation to rebuild an education system that values the whole child and the whole community.

To deliver on that promise, we need shared leadership: schools opening their doors, youth and cultural sectors stepping forward, funders and policymakers aligning effort and resources.

If we work together – truly as a team around every child – the enrichment entitlement can become more than policy. It can be the moment we decide that every young person, wherever they grow up, deserves the chance to belong, contribute and flourish.

Opinion

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DR ANNE HEAVEY

Director of impact,
Ambition Institute and
DfE inclusion panel member

Why it's time to turn SEND training 'inside out'

Working from a diagnosis seems obvious but has limitations – so teachers need to anticipate pupils' needs, says Dr Anne Heavey

The government has set out five principles that will underpin reforms to the SEND system.

Understandably, this has stirred up fresh talk about 'SEND training' for teachers and school leaders, to help these reforms be successful for children.

This raises the question: what's the most important knowledge for teachers and leaders to know, and how should this be organised and shared?

There are two main approaches to training teachers and leaders on SEND, which I'll describe as outside-in and inside-out.

An outside-in approach

This approach trains teachers and leaders in how to support children according to a diagnosis they may have – for example, dyslexia, autism or ADHD.

It is widely used and has a logic: diagnoses can provide children and families with a language to understand themselves and advocate for support.

Teachers and leaders should of course be familiar with common diagnoses, and be able to respond confidently and reassuringly when

parents ask for help with something with which their child has been diagnosed.

However, the outside-in approach to training has limits:

1. Several children may share the same diagnosis, but it can show up in different ways for each child: as a result, they often need different support.
2. Some diagnoses are well covered in training but others are rarely mentioned, like Fragile X syndrome, despite it being the most common cause of inherited learning disability.
3. When a child has more than one diagnosis, teachers might be tempted to use different strategies for each diagnosis, instead of looking at the child's needs as a whole.
4. Diagnoses were developed to identify conditions, not help teachers to understand what support pupils need.
5. Given that medical categories don't always fit neatly with the knowledge we have in education, the effect can be to make SEND feel separate from the rest of teaching and learning.

An inside-out approach

Every pupil has needs – like social and emotional, communication, sensory and physical needs. These needs can change over time, for many reasons, and in different ways.

The inside-out approach trains



“ Diagnoses don't help teachers understand what support is needed

teachers and leaders to anticipate, notice and respond to the underlying needs of their pupils.

For example, take two pupils, Priya and Oliver, who both have a diagnosis of autism. Their teachers might be familiar with autism, but notice that it presents differently in Priya and Oliver.

When teachers understand the underlying needs pupils have, they can take their understanding to a deeper level. They can notice that Priya has an increased need for predictability, while Oliver has a greater need around communicating with other children.

This knowledge can help them strengthen the support they offer to Priya, Oliver and other pupils as part of core teaching.

For instance, they might introduce 'now and next' visual cues in class to support Priya's increased need for predictability, or focus on consistent transitions at the end of lessons. They might also build structured discussion time into lessons, to support Oliver.

Understanding pupils' needs also enables teachers and leaders to make informed decisions about when extra support is required. Sometimes, this can be achieved by refining teaching practice, like above. Other times, it may be

necessary to involve the SENCo and introduce appropriate additional support.

The inside-out approach can have other benefits, too. If educators can:

- anticipate and notice pupils' needs early, they are more likely to catch them in good time without waiting for things to deteriorate.
- identify pupils with similar needs, they can address them collectively. For instance, an understanding of working memory enables refinements in classroom practice that support pupils with dyslexia, pupils with dyspraxia, and their peers.

What should come next

We need professional development that brings the outside-in and inside-out approaches together.

It should help teachers respond to pupils' needs as part of their core teaching – while also explaining how this relates to diagnoses they will often see in their classrooms. It should also build on what they already know about children and learning in general.

A combined approach will provide the best opportunity to build our collective understanding over time, and help every child thrive.

Opinion

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LAWRENCE
FOLEY

CEO, Future Academies

As AI does our work, it may destroy the reasons we learn

Deference to machines raises questions not just about what and how we learn, but why, warns Lawrence Foley

Every morning my inbox fills with new AI products: personalised learning, workload solutions, assessment silver bullets.

These offers carry not only a financial cost but a quieter, more insidious one too.

When I began teaching, this kind of technology felt like salvation. I remember trawling the internet for someone who had once taught Eliot's objective correlative and could help me make sense of it. The idea that one day a system might do that work for me felt like liberation.

Now that it can, I find myself wondering what is being liberated, and from whom.

These days I am more circumspect, more suspicious of what is coming down the track. AI tools can certainly streamline admin and free up time, but I worry they may begin to crowd out the messy, unpredictable moments that make education profoundly human.

There is something thrilling about teaching a class and knowing that someone in that room might one day know more about the subject than you do. That possibility, that

passing of understanding from one mind to another, is the essence of teaching.

Education was never meant to be efficient. It is slow, relational work. It grows through conversation, trust and the gradual shaping of minds over time, through the small acts of noticing, attending, questioning and, above all, *thinking*.

The classroom remains one of the few physical places where people still think together in real time about things that matter.

I do not want my own children educated in a system that offers them a screen instead of a teacher, or a bot instead of a brain.

More than this, I want them taught by teachers who think and care deeply about their subject, not by those who outsource or offload thinking elsewhere.

I keep coming back to Harold Bloom's claim that Shakespeare "invented the human".

He meant that Shakespeare's characters, for the first time in literature, began to think about their own thoughts, that they became aware of themselves. I think that is what real learning does: it helps young people overhear their own minds.

AI, by contrast, is a technology of replication, animated by ghosts of human thought. As Kyle Chayka



“ The arts remind us that meaning cannot be automated

wrote recently in *The New Yorker*, it is a 'technology of averages'. It produces smooth competence but little originality. People who rely on it begin to write and think in increasingly similar ways.

But if our students come to believe that knowledge no longer needs to be learned, that it can always be summoned, then something fundamental is lost.

If AI convinces them that knowing is unnecessary, that the answer is always waiting just beyond the cursor, then the purpose of school itself begins to dissolve.

When knowledge feels instantly available and endlessly reproducible, the struggle to understand begins to seem redundant, even though it is what forms intellect and character alike. We will have to work harder than ever to show why knowing still matters.

The human encounter through which knowledge comes alive is not a means to an end, but the end itself. It is within that dialogue, not in the answer, that students

discover why learning is worth doing at all.

And here, the arts matter more than ever. I don't mind if a machine drives my car or stocks my fridge before I realise what I'm missing.

But I would care if it wrote the novel in my hand, composed my favourite song, or told my child what beauty or love means. The arts remind us that meaning cannot be automated. They depend on interpretation, perspective and emotion. They depend on our humanity.

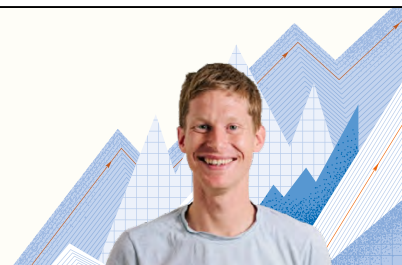
Perhaps this is the moment to remember that the arts are not an extra, but an origin. In a world increasingly built on pattern and prediction, they stand for what cannot be computed: imagination, empathy and judgement.

They remind us that to be human is not simply to process information, but to invent meaning through it.

Bloom said that Shakespeare invented the human. The danger is that, in our haste to embrace AI, we begin to diminish ourselves.

STAT OF THE NATION

DATA DEEP DIVES TO SURFACE FRESH PERSPECTIVES



Question level analysis is a waste of your time... so stop

John Jerrim

Professor of education and social statistics, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society

Our education system is awash with data. When used correctly this can help inform important school decisions, but there is always a danger one reads too much into the numbers, spotting trends and patterns that are not really there.

The use of assessment results falls into this category. Given their role in accountability, school stakeholders obviously take a keen interest in the results (particularly when it comes to key stage 2 SATs and GCSEs).

But some might take their analyses too far, making inferences and basing decisions on somewhat shaky grounds.

Last year, half of teachers in a Teacher Tapp poll reported they were entering data for Question Level Analysis (QLA) – which analyses performance on individual questions, instead of overall scores.

Similarly, assessment organisations are regularly asked to provide their clients with “sub-domain” scores, so they can better understand pupils’ relative strengths and weaknesses.

For instance, perhaps little Jonny is great at fractions but terrible at geometry, meaning he should spend more time working on his understanding of shapes and angles.

Or perhaps the whole class is awesome at algebra but doesn’t really get statistics, potentially guiding teaching plans.

The trouble is that QLA is fraught with difficulties. Individual questions differ in several ways, making it difficult to know what exactly to take from a single correct or incorrect response.

Such information is also very noisy, given one is looking at single points of data, one at a time. Sub-domain scores in many ways attempt to bridge this gap, providing schools with more granular information than overall test scores, but with greater reliability than looking at individual question responses.

Sounds great, right? But is such additional information really that useful to schools?

In a recent project funded by the Nuffield Foundation, we investigated this issue with



‘This practice is at best a waste of time and – at worse – counterproductive’

respect to the key stage 2 mathematics test.

The central aim of our project was to investigate the reliability of key stage 2 SATs sub-domain scores, and provide useful information to provide back to schools (e.g. to inform their teaching and curriculum development).

First, the good news.

We believe that producing sub-domain scores that are reliable enough for school-level reporting is indeed possible. We have managed to produce reasonably reliable school-level SATs scores for the eight areas of the Key Stage 2 mathematics curriculum.

But this must be done by pooling data across years and requires the use of fairly sophisticated statistical techniques (you can’t just add up the number of geometry questions pupils get right and expect to produce a reliable geometry score – which is what the Department for Education currently do).

Now for the bad news.

These scores turn out to be pretty useless, in terms of the additional information they provide. They, in essence, give schools very little extra insight over what can be inferred from overall mathematics scores. This is reflected by just how similarly schools perform across the eight national curriculum domains – the vast majority of the correlations sit above 0.99.

One may of course question whether this is something specific to the key stage 2 mathematics test. We have, however, also experimented with the reading data, where essentially the same result was found.

Our initial plan – once we had produced our scores – was to deliver school-level results back to schools. But – based on our findings – we no longer believe this is the right thing to do.

With more than enough data to be getting on with, all this information would do is give schools some extra distracting noise.

While this may at first seem a bit of a depressing result (at least for us) the findings do have real value for schools.

We all know the workload pressures staff are under. Our results show that any school currently undertaking QLA or any kind of sub-domain analysis of the key stage 2 tests should stop. This practice is at best a waste of time and – at worse – counterproductive.

We believe the same is likely true for many other assessments schools use, including those from commercial providers and QLA of GCSEs.

In life, sometimes less is more. This is also true in terms of reporting results from assessments back to schools.

This research was conducted by John Jerrim, Dave Thomson and Natasha Plaister

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

FRIDAY

The government totally redefined the meaning of phrases with a farcical update on the future of proposed free schools.

The government launched a review in October last year into free schools that had been agreed under the Conservatives but not opened yet – including desperately needed special schools.

We got the usual line at the time that “more detail will be provided in due course”.

In response to a question from Liberal Democrat MP Pippa Heylings, children’s minister Josh MacAlister had the cheek to suggest officials are “working at pace” on the decisions “to try and give all local authorities updates as soon as possible”.

Big LOLz in the *Schools Week* office when we read this.

MONDAY

A bit of aggro in the House of Lords. Lord Baker, the Tory peer, interjected during a speech from his colleague Baroness Barran about the rights and wrongs of the curriculum review.

“Just how long will this take? Will the back benchers ever get in?” an exasperated Baker said.

Barran informed him the backbenchers wanting to take part in the debate will get 20 minutes to have their say.

Still grumbling when it was his turn to speak, Baker said halfway through: “I will say one other thing – I must try to be briefer than some of the other speakers.”

After being asked to wind up his speech, Baker added: “Some of the long speeches we hear are not from the back benches but from the front benches, if I may say so.”

Not quite so noble!

Meanwhile, the government appointed former social mobility commissioner Alan Milburn to lead an independent investigation into rising numbers of young people not in education,

employment or training (NEET).

Figures show that nearly one million young people – about one in eight young people aged 16 to 24 – are NEET.

Handy choice, given Milburn’s predecessor in the social mobility commissioner role was another Milburn, this time Dame Martina.

Helpful for if Alan quits in disgrace/ or over government inaction to have a namesake lined up as the perfect replacement.

TUESDAY

While government is hoping scrutiny of its SEND reforms will die down a little after announcing they won’t be published until the new year, the education committee is keeping the heat on.

Committee chair Helen Hayes wrote to education secretary Bridget Phillipson today to demand more detail on how reforms will be “co-created” with parents, the sector and experts (as promised when the government delayed the publication date of its white paper reforms).

“I would be grateful for an outline of the specific steps you plan to take to design and facilitate this co-creation process,” Hayes said.

This “includes how stakeholders will be selected and engaged, how co-creators will be resourced to be equal participants in the process, how feedback will be incorporated, and how the department will ensure that decision-making remains transparent, inclusive, and accountable”.

WEDNESDAY

The government has been getting some (fair) flack for announcing a load of new expectations on schools, be it on parental engagement, behaviour or careers education.

So how did they respond?

More expectations, of course! (But this time, they have been drawn up by robots!)

Schools will all get their attendance

targets from this month, with a handy report of which schools in their area have similar cohorts of pupils but are doing a much better job!

Lots of excitement today over which edu sector VIP would interview Bridget Phillipson in her webinar about the curriculum review.

Previous iterations of the Phillipson Show have included free school founder Ed Vainker, skills minister Jacqui Smith and former regions group director John Edwards in the interviewer’s chair.

Today’s turn went to (drum roll please) ... Becks Boomer-Clark – the chief executive of Lift Schools.

She started by praising Phillipson for launching a review (“you deserve real personal credit”), picking Becky Francis to lead it (“arguably the best person in the education sector” for the job) and then saying the report had “landed well”.

After buttering up Bridget, Boomer-Clark then lobbed in some proper questions.

On why government ignored Francis’ plea to keep Progress 8 unchanged, Phillipson said “my view is that it’s too much of a constraint on student choice in terms of narrowing breadth”.

While on the problem of squeezed school funding, the education secretary added “we are investing more in our schools, more in family support services too – and that is in the context of a pretty challenging situation when it comes to public finances”.

“That’s why we hope we’ll get more growth in the economy, because that provides you with different opportunities,” she added.



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