

SCHOOLS WEEK

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'Not credible' to 'figure out how
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And Phillipson slams OBR's
'incorrect' impact analysis

Fallout heaps pressure on
ministers to deliver
SEND solution



SCHOOLS
WEEK

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Anyone who has read Schools Week over the past five years will not be surprised by this week's big news about the SEND 'ticking timebomb'.

It has always been there. But on Wednesday, the Office for Budget Responsibility decided to actually record it – in black and white – on the government balance sheet.

By 2028, councils will face a £14 billion blackhole on their SEND funding deficits. It's near impossible to find a solution that doesn't involve government stepping in to provide funding.

Government then also faces another £6 billion to run the SEND system each year (the costs of this will move from councils back to central government from 2028, it was confirmed this week).

Those numbers are scary – but should not be unexpected.

In fact, transparency over how seriously bad the situation is should be welcomed. (Although this has been complicated somewhat by the OBR issuing a bit of a dodgy estimate on the impact of schools,

see our story on pages 4 and 5).

It is also a positive development for the schools sector.

It makes clear to everyone the scale of the problems, and just how urgent a solution is required. It should also mean that another half-baked plan to resolve it all – as the Tories did before they left office – will not suffice.

Elsewhere this week, we take a look at how the change in Ofsted grades has given the Department for Education a headache over where to set the quality bar for eligibility onto exemplar schemes, such as teaching hubs (see page 7 and 8).

We've also got some encouraging news on teacher workload and wellbeing (while things are bad, they are getting a bit better, see page 13).

Plus we have a super long read into how one of the country's biggest ever academy rebrokers is going (pages 15 to 17).

Meanwhile, one academy trust is turning to its pupils to come up with ideas to solve the key stage 3 disengagement problem (page 18).

Most read online this week:



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2 **Budget 2025: Everything schools need to know**

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

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NEWS: BUDGET

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£20bn SEND blackhole ups stakes on reforms

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

Revelation of a £20 billion SEND blackhole has sparked a row between the Department for Education and the spending watchdog and upped the stakes on ministers to fix the system before the government absorbs its soaring costs.

This week's budget revealed that from 2028, SEND cost pressures will sit on the government's books, rather than councils, after a "statutory override" allowing authorities to post high needs deficits comes to an end.

The Office for Budgetary Responsibility said the decision could cost the government £6.3 billion in 2028-29, with "no savings" identified to offset this.

Without action, the pressure would rise to over £9 billion by 2030.

The OBR also warned the government has announced no plans to address councils' existing SEND deficits, expected to reach £14 billion by 2028 – meaning minister face a £20 billion SEND funding timebomb.

'Treasury forcing the pace'

Sam Freedman, a former government adviser, said this week's development was "the Treasury basically telling the DfE 'you are going to do these reforms' to try and force the pace".

But a row has erupted over an OBR analysis on the potential impact of the SEND costs.

The organisation originally reported that funding the £6.3 billion entirely from the schools budget would see mainstream per-pupil funding cut by 1.7 per cent.

It later issued a correction – revising the figure up to 4.9 per cent. The OBR did not respond to repeated requests for clarity on how this was worked out.

The Department for Education then issued a public statement on Wednesday evening saying the claim was "incorrect".

They said it was "clear" that any



'We don't need commentary that treats a modelling example as if it were a signed-off decision'

deficit will be "absorbed within the overall government budget" – not just the education budget.

The projections also did "not account" for the potential impact of planned SEND reforms, due in a delayed white paper in January, government added.

But the intervention has raised the stakes on SEND reform.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson was even forced to privately reassure MPs on Thursday.

In a letter seen by Schools Week, she said the OBR content "is being presented in a way which is quite misleading".

Wayne Norrie, CEO

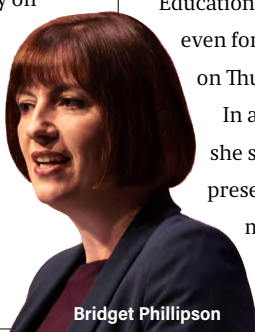
of the Greenwood Academies Trust, backed government, adding "leaders need honesty about trade-offs".

But "what we don't need is commentary that treats a modelling example as if it were a signed-off decision to squeeze mainstream schools yet again."

'Time to come clean'

However, the Conservative opposition seized on the chaos this week, calling for Phillipson to "come clean" about what they call a "hidden £6 billion blackhole".

Laura Trott, shadow education secretary, added it would lead to "a cut to schools and mass



Bridget Phillipson



Laura Trott

NEWS: BUDGET

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teacher redundancies, or a £6 billion cut to special educational needs provision”.

In her note, Phillipson said she was “disappointed but not at all surprised that the Conservatives have started scaremongering about something that isn’t even happening”.

But publication of the figures ups the pressure on ministers to deliver a solution.

The OBR said having to shoulder SEND deficits is “very likely to result in many local authorities issuing section 114s” – effectively declaring bankruptcy – due to “being unable to set a balanced budget”.

The government is due to set out more detail at the local government finance settlement in December. Councils are urging ministers to write the deficits off.

Luke Sibieta, education programme director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said the OBR was right to highlight the size of the potential SEND blackhole.

“It is not a credible plan [for ministers] to say that we will figure out how to fund it later. The government is yet to set out plans to reform the SEND system. Indeed, it has kept postponing plans to publish proposals.”

He added government had three options to fill the £6 billion gap.

It could “slow the growth in SEND spending through reforms” though “changes will take time to be felt”. It could top up school funding from elsewhere in government. Or it could reduce mainstream funding to pay for high needs.

“To illustrate the impact of these choices, £6 billion is equivalent to about 9 per cent of the overall schools budget in 2028-29, or about 11 per cent of the mainstream schools budget in that year,” Sibieta’s analysis suggested.

The OBR was pressed on why its figures differed, but did not respond to request for comment.

What else do leaders need to know from this week’s budget?

1. Two-child benefit cap scrapped

The chancellor confirmed the government will be scrapping the two-child benefit cap



Correction to Chapter 5, paragraph 5.19, second bullet

Text currently reads:

If it were fully funded within the Department for Education’s £69 billion RDEL core schools budget in 2028-29, this would imply a 1.7 per cent real fall in mainstream school spending per pupil rather than the 2.4 per cent increase planned by Government.

Text should read:

If it were fully funded within the Department for Education’s £69 billion RDEL core schools budget in 2028-29, this would imply a 4.9 per cent real fall in mainstream school spending per pupil rather than the 0.5 per cent real increase planned by Government.

for universal credit from April 2026, which government claims will lift 450,000 children out of poverty.

The OBR said this would cost an estimated £3 billion by 2029-30.

2. £5m for secondary library books

There will be £5 million of new funding for state secondary schools to buy new books. This equates to £1,400 per school.

It builds on an earlier pledge of £10 million in funding to provide every primary school in England with a library by 2029.

According to the government, currently 1,700 primaries do not have one.

Both investments coincide with the government’s planned National Year of Reading 2026.

3. Private school VAT boost

The OBR’s report says the government’s introduction of VAT on private

school fees will raise £40 million a year more than expected.

This is driven by an updated forecast for average earnings that is used to project school fee growth.

Estimates for the number of children expected to leave the private school system in the long term – around 6 per cent of the private school population – remain unchanged.

4. But no extra school revenue funding

Despite the hopes of unions and other sector leaders, the budget did not contain a further increase in overall school revenue funding.

This year’s spending review set out plans to raise the schools budget from £64.8 billion this year to £69.5 billion in 2028, a cash-terms increase of £4.7 billion by the end of the spending review period – but in real terms, this is a less than one per cent rise.

Sector leaders had hoped for extra cash at the budget to fund rising cost pressures, including under-funded pay rises.



Luke Sibieta

NEWS: FUNDING

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Three councils allowed to breach minimum school funding rules

SAMANTHA BOOTH

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EXCLUSIVE

Three councils signed up to controversial multi-million pound SEND bailouts have been given government permission to breach minimum funding levels in schools.

Since 2020, local authorities have had to follow national minimum per-pupil funding levels (MPPFLs). This year, the rates are £4,955 for primary pupils, £6,221 for key stage 3 pupils and £6,831 for key stage 4 pupils.

But government documents show North Tyneside, Bracknell Forest and – for the third year in a row – Kent all “gained approval to set a lower value”.

This was “in the context” of their safety valve agreement, where councils make sweeping changes to their SEND services in exchange for extra government cash.

The change is linked to councils being granted permission to top slice their schools budget to fund their high-needs black hole. This year, 33 councils were allowed to seize more than £82 million to prop up the deficits.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary at school leaders' union NAHT, said the practice “underlines how acutely the SEND system has been underfunded over many years”.

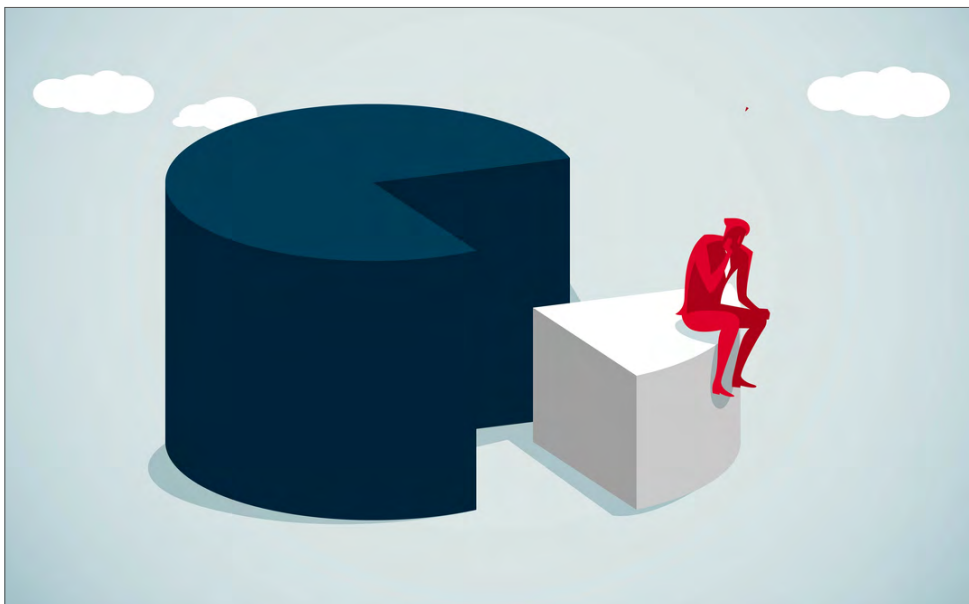
“It’s vital the government’s forthcoming reforms are backed by the funding needed to address this worrying situation, make SEND deficits a thing of the past, and ensure councils do not have to resort to this unhelpful and divisive financial jiggery-pokery.”

Kent transferred £16.5 million – 1.2 per cent – of schools funding to its high-needs budget as part of its six-year, £140 million safety valve agreement.

Primaries received £4,910 – £45 less than the national per-pupil funding rate and the lowest of the three councils this year. This was £6,184 for key stage 3 and £6,742 for key stage 4.

Schools Week analysis suggests the average sized primary school in the area could lose about £12,600.

A spokesperson for the council said it ensures all the schools share the cost fairly. It said 77 per cent of its schools had a per-pupil rate above the minimum level, meaning these would be top



sliced while 23 per cent would not.

“This money is still being invested in education, just redirected to provide extra help where it’s needed the most. It also ensures all schools share the cost fairly,” they added.

David Whitehead, chief executive of Our Community MAT and member of the school funding forum, said: “The rationale is quite sound in terms of trying to create a level playing field. I think the bigger picture is that if SEND was funded appropriately in the first place, then the council wouldn’t have to do it.”

In Bracknell Forest, primaries received £4,930 per pupil. This was £6,196 and £6,806 for key stages 3 and 4 respectively. The authority transferred £900,000 – 0.85 per cent – from its schools budget.

Stuart McKellar, the council’s executive director of resources, said all schools were fully consulted on “all aspects of the council’s safety valve proposal” with the DfE and “this decision was not taken lightly”.

The council signed a seven-year safety valve agreement in 2023. It is facing a cumulative high-needs deficit of £34 million by April next year.

He said the authority requested permission to reduce the minimum level for a “small number of schools”, adding: “We understand the impact funding decisions can have and we remain committed

to prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable children in our schools.”

In North Tyneside, primary pupils attracted £4,932 in funding, while key stage 3 and 4 pupils received £6,192 and £6,800 respectively.

Jon Ritchie, the council’s resources director, said making the change meant the 0.5 per cent transfer was “more equitable amongst our schools and would impact each school’s budget more fairly”.

The schools forum did not approve the transfer last year. But ministers can overrule this.

David Watson, St Thomas More high school headteacher and schools forum chair, said: “We really support what the local authority is doing within the safety valve programme ... but what we felt is it shouldn’t ideally be at the expense of the core schools budget.”

Meanwhile, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council – which previously had to reduce its minimum funding levels but did not this year – warned ministers its £183 million deficit is “forcing” it to make “impossible financial decisions” with “devastating consequences”.

It called on government to allow them to use high-needs cash to cover £10 million interest repayments on their debt.

Council leader Millie Earl said: “There is an increasing risk of breaching established local government funding rules.

“We have heard promise after promise of a national solution, but we are yet to see any proposals or plans.”



Paul Whiteman

LONG-READ: POLICY

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**‘Urgent clarity’ sought on flagship schemes after Ofsted grade reform**

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSWW

EXCLUSIVE

Union leaders are demanding “urgent clarity” on how schools will qualify for exemplar schemes, such as teaching school hubs, that previously required a ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ Ofsted rating as an eligibility benchmark.

Headline grades were abolished in September 2024, and are being replaced with a new “report card” system following a major overhaul of inspections.

Previously, schemes such as subject hubs, teaching school hubs, and the Teacher Reference Group required schools taking part to have ‘good’ or better ratings.

Leaders’ union ASCL says it has “repeatedly” asked the Department for Education “what the changes to Ofsted’s grading system mean” for such programmes.

‘Imperative that schools have clarity’

ASCL general secretary Pepe Di’Iasio added: “It is imperative that schools have clarity on this as a matter of urgency, and that there is a transparent and fair process for schools wanting to apply in the future.”

He warned that as Ofsted has been clear its new five-point grading scale is not comparable to the previous four-point one, “it would be a contradiction to simply change a requirement of ‘good or better’ to one of ‘meeting the expected standard or better’.”

“However, we still don’t know what is planned.”

The Department for Education did not provide an on-record comment, despite being approached last week. It would only say the eligibility criteria will remain under review, with schools issued report card grades being considered on a case-by-case basis.

Under Ofsted’s new inspection framework, schools now receive one of five grades across at least six judgement areas. The framework launched at volunteer schools a fortnight ago and routine inspections are due to resume on Monday.

Eligibility updated for some

DfE has updated official guidance for the Condition Improvement Fund (CIF) to reflect its

**‘Having a clear quality bar for flagship schemes is clearly very important for maintaining standards within the sector’**

new “case-by-case” approach.

The school repair funding supports a small number of expansions where Ofsted has rated the school ‘good’ or better in quality of education and leadership.

The 2026–27 guidance for the fund now states applications from schools inspected under Ofsted’s new framework will be reviewed “on a case-by-case basis”.

Meanwhile, there is no mention of Ofsted in the 2025 guidelines for teachers hoping to join the Teacher Reference Group, which advises government on the potential impact of policies. An earlier document said teachers must be in a school “rated good or outstanding”.

Similarly, the 2025 information pack for Headteacher Reference Groups (HRGs) does not mention Ofsted, despite the 2019 pack saying it “would particularly encourage” applicants from schools recently judged ‘outstanding’.

Dame Alison Peacock, chief executive of the Chartered College of Teaching, said while “there are many initiatives where school quality is important”, schemes where the DfE seeks views from leaders or teachers “seem to require a different approach in order to gain a wider perspective”.

She called for the DfE “to think carefully about what it needs for

each of these schemes and set its quality criteria accordingly”.

‘Quality bar is important’

In 2020 guidance, only schools rated ‘good or outstanding’ were eligible to become teaching school hubs – described as “centres of excellence for teacher training and development”.

Providers reapplied in 2023 for approval to run hubs until 2028. It is not clear how new Ofsted ratings will affect any future rounds.

Another scheme with no update is the DfE’s subject hubs, which previously had to be ‘good’ or better.

David Hatchett, chief executive of multi-academy trust Anthem Schools Trust, whose schools are involved in several initiatives including English and maths hubs, said a lack of eligibility criteria creates “an element of uncertainty” for schools and trusts.

“Having a clear quality bar for flagship schemes is clearly very important for maintaining standards within the sector and improving outcomes for children and young people,” he added. But “that doesn’t mean excellence should be pinned to any one Ofsted inspection evaluation category. Particularly as inspections typically happen some years apart”



David Hatchett

LONG-READ: POLICY

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Move away from simplistic gradings'

Daniel Kebede, general secretary of teachers' union the NEU, called for the DfE to "resist" using Ofsted gradings as a way of judging eligibility for its schemes.

"There were good reasons for stopping the use of single-word judgements, and so we hope the DfE

will discontinue the link between having a certain inspection category and accessing or contributing to certain schemes, programmes or boards," he said.

James Bowen, assistant general secretary at school leaders' union NAHT, echoed this, saying: "The time is right for the DfE to move away from

using simplistic Ofsted gradings as a way to determine eligibility for various programmes."

Hatchett added "excellent work" is done across his trust's schools, "not only in schools previously judged as 'Good' or 'Outstanding'", and called for an approach that "recognises strong, quality-assured practice, wherever it exists".

What do the guidelines say?

Headteacher Reference Groups

THEN: The July 2019 information pack for applicants (the most recent that could be found online) said DfE would "particularly encourage" applications from candidates in schools "judged Outstanding by Ofsted in the 2018-19 academic year".

NOW: There is no mention of Ofsted grade requirements in the 2025 information pack.

Teacher Reference Groups

THEN: In 2023, to be eligible teachers had to teach at schools "rated good or outstanding by Ofsted".

NOW: This has been dropped from the 2025 guidelines.

Teaching school hubs

THEN: 2020 guidelines stated eligible schools must be "rated Good or Outstanding at latest Ofsted inspection".

NOW: Not clear what will happen to this requirement in future rounds.

Subject hubs

THEN: As of 2023, schools had to be rated 'good' or 'outstanding' to be a maths or English hub.

NOW: No update

Condition Improvement Fund

THEN: Guidance for 2026-27 published last month says a small number of expansion projects will be considered for schools with

'good' or better in quality of education and leadership

NOW: However, schools with a report card grade will be reviewed on a "case-by-case basis".

Looked-after children placed in schools

THEN: DfE guidance from 2018 states 'good' or 'outstanding' schools "should be prioritised" when a council is placing a looked-after child in a new setting. They "should never be placed" in an 'inadequate' setting unless in "exceptional" situations.

NOW: Government plans to publish new statutory guidance. In the meantime, virtual heads should use "full Ofsted inspection reports" to make "informed decisions".

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Ofqual calls for extra time study during exam reforms

RUTH LUCAS
@RUTHLUCAS_

The government should “explicitly consider” whether the amount of time in reformed exams is sufficient, the qualifications regulator has said, as revised data on the scale of access arrangements is revealed.

Ofqual has released new figures to show the proportion of pupils getting arrangements such as 25 per cent extra time from 2016 to 2025, after historical data was found to “significantly overstate” the issue. Additionally, the regulator has published research showing “substantial variation” in how quickly pupils can complete exams across different subjects. The watchdog has called on the government to consider this when reforming qualifications following the curriculum and assessment review.

“While we do not have evidence of speededness being a significant issue in current assessments, future assessment design will be strengthened by an explicit consideration of whether the standard duration of whether the standard duration is sufficient for students to work without undue time pressure,” Ofqual wrote in its report.

The revised data, published on Thursday, showed the proportion of pupils receiving access arrangements is much lower than previously reported.

Ofqual said between 18 and 27.7 per cent of pupils had at least one access arrangement in



2024–25. The most common arrangement was 25 per cent extra time, which was granted to 16.6 to 25.5 per cent of pupils. This is broadly in line with the proportion of pupils with special needs, Ofqual said.

However, private schools are still much more likely to use it: 22.4 per cent to 32.1 per cent, compared with 14.6 per cent to 22 per cent for state school pupils.

Ofqual said it could not publish specific figures and had to use a range, because it did not know whether there were candidates with multiple arrangements or with some granted for future years. The watchdog said the top end of the ranges published would likely be reduced once further information was collected.

Figures suggest lower rates of access arrangements compared with historical data. Incorrect figures, suspended in July, reported 26.5 per cent of state school pupils and 41.8 per cent of private school pupils had arrangements.

Ian Bauckham, chief regulator at Ofqual, said the data would “more accurately inform the legitimate interest the education sector and the public take in access arrangements”.

“Access arrangements must meet the needs of students, allowing them to demonstrate fairly what they know, understand and can do. They must also be manageable for schools and colleges to implement.”

The regulator has looked more broadly at how long it should take pupils to complete exams. It said the Department for Education should consider “whether an assessment should require a student to work at speed”.

Research published on Thursday on ‘speededness’ – the rate at which a pupil’s score in a test depends on how quickly they work – found variation between subjects.

Ofqual found “substantial variation” in how quickly pupils could complete exams. It analysed how many did not answer questions at the end in 181 papers for biology, chemistry, physics, maths, combined science and geography.

In maths, the “maximum omission rate” (the proportion of pupils missing a final question) ranged from 3 per cent to 52 per cent (a mean of 20.8 per cent).

This was lower in the sciences, (7.4 per cent for biology, 4.7 per cent for physics and 4.3 per cent for chemistry), although combine science was 14.5 per cent. Meanwhile it was 9.7 per cent for geography.

Pupils eligible for free school meals and with special educational needs missed the most questions on exam papers.

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBBOOTH

More pupils ‘school ready’, but more to do for 75% target

The proportion of reception pupils achieving a “good level” of development has risen slightly this year, but the rate of improvement will need to increase for government to hit its “school ready” target.

Last academic year, 68.3 per cent of pupils hit this marker in the early years foundation stage profile assessments, results published on Thursday show.

This is up 0.6 percentage points from 2023–24 and 3.1 percentage points from 2021–22.

Last year, Labour set out its “school ready” pledge for three-quarters of five year olds to

achieve a good level of development by 2028.

The measure assesses children’s progress across areas such as language, personal, social and emotional development, and maths and literacy.

But the highest it has ever been is 71.8 per cent, and that was under an old assessment system.

For Labour to meet its 75 per cent target, the average rise each year would have to equate to 1.7 percentage points – compared to this year’s rise of just 0.6 percentage points.

This year, the disadvantage gap has widened

again. It now sits at 21.3 points, up from 20.5 points last year.

Just 51.3 per cent of free school meal-eligible pupils achieved a “good level” of development, compared to 72.5 per cent of their wealthier peers.

There has been a slight increase in the number of pupils with special educational needs provision achieving the “good level”, from 19.7 per cent last year to 20.6 per cent this year.

The gap has narrowed between boys and girls, by 0.6 points, but girls still perform higher (75.3 per cent) compared to boys (61.6 per cent).

ANALYSIS: SCHOOL BUSINESS LEADERS

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Unions call for business leaders' pay alignment

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

EXCLUSIVE

Ministers have been told to align school business leaders' pay with that of other leaders as analysis shows their salaries have stagnated.

School business managers play a key role in managing school finances, but are often paid on the support staff pay scale, set by the National Joint Council for Local Government Services (NJC).

In their submissions to the teacher review body, the NAHT and ASCL unions called for the government to consider aligning school business leader (SBLs) pay with a revised school leadership pay structure.

SBLs "play a critical role in the strategic and operational success of schools and trusts", and "strategic decision-making", the union added.

Yet "too few ... are remunerated on a salary that aligns with the senior responsibilities they exercise", which creates "disparities in their recognition, progression and retention".

Better definition

A union survey of 161 respondents suggested four in five were paid on the NJC scale, with just 5 per cent on the leadership pay spine.

Rachel Younger, chair of NAHT's SBL sector council, said: "If you're a leader, you're a leader ... People should be paid commensurate with the job that they're doing, with the level of complexity and accountability of those roles."

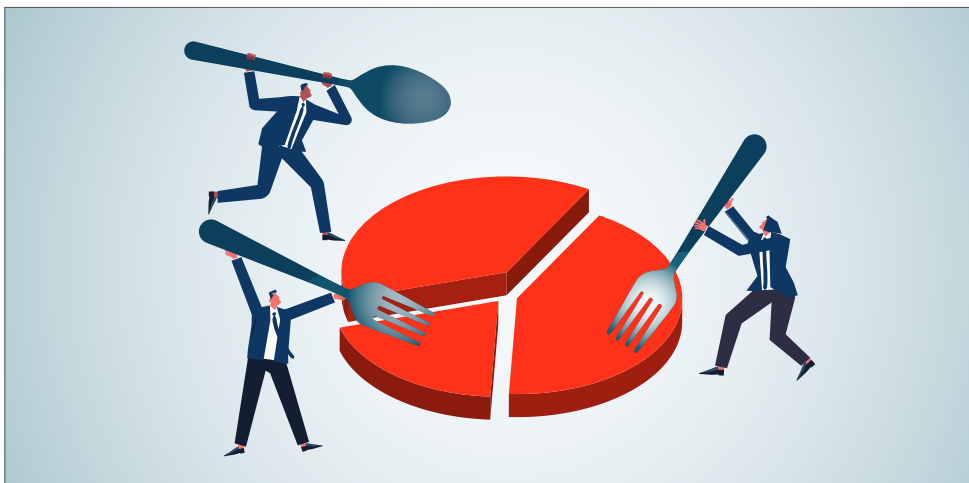
Salaries vary with councils using different pay scales, and a lack of clarity over different role types – such as school business managers and chief financial officers – also leads to variability, experts added.

Stephen Morales, chief executive of the Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL), added: "A SBM can earn from £25,000, up to in excess of £150,000.

"I think we need a much more precise definition of what we mean by an SBL or school business professional. The catch-all descriptor is not telling us very much."

Falling pay

Analysis of job adverts by SchoolDash shows school business leader pay has fallen in real terms. Advertised salaries have risen by just two per cent since 2020, while



inflation has averaged about four per cent in that time.

The average school business leader salary this year was £50,411, SchoolDash found, marginally higher than last year's £49,278 and the 2023 average of £49,640.

For comparison, the median teacher pay in 2024 was £49,084 – a 5.5 per cent rise from the previous year alone.

Younger said lack of parity with other leaders has long been "a bone of contention" for school business professionals, but has "definitely got worse" in recent years, with flat-rate awards eroding salaries. Meanwhile they are working under more pressure than ever "trying to stretch the budget to go further".

'Angry and frustrated'

Younger said colleagues "are quite angry in a lot of cases, and frustrated, and we are seeing a lot of people leaving the profession early. Pay is part of recognition, but it's a really big part of recognition."

An NAHT survey this month found 85 per cent of business professionals did not feel their salary fairly reflects their responsibilities.

Only 28 per cent would now recommend leadership roles – a drop from 43 per cent in 2021.

Of 770 school business professionals recently surveyed by the Department for Education, six per cent said they wanted to quit "as soon as possible", and 10 per cent within the year. Although the majority (59 per cent) said they wanted to stay for at least three years.

Joe Demetriou, a former SBM, said business leaders have "significant

school-wide responsibilities that often demand long hours and high commitment", but often "face contract terms that do not reflect these demands".

In some cases, roles "are not advertised at the top of the support staff pay grade".

Term-time only rise

SchoolDash analysis found a sharp rise in term-time-only (TTO) adverts this year.

After accounting for 3.8 per cent of SBM roles advertised in 2022, this dropped to zero in 2023, before jumping to 6.8 per cent in 2024.

Although the sample sizes "are relatively small", the shift in differences "statistically significant", said SchoolDash.

Younger said she felt the increase is likely "around cost-cutting".

Justine Berkeley, managing director of SBM Services, which supports business staff, said more schools and trusts must "maintain the capacity and capability needed to manage complex business operations effectively throughout the whole year".

"Increasingly, we are working with SBMs who are struggling to meet the full breadth of the role because sufficient time is simply not allocated to carry out all of the responsibilities expected of them," she said.

ISBL has created its own school business professional pay framework, which uses head teacher pay scales as a baseline to calculate recommended pay, applying weighting to variables.

Demetriou added: "Proper remuneration and contract terms are essential to attract and retain skilled professionals to fulfil these vital responsibilities."



Rachel Younger

NEWS: ATTENDANCE

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AI attendance: Just how similar are similar schools?

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

School leaders are still facing problems with the government's AI-generated attendance reports, despite them being re-issued after errors – as a government leader cautions “no model is perfect”.

Leaders who spoke to Schools Week said they had been told to learn from schools hundreds of miles away, their own school, or in some cases were not linked with any settings at all.

It comes as polling shows 80 per cent of headteachers think pairing up schools won't make a difference to their attendance levels.

Schools were issued new versions of their government attendance baseline improvement expectation reports last week, after the first reports were found to contain mistakes.

The reports include an AI-generated target to raise attendance levels, and rank schools within a group of 21 similar settings. Schools are then given four “better-performing” schools that they are encouraged to network with and learn from.

Schools are grouped together based on factors including the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, with social, emotional or mental health needs, English as an additional language, or in an urban or rural setting.

The Department for Education told teachers earlier this week this “provides an intelligent alternative to judging attendance solely against the national average”, which “includes schools in very different circumstances”.

“Not only does this provide you with greater transparency on the schools we're comparing you against, but it also provides an opportunity for you to reach out to those schools and create networks,” the DfE added.

But Stephen Ferguson, deputy headteacher at Kingsmeadow Community School in Gateshead, said although the similar schools was a “really positive feature”, most schools listed in his report were in London or the south. They also all belonged to multi-academy trusts, whereas Kingsmead is a local authority school.

“It's difficult to really do any sort of collaborative work with schools around a feature like attendance, if actually the similar-schools report generates schools that, once you get under the surface, aren't quite similar ... geographically, it's hard to get there and work with them.

“Yes, we can do it online or over the phone, but



Sir Kevan Collins and Bridget Phillipson

often the systems have multiple layers and depths to them. It's quite valuable to see in person.”

Other schools, including Dartmouth Academy in Devon and Trinity Academy St Edward's in Barnsley, were ranked among the top of their similar school groups.

They were told to go to their own school for advice.

Mark Allen, principal of Trinity Academy St Edward's, said: “Because it's AI-generated, you lose the kind of human intuition ... that's disappointing, you're invested in this and yet it's telling me to look at my own school for help.”

Andy Goodwin, safeguarding and attendance lead at Dartmouth Academy sponsor Education South West, said the reports “are on the journey toward what I think a lot of us have been crying out for, which is ‘please tell us who contextually we are similar to’”.

However, he added the reports have “some massive weaknesses” and leaders “don't fully understand how they've made the decision about the context”.

Another of the trust's settings, a technical college for 14-19 year olds, was told to learn from 11-18 secondary schools.

“That is no use, that's no context,” Education

South West trust chief executive Robert Coles said.

Nigel Attwood, headteacher at Bellfield Junior School in Birmingham, said his latest report did not include any schools to go to for support. The attendance data on the report was also wrong, he said.

In the school's initial report, Attwood said he had been recommended another school with about 60 per cent of its pupils receiving pupil premium funding – the same as his school. But others recommended had half the proportion.

“I think it's another document that's costing money that we could have used somewhere else,” Attwood said.

According to Teacher Tapp, the sector agrees with the leaders' concerns.

In a poll of 10,000 school staff, 80 per cent of heads, 82 per cent of teachers and 76 per cent of senior leaders thought pairing schools wouldn't make a difference.

Sir Kevan Collins, the DfE's lead non-executive director, told a teacher webinar about attendance on Tuesday there is “never, ever a perfect match”, and that the scheme was still in its test-and-learn phase.

“One of the things we want to do in this first year is test this with you. We want to find out whether we're matching you with schools you recognise as your own, or whether we need to make adjustments. No model is perfect.”

The DfE said while school region is given “appropriate weight” when forming the similar school groups, technology allows schools to “transcend location”. It added that if a school sees their own name as a high performing school, it “is not a suggestion they should contact themselves for support”.

NEWS: MATS

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Another diocese plans mega MATs

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

A Catholic diocese plans to move all its schools into new mega multi-academy trusts after tearing up its earlier academisation vision over fears the planned trusts would be too small.

The Diocese of Westminster planned to put its 187 schools into trusts ranging from 15 to 32 schools, meaning they would all educate about 6,000 pupils.

However leaked correspondence shows the diocese now wants to launch "four equally proportioned" academy chains instead.

This is because "shifting demographics" and financial pressures have left trusts needing to "serve more than 10,000" children to be sustainable.

One headteacher in the area has branded the proposals "dystopian", with one union boss "anxious" about the approach some dioceses are taking to the formation of mega MATs.

'Deeply concerned'

Rob Kelsall, assistant general secretary of the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), said the union is "deeply concerned by the diocese's unsolicited announcement of a new programme of large-scale structural reorganisation across Catholic schools.

"Our members are fully committed to the flourishing of Catholic education, but they cannot be expected to accept centrally imposed models that disregard local judgement and experience."

The Diocese of Westminster unveiled its original academy plans in 2018. However, Cardinal Vincent Nichols wrote to leaders this month to tell them the landscape has "changed considerably since those early steps".

Back then, the "benchmark for trust sustainability in terms of pupil numbers was 5000+."

However, "shifting demographics and a range of internal and external pressures" mean they "should serve more than 10,000" children. None of the diocese's 10 MATs "meet this threshold".

The diocese will "pursue closer partnerships among our existing trusts" moving towards "a consolidated network of four equally proportioned" chains.



'Swallowed up'

The Catholic Education Service's 2024 census found 187 schools operating in the diocese, 54 of which were academies. If they were to be shared between four trusts, each would have about 47 schools.

Nichols stated the new vision should "be accomplished over the next few years", as he cited a recent letter sent by Pope Leo XIV instructing Catholic schools "to converge".

A spokesperson for the diocese stressed "the proposals will be phased carefully" and that "governing bodies will, as always, retain their statutory responsibilities for determining the direction of their own schools".

However, Kelsall said such a "top-down restructuring process undermines both the professionalism of school leaders and the principles of subsidiarity that sit at the heart of Catholic social teaching".

"School structures are not, and must never be, determined by central diktat," he said. "We urge the diocese to pause this process, and commit to an open, transparent and genuinely collaborative approach", he added.

Calling the plans "dystopian", a leader at one of the diocese's schools voiced concerns their school would "be swallowed up, lose our distinctiveness and managed from afar. It's impersonal."

Delays and pauses

Analysis conducted by Schools Week last year suggested all but one of the 19 English Catholic dioceses are pursuing trust growth plans.

In Salford, church leaders want to split their schools between three trusts with at least 50 primaries and 10 secondaries by 2030. The largest is expected to take on 71. But it is now "assessing the impact" Labour's decision to axe "the [academy]

conversion grant will have".

The Archdiocese of Liverpool paused its proposals for 12 MATs with between six and 28 schools following the government's "sudden" axing of funds. It will unveil a revised strategy "in the new year".

Meanwhile, the Archdiocese of Birmingham was given the go-ahead by government in May to merge six trusts to create a 63-school MAT, called St Gabriel the Archangel. It launched two months ago.

'Other dioceses will do different'

St Gabriel will act as a pilot, with up to five more trusts – each consisting of more than 40 academies – established once "the lessons of implementation" are learned.

Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Pepe Di'Iasio said the union is "anxious about the approach being taken in some Catholic dioceses to the formation of large" trusts.

This is "a particularly challenging enterprise" with big MATs "generally formed over a number of years" with bosses ensuring "they have sufficient capacity and structures in place before taking the next step".

"We fully understand the argument for the formation of large MATs in a time of sparse education funding, but these have to be built on solid foundations," Di'Iasio added.

However, Catholic Education Service director Paul Barber said it was "only right for dioceses, in collaboration with their schools, to decide on how best to respond to the needs of ... families and those in the wider community".

"A consolidation of Catholic academy trusts, such as in Birmingham and Westminster, will be appropriate for those particular areas, while other dioceses may take different approaches."

NEWS

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Teacher workload survey: bad, but getting better

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

Teachers and leaders reported working fewer weekly hours this year than they have since 2022, while wellbeing has improved across the board, a new report shows.

More than 10,800 teachers and leaders have taken part in this year's Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders survey, carried out for the government by IFF Research and UCL Institute of Education.

But while there has been progress, workload levels remain high.

Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the National Education Union, said teachers are still "overwhelmed by manageable workload and long working hours".

1. Wellbeing improves...

All measures of overall teacher and leader wellbeing have improved for 2025, compared with all previous waves of the annual study, which began in 2022.

The average life satisfaction score for teachers and leaders increased compared with all previous waves, as did the average happiness score and the score they gave to feeling things done in their life are worthwhile. The average anxiety score also decreased.

However, researchers noted these wellbeing measures remain lower for the sample than for the wider population.

2. ...and workforce happier with pay

This year, 38 per cent of teachers and leaders agreed that they were satisfied with the salary they received for the work that they did – up from 30 per cent last year, and an increase compared to all previous waves.

About half (49 per cent) said they were not satisfied, though this was lower than all previous waves, and down from 58 per cent in 2024.

3. Teachers working fewer hours

This year, teachers reported lower working hours than in all previous waves.

Average hours worked per week for full-time teachers this year were 50.1, down from 51.2 last year.



Full-time primary teachers worked 51.4 hours a week on average in 2025, compared to 52.5 hours in 2024. Secondary teachers worked on average 49.3 hours compared to 50.3.

Meanwhile, full-time leaders averaged 56.5 hours a week – lower than 57.6 in 2024, 58.2 in 2023, and 57.5 in 2022.

Full-time leaders in secondary schools worked 57.3 hours a week on average, compared to 58.3 last year. Primary leaders worked 56.5 compared to 57.5 hours last year.

However, Kebede said: "Teachers' typical working hours continue to break the spirit of the Working Time Regulations.

"The government must finally confront the truth: workload is the real crisis. Without concrete measures on Ofsted, flexible working, funding and pay, our schools will be running on empty. It is simply unsustainable."

4. Workloads more manageable...

The proportion of teachers and leaders who felt their workload was not acceptable, and that they did not have sufficient control over it, remained high, at 43 per cent.

But this marked a drop from 49 per cent last year, and a high of 57 per cent in 2022.

A higher proportion of teachers and leaders felt their workload was acceptable – 26 per cent compared to 22 per cent last year, and 17 per cent in 2022 and 2023.

But Kebede added: "Only one in four believes

their workload is acceptable. This is a national disgrace."

5. ...but a third want to leave within a year

About three-in-ten (29%) teachers and leaders indicated they were considering leaving the English state school sector in the next 12 months, for reasons other than retirement.

This was lower than the 34 per cent and 36 per cent seen in 2024 and 2023 respectively, but higher than the 25 per cent seen in 2022.

As with previous cohorts, the most common reasons cited for those leaving the sector were high workload, stress, poor wellbeing and teachers' views not being valued by policymakers.

6. Flexible working rises

Meanwhile, just over half of the teachers and leaders surveyed (51 per cent) said they had a flexible working arrangement in place this year. This marks an increase on all previous years (46 per cent in 2024 and 2023, 40 per cent in 2022).

Part-time working remained the most common arrangement, at 22 per cent, but the prevalence of other arrangements has increased since last year.

Among them is PPA time off-site, which has risen from 15 per cent in 2024, to 19 per cent. Home or remote working rose from 4 per cent last year to 6 per cent this year.

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Island's exodus reversed: how pupils are coming back to Sheppey

JACK DYSON

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EXCLUSIVE

Nearly 1,300 secondary pupils used to set off each morning on the "daily" exodus out of the Isle of Sheppey, turning their backs on the local school that even teachers had deemed too dangerous.

But after one of the country's biggest school restructures in recent years, pupils are now battling for an education spot on the island. However, amid the success, there are rumblings of discontent over admissions and inclusion. Schools Week investigates ...

One-of-a-kind rebrokerage

When Oasis Academy Isle of Sheppey closed last year, it had never been rated 'good' or better by Ofsted.

In 2022, inspectors found more than half of pupils were not attending regularly. Behaviour was "often dangerous", leading staff to strike. "Too little" was done to tackle racist, sexist and homophobic language.

Nearly 1,300 secondary pupils were travelling off the island – nine miles long and five miles wide – in a "daily exodus" to schools on Kent's mainland.

The school – spread across two sites over two miles apart – became the first to be given up by Oasis Community Learning, one of England's largest trusts.

The rebroker was unique and most likely the largest undertaken by government.

The school was split into two last year, one to be run by the Leigh Academies Trust and another overseen by the EKC Schools Trust.

So how was it all done, and how is it going? Schools Week spoke to leaders, councillors and local experts to find out ...

Sending a 'clear message'

Leigh chief executive Simon Beamish said it had "changed absolutely everything" about how the school operates, now called Leigh Academy Minster (LAM). It is based on the old school's



'I wanted them to know they were our children, so we could get them qualifications'

southern campus in Minister on Sea.

The focus was initially on behaviour, attendance and safeguarding.

"Everybody got a very clear message they were expected to behave, lessons weren't going to be disrupted, and pupils were going to treat each other and adults with respect," said Beamish.

Suspensions were high initially but "rapidly" declined later, Beamish said, with pupils feeling "much happier and safer to come into school".

EKC Schools Trust, which runs EKC Sheppey Secondary on the old school's north site, said it has been "relentless in building a positive culture".

It has focused on being "highly inclusive", introducing "affordable uniform, free breakfast ... and a behaviour policy that supports, rather than penalises, children with additional needs".

When the new schools launched, parents of year 7, 8 and 9 pupils were asked which school they'd prefer to attend. But only LAM took on pupils in year 10 and 11.

Curriculum revamps

Both schools redesigned their curriculums. EKCSS offers a "strong academic core [that] also embeds

technical and vocational pathways". Every element is "career-focused" and draws on experience from the trust's sister organisation, East Kent Colleges Group.

LAM introduced a "baccalaureate middle-years programme into years 7, 8, 9", Beamish added. History and geography are more "bespoke" to where pupils live "so they recognise themselves" in what they learn. Much of the curriculum was "pared back down, made simpler and more logical in order to be delivered to a high quality".

The prior school had "a lot of additional pathways and students doing a range of surprising qualifications" such as "hair and beauty".

Beamish said: "We certainly wouldn't recommend a course like that at key stage 4 – for me, that's a course pupils progress on to in the sixth form when learning becomes more specialist."



LONG READ

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**How is it all going?**

Per-pupil attainment 8 scores – which measure GCSE performance across eight subjects – have improved at LAM. It registered a score of 28.4 last year, up from 23.6 at its predecessor in 2023–24. Equivalent figures for EKCSS have not been published as it has no year 11 pupils yet.

Absence rates are down. LAM and EKCSS overall absence rates stood at 13.5 and 12.5 per cent respectively, compared to 15.6 in Oasis Isle of Sheppey's final year of operation.

Former Kent headteacher and education adviser Peter Read said he would receive “weekly weeping letters saying: ‘My child’s at Oasis, what the hell can I do?’” But that correspondence has stopped.

Starkly, both schools are oversubscribed. A Kent council spokesperson said the “significantly strengthened education offer” means “the previous daily exodus of over 1,000 pupils travelling off-Island ... reversed”.

In fact, 56 pupils had to be allocated places at other schools up to 27 miles away because both the island’s new schools are now oversubscribed.

Local councillor Mike Whiting, a former Kent cabinet member for education, even said some parents have opted to home educate instead, calling the families “inadvertent victims of the success of the two new academies”. This was despite LAM adding a bulge class.

The council has warned that one of the secondaries will have to expand to meet demand now.

‘Less inclusive trusts’

Despite the success, it has not been without issues.

Kent council papers said the problems caused by the academies’ oversubscription highlighted “the lack of direct influence a local authority can wield when provision of school places ... is unsuitable”.

Documents seen by Schools Week show Kent council told the Office for the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) last year that the closure of Oasis Academy Isle of Sheppey was its “standout” admissions challenge in 2023–24.

Different trusts running the schools created “a complex environment to agree and manage such a complicated project”. The process “highlighted how insufficient guidance in the school admissions code and underlying legislation is in providing [local authorities] and trusts a robust framework in which to make decisions”.



‘Everybody got a very clear message they were expected to behave’

The council, in its letter, said the “lack of clarity also has the potential to allow less inclusive trusts to mandate preferential requirements that take advantage of the disparate nature of related SEN and alternative provision legislation”.

‘Misleading, undermining, baseless’

When asked for comment, a Kent council spokesperson said it was “not accusing any specific trust of being ‘less inclusive’”.

But they said a “key challenge” was “the inconsistent engagement with fair access protocol principles”, a statutory process “designed to ensure that vulnerable or hard-to-place children ... are admitted quickly and equitably across schools”. Councils are put in “a difficult position” when trusts fail to “fully participate in this process”.

“We are legally responsible for ensuring every child receives an education but lack the authority to compel schools to accept placements outside of formal admissions rounds,” the spokesperson continued.

When asked about Kent’s comments, Leigh said it “firmly reject[s] the idea” its school is “less inclusive”, describing them as “deeply misleading, undermining and baseless”.

Its admissions arrangements “are fully compliant” with national rules and “were agreed by KCC and the [Department for Education] prior to opening and after a full public consultation”.

An EKC spokesperson said its mission “is to serve the communities in which we work, focusing on the most deprived areas in east and south Kent”. But the “system in which we operate often works against those serving the most vulnerable children”.

“Ofsted outcomes and national performance measures can unintentionally incentivise schools and trusts to deter disadvantaged pupils, since attendance, behaviour and attainment figures are affected most by these groups.

“This has created a situation where some schools judged highly effective are, in reality, failing the very communities they exist to serve.”

Different cohorts

Government data shows just over 53 per cent of EKCSS’s pupils were considered eligible for free school meals last year, similar to the 51 per cent in Oasis Academy’s final year of operation. However, LAM has fewer, at 40 per cent.

Leigh stated the two new schools “serve different communities”, with LAM drawing “mainly from Minster and Eastchurch, which have lower deprivation levels overall”.

The trust said any change is down to the school’s catchment area becoming smaller as its popularity has increased, rather than “any difference in inclusivity”.

EKCSS also had the 11th highest proportion of pupils with an education, health and care plan

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(EHCP) in the whole county (6.7 per cent).

LAM's rate was less than half that of EKCSS (3 per cent) and below the 4 per cent registered by Oasis in 2023–24.

Leigh argued the comparison with EKCSS is “not like-for-like”. This is because LAM “opened with pupils in every year group”.

Home education

KCC figures, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, showed that 5.8 per 100 LAM pupils were de-registered from the school to be educated at home. Among primaries and secondaries, the figure was the 17th highest in the whole of Kent. EKCSS was 112th (1.9 per 100 pupils).

However, Leigh said 56 per cent of the requests “were from the families of students in years 10 [to] 13 who were given no choice on their child's new school as part of the re-brokerage”.

“In its first year, LAM ensured all pupils were on full-time timetables vs more than 100 on part-time timetables under Oasis [and] around 150 pupils were returned from [AP],” the trust added. “Many of these pupils had been receiving very little education, often of scandalous quality, prior to LAM opening. They had been effectively excluded from full-time education in the predecessor school by the back door.”

Leigh pupils on AP's role

Leigh said some year 11 pupils last year were also single rolled at a new AP satellite school on the island, called Estuary Academy Island – which is rare. This meant the pupils' results would not count in LAM's results that year.

Beamish said these pupils were in Oasis's internal AP, called Inspire, but “many had never attended Oasis and were never likely to attend LAM given their circumstances. Most had already been in some form of external AP for several years. This position was agreed after formal assessments by the AP provider and KCC [educational psychologists] in consultation with pupils and parents.” He said the trust “had no role in this”, but leaked emails show Beamish had asked the council for this arrangement.

EKC said its AP pupils on the island have been dual-rolled, where results sit with the “main” school.

However, Emma Bradshaw, CEO of Alternative



EKC Sheppey Secondary

‘Lack of clarity has the potential to allow less inclusive trusts to mandate preferential requirements’

Learning Trust (ALT), which runs the island's AP site, praised Leigh for taking on key stage 4 pupils, many of whom were “tricky”.

“They had never set foot in LAM. I fought to single roll them because I wanted them to know they were our children, so we could get them qualifications,” she said. “Some were getting a few hours' tuition each week [under Oasis]. They'd been abandoned by the system not working for them. There was lots of debate about it, but it isn't off rolling because they were never on-roll.”

The AP had catered for 115 pupils at first, but this has now reduced to 65 as pupils reintegrated back into mainstream. ALT said this “demonstrates the effective impact of its tailored support systems”.

OSA roped in again

There have also been frictions between the two mainstream schools. Earlier this year, Leigh objected to EKC's plans to name its primary on the Isle of Sheppey, Queenborough, as a feeder school to offer continuity of education.

Among other things, Leigh said the plan was “unfair” as it “potentially unfairly disadvantages children from a particular social or racial group” as there are other primaries with fewer pupils on free meals that are closer.

However, schools adjudicator Philip Lloyd said it “would not be unreasonable or unfair” to

name Queenborough, which is three miles from the secondary, as a feeder school. There was “no evidence” it would “unfairly disadvantage children from a particular social or racial group”.

He pointed out EKC already admits a higher proportion of poorer pupils and those with additional needs than its predecessor.

Last year, 37 per cent of pupils at EKCSS had an EHCP or were in receipt of SEN support – above the predecessor Oasis school's 29 per cent. LAM had 13 per cent.

£2m spent but true costs unclear

Questions remain about how much government funding was spent on turning around the schools.

Cabinet Office spending data shows about £2 million was allocated to the trusts involved in the launch of the new schools last year. Most of this (£1.5 million) went to Leigh, which spent its allocations on “transition planning”, leadership capacity and “new ICT infrastructure”. Just under £140,000 went to EKCSS. A further £370,000 was given to the ALT.

However, it is unclear whether any more money was pumped into the project by the government. DfE has snubbed our requests for a breakdown of the costs associated with the handover, claiming it is not a rebroker and therefore it does not have to publish them.

The department was approached for comment.

Trust piloting pupil ideas to tackle disengagement

RUTH LUCAS
@RUTHLUCAS_

One of England’s largest multi-academy trusts will survey its pupils for ideas to solve the key stage 3 engagement crisis – before piloting potentially “radical” solutions in its schools.

According to research, one in four pupils in England disengage when they move up to secondary school, with particularly low rates among girls and disadvantaged pupils.

Lift Schools, which runs 57 schools, is partnering with Reach Foundation to launch the Key Stage 3 Futures Programme from January.

The project will survey pupils, teachers and parents across the trust’s schools from January, before testing practical solutions for engagement in September 2026.

The chief executive of Lift Schools, Becks Boomer-Clark, said Lift is “prepared to be quite radical. To meet the challenge of engagement, we probably do need a revolution in the shape and structure of early secondary years.”

It will become part of Lift Schools’ Innovation



Lab and will be led by Reach Foundation’s managing director Ed Vainker, and independent panel member of the curriculum and assessment review Jon Hutchinson.

Boomer-Clark suggested solutions such as starting the school day later and changing the size of classes could be tested, but they were “open to ideas” from pupils.

“Part of the challenge of the engagement crisis is that it’s very often adults projecting their solutions on to children’s experience of school,” Boomer-Clark said.

In May, research carried out by the Commission on Engagement and Lead Indicators found more than one in four pupils begin to disengage with school as they reach Year 7.

And research from Lift Schools involving 21,000 pupils and 1,700 teachers across its schools found a significant dip in pupils reporting they had a sense of belonging.

While 84 per cent of year 6 pupils said they had a sense of belonging, just 58 per cent of year 9 pupils reported the same.

Less than half of girls in year 8 who were receiving free school meals felt they belonged at school, research found.

Lift is also partnering with UCL and Nuffield Health to explore the causal links between school and classroom climate, and student belonging, attendance and attainment.

Vainker said the project was a “huge opportunity to make sure that the early years of secondary build on the positive experiences that many young people have in primary and sets young people up to go to achieve well”.

Boomer-Clark added Lift was open to other schools taking part in the pilots.

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

More pupils feel like they belong, but fewer motivated

Secondary pupils’ sense of “belonging” in schools has increased significantly since last year – though they are feeling less motivated to learn, a new Department for Education report shows.

The news comes as the government has stressed it wants to boost belonging among pupils.

In January, the education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, said the ongoing “absence epidemic” in schools “signals a crisis of belonging” as “far too many children feel that they simply don’t belong in school”.

The DfE has compiled findings from its termly pupil experience surveys, which collect data from thousands of children each year.

The findings, published on Thursday, show “some improvements” across several

metrics in the year between May 2024 and May this year.

The proportion of pupils who feel they belong in school has soared by 12 percentage points, the report found.

Asked in May if they felt they belonged in school “most or every day” in the past two weeks, 69 per cent of year 7 to 11 pupils said they did. This is a sharp increase from 57 per cent the previous May, which came after successive decreases in previous years.

However, there was variation across several characteristics. Girls were significantly less likely to feel a sense of belonging than boys (65 per cent vs 73 per cent), the study found. Pupils in key stage 4 reported lower levels of belonging than pupils in key stage 3 (64 per cent vs 72 per cent).

Pupils eligible for free school meals and

those with SEND were less likely to feel a sense of belonging than other pupils (60 per cent and 61 per cent respectively, vs 72 per cent).

Elsewhere, the study showed the proportion of pupils feeling motivated to learn has dropped.

In May 2025, 70 per cent of secondary pupils were “fairly” or “very” motivated to learn, compared to 75 per cent the previous year.

The percentage of pupils who said they enjoyed school most or every day rose to 59 per cent, from 48 per cent last May. Pupils also reported more positive relationships with staff.

The proportion reporting there was often or always an adult at school who “really cares about” them rose from 50 to 57 per cent, from May 2024 to 2025.

NEWS

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Call for local partnerships to prevent structural 'limbo'

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Local education partnerships can foster collaboration between maintained schools and academies, and fill the "policy vacuum" left by the fragmentation of the system, a former education secretary and Ofsted chief have said.

Local education partnerships involve schools – maintained and academies – teaming up to form groups that partner with councils and lead school improvement, professional development, inclusion and programmes to improve literacy.

Partnerships such as Camden Learning – a model championed by schools minister and former Camden council leader Georgia Gould – and HFL Education (once Herts for Learning) are long-established and well-known.

But a report from the Area-Based Education Partnerships Association (AEPa) – a membership body for local education partnerships – revealed there are now 30 operating across England.

The news comes as ministers are deciding what to do about school structures as part of their upcoming schools white paper.

Schools Week revealed earlier this year that officials were working on proposals to encourage all schools to join a group.

'Risk that schools lose autonomy and trusts work in weak system'

But the report warned that "as we move to most schools being members of trusts, the risk is that individual schools both lose autonomy as part of a larger group and the trust itself operates within a weak school system because nothing connects them with other schools in the same geographical area".

It also said the "framework and incentives by which schools, or groups of schools, relate to each other and to the wider community is in limbo".

But it "increasingly matters less whether a school is an academy or a maintained school than whether there is a structure in which schools in the same place, serving the same community, can work together and learn from each other".

That is the "policy vacuum that local leaders and schools are seeking to fill through local education partnerships".



'They bridge schools and communities'

The report found that successful partnerships delivered improvement by supporting professional development, leadership pipelines and inclusion at a local scale.

Funding for the partnerships comes from a range of sources. Commissions from councils are "common", but "for many, the main sources of income are schools – as one-off, annual, or multi-year payments for a range of support".

Other sources include payments for other traded services, commissions from other public-sector organisations, and other grants or awards.

The report noted that "many" partnerships have had to rely less on council income.

According to the paper, the partnerships it promotes are "school-led, place-based and open to all schools no matter what their legal structure".

"As such, local education partnerships are a rich resource for the new government in managing the national agenda for change."

'The missing link'

The AEPa is chaired by Baroness Morris, a former education secretary and Dame Christine Gilbert, a former chief inspector who now chairs Ofsted and Camden Learning.

They said partnerships provided the "missing link" in a fragmented system and said the report should provide the government with "food for thought" as they consider their next steps.

"Place matters," they said. "Schools thrive when they are deeply rooted in their communities. Local education partnerships provide the glue that connects schools, families and services, ensuring every child has the chance to succeed."

"For many years multi-academy trusts have

been seen as the only structural way to deliver on this goal, but increasingly in many parts of the country local education partnerships have been quietly getting on with the job of gripping the challenges that schools and communities are facing locally."

'We really believe in collaboration'

Gould told the Schools and Academies Show last week the government "really believe[s] in collaboration", but added that it was "up to schools how they come together in that way."

"There's a lot that comes from collaboration and I think the role of trusts ... the leadership that they've shown and the capacity they brought into school improvement."

"So we are absolutely committed to more collaboration and to ensuring that at a place level, health, schools, local authorities are working together to really ensure that all children are supported, and where there is collaboration to save money, then it's a really important tool."

Examples of partnerships set out in the report include Birmingham Education Partnership, which runs a "new to headship" programme for all new leaders and a more advanced development programme.

In Surrey, Schools Alliance for Excellence has developed a "Surrey inclusion framework" to support schools with self-evaluation. More than 150 schools – both maintained and academies – have worked with it.

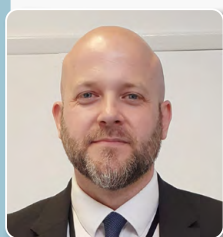
Learn Sheffield has been commissioned by its local council to lead reforms to increase the number of children who have positive experiences and achieve good outcomes without requiring additional or different provision.

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Martin Simpson****Chief operations officer, E-ACT****Start date:** December**Current role:** Director of technology, \J Schools**Interesting fact:** Martin writes Wikipedia articles about obscure footballers (the kind that usually play five games for Grimsby before fading into obscurity). One was so grateful he wrote to him to say thank you.

Movers & Shakers

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

**Jess Pearce****Principal at St Ivo Academy, Astrea Academy Trust****Start date:** January**Current role:** Headteacher at Trumpington Community College**Interesting fact:** Jess used to play roller derby and while fear of serious injury made her give it up, she now encourages her daughter to be confident on her roller skates.**Pete Bloomfield****Trust executive leader, education, Broad Horizons Education Trust****Start date:** January**Current role:** Head of standards, Evolution Academy Trust**Interesting fact:** Pete's education career started as a caretaker and then teaching assistant. He is also a long-time board game designer and play-tester – collaborating with groups across Europe.**Paul Smith****Chief executive, East Midlands Education Trust****Start date:** April**Current role:** Chief education officer, Northern Schools Trust**Interesting fact:** Paul has a twin brother and is also the parent of twin boys.**Gareth Conyard****chair, The School Library Association****Start date:** November**Concurrent role:** CEO, Teacher Development Trust**Interesting fact:** Gareth is a big fan of flags and has written blogs about them. He has a specially designed Conyard family flag hanging in his front room window.

Church education chief to lead school admissions adjudicator

FEATURED

The Church of England's chief education officer, Reverend Nigel Genders (pictured), has been appointed by the government to lead the adjudicator that oversees school admissions across England.

The Office of the Schools Adjudicator makes decisions about objections and variations to school admissions, as well as ruling on appeals from schools directed to admit pupils and significant changes to schools.

It comes as the government's children's wellbeing and schools bill will give councils the power to direct academies to admit children.



And the schools adjudicator can set the published admission number (PAN) of a school, including academies, where an objection is upheld.

Genders replaces Dr Marisa Valley and Mr Thomas Brooke, who have been acting as interim chief schools adjudicators since May 2024.

"High standards should be for every child, in every school, in every part of the country – opening up opportunity and breaking the link between background and success," said education secretary Bridget Phillipson.

Genders has been appointed for three years and will start on February 16. He will step down as chief education officer at the Church of England and chief executive of the National Society for Education in the new year.

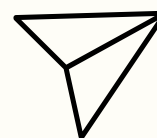
Genders said the role "carries a vital responsibility to ensure fairness, transparency, and integrity in decisions that affect children, families and communities across the country.

Genders has spent 30 years in ministry, as a parish priest, school chaplain, university governor, and director of education for the Diocese of Canterbury. He was made a canon of Canterbury Cathedral in 2020.

Please let us know of any new faces leading your school, trust or education organisation by emailing news@schoolsweek.co.uk

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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



Letter of the week



SEND stigmatising

Reform MP Richard Tice's comments on SEND, "[Reform starts to reveal its thinking on SEND reform](#)", reveal a worrying misunderstanding of the children our system is supposed to support.

As someone who has ADHD and works every day with neurodiversity (I am a former teacher, chair of governors and lead a company dedicated to inclusive education), I recognise that calling the use of ear defenders "insane" isn't just provocative, it's stigmatising.

For many autistic and otherwise neurodivergent pupils, sensory overload is real, overwhelming and a barrier to learning. Ear defenders aren't a fad; they're a lifeline that helps children feel safe, regulated and ready to engage.

Tice's claim of a "crisis of over-diagnosis" also misses the point. Rising identification reflects better understanding. For countless families, a diagnosis provides clarity, validation and the tools to support children effectively. And, with



such huge backlogs, it's just not credible to suggest too many people are being diagnosed.

His proposal to shift more responsibility on to already overstretched mainstream schools without the resources, training or specialist input needed to make inclusion meaningful is equally alarming. A "school-led" model works only when schools are properly equipped and structured around all children's needs.

Language shapes attitudes. When leaders mock essential supports, they fuel shame and discrimination. If we want a truly inclusive system, we must start with empathy, not cuts.

Dr Martin Saunders, co-founder & chief executive, EdShed

Richard Tice's recent claim that allowing children to wear ear defenders in school is "insane" may make good talk-radio fodder, but it badly misrepresents what happens in classrooms.

Ear defenders aren't a fad or a soft option – they're a simple, low-cost tool that helps some pupils manage sensory overload so they can stay in class and learn. For many children with sensory processing differences, autism, attention difficulties or anxiety, ordinary classroom noise can be physically overwhelming. Ear defenders don't remove expectations, they make them achievable.

Schools don't hand out adjustments indiscriminately. They follow the assess-plan-do-review cycle, speak with families and monitor impact. As every SENDCo knows, small

sensory supports can prevent escalation, reduce stress and protect learning time. Removing them doesn't build resilience, it withdraws access.

This debate reflects a bigger national misunderstanding about inclusion. Teachers aren't pandering; they're enabling children to succeed in increasingly complex classrooms, with rising need and stretched services. We would never ask a child to take off their glasses to "toughen up". Why treat sensory needs differently?

Ear defenders aren't the problem. The real issue is whether we want schools that adapt to children or force children to adapt to headlines.

Prof Michael Green, visiting professor at University of Greenwich



Mind the financial education gap

The Curriculum and Assessment Review has rightly reignited debate about financial education, especially with its headline reference to mortgages and its call to extend citizenship into the primary curriculum.

While speaking to the BBC, interviewers were surprised to learn that financial education is already statutory for 11- to 16-year-olds. The problem is simple: statutory does not mean delivered.

As Becky Francis notes, only a third of pupils recall being taught about money. My experience mirrors this. Ask year 11s what they wish they'd learned and the answer is always the same: "Money, taxes and financial stuff."

The Economics, Business and Enterprise Association argues that genuine financial literacy requires four things: dedicated curriculum time, trained specialist teachers, proper assessment and inclusion in Ofsted's framework. Without these, financial education remains squeezed into form time or scattered across subjects, producing inconsistent and superficial learning.

The review is right to frame financial literacy as rigorous "applied knowledge", not a soft life skill. But unless accountability matches ambition, nothing will change. Young people want this knowledge, the economy needs it and social justice demands it. Warm words are welcome – but without implementation, they won't reach the classroom.

Adrian Lyons, trustee of the Economics, Business and Enterprise Association and former HMI

Send your letters here:

LETTERSTO THEEDITOR@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



Profile

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

Pocketing counterculture

Around 500 UK schools now use Yondr phone pouches that stop pupils scrolling all day. Founder Graham Dugoni talks to Schools Week about the firm's origins, and why it hired former schools minister Nick Gibb as an adviser

Since 2014, Graham Dugoni has been trying to build a “cultural movement” towards phone-free spaces. It's already a pretty broad church.

After all, what else could possibly link former UK schools minister Nick Gibb, comedian Chris Rock and rock star Jack White?

Dugoni is CEO and founder of Yondr, whose lockable pouches allow schools, concert halls and other venues to lock smartphones away but let their owners keep hold of them.

The company has operated in UK schools since 2017, but has experienced a recent boost in popularity.

More than 250,000 children in 500 schools now use the programme. Of those schools, 110 started

in September.

Yondr also made headlines earlier this year with its surprise appointment of Gibb as an adviser.

‘I got laughed out of every school’

Born in Portland, Oregon, Dugoni attended Jesuit High School before playing college soccer at Duke University. He turned professional in 2010, playing for a Norwegian club before returning to the states, eventually retiring due to injury.

The sportsman, now 39, set up Yondr after seeing a drunk festival-goer being filmed without permission.

His concern about live events led quickly to worries about schools. But when he started

trying to sell his invention in education, he faced pushback.

He says it was during a “tech boom” in San Francisco, at a time when the “zeitgeist” was for more tech inside the classroom, not less.

“I got laughed out of basically every single school for probably six months straight,” he says.

But he felt young people were “going to need to have the experience of being without these devices for at least a period of time every day.

“Otherwise, how are they ever going to learn to integrate them into their life in a useful way?”

When the company started it was “mostly individual schools or individual classroom teachers looking for some kind of solution,” Dugoni tells me over video chat from the US.

Profile: Yondr



Now, “there’s broad social acceptance, I think, of what we do”, and Yondr works with entire multi-academy trusts here and whole states in the US.

Why pouches?

A survey by the children’s commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza, found earlier this year that 90 per cent of secondary schools and 99.8 per cent of primary schools already had policies in place that stop the use of mobile phones during the school day.

Three-quarters of primary schools and 7.9 per cent of secondary schools reported requiring pupils to hand in their mobile phones or leave them in secure locations they cannot access.

Only 3.5 per cent of secondary schools fully banned pupils from bringing them in at all.

With schools locking phones away already commonplace, what’s the benefit of a pouch?

Dugoni says the approach “gives the student a sense of responsibility”. He adds: “The student keeps their property on their person, which is helpful when you’re talking to parents.

“But it’s also helpful when you’re trying to educate young people, as you’re saying ‘we trust you to keep your property, but throughout this period of time, you can’t use it.’”

Another benefit is that when a pupil reaches for their phone and feels the pouch, “it interrupts the mental impulse.

“To me at the deeper level of phenomenology, how you’re going to retrain students and create new habits, is you have to interrupt an impulse and allow a new neural pathway to form.”

Dugoni acknowledges some “dynamo” heads have been “doing this for a long time”, creating an “amazing school culture where they’re able to create a phone-free school from beginning to end of the year”.

“The vast majority of districts and schools we work with around the world are trying to do that.



Yondr’s pouches and unlocking mechanisms

‘You’re saying ‘we trust you to keep your property’

But somewhere along the school year, that process drops off,” he adds.

“In a lot of these systems, the teacher’s kept in the position of being the phone police... the ones who have to wade through the grey area of, ‘is it a valid reason the student has their phone or is it not?’”

Is it value for money?

Yondr’s pitch to schools is a tricky one at a time of financial hardship.

Its programme costs £18 per pupil – that’s for the equipment, but also the implementation support, data analysis, help with communication and staff training.

An average-size secondary school in England would face a bill of over £19,000 to implement it for all pupils.

And the combined bill for the 500 UK schools using Yondr pouches would total £4.5 million. Schools also pay £15 to replace lost pouches.

What may have started as an altruistic drive to improve pupils’ wellbeing and learning has turned into a huge for-profit company operating across multiple countries.

Yondr is a private company registered in the US, so its financial results are not published. But its sales to state schools in the US alone reportedly increased from \$174,000 in 2021 to \$2.13 million in 2023.

And it was recently reported that Yondr made \$5 million from US government contracts in the first three quarters of 2024 alone. The company says it expects double-digit revenue growth in education this year, and its business has grown nearly five-fold since 2023.

So are pouches value for money, when other approaches may be cheaper or free?

Dugoni says that if creating phone-free schools was “as easy as I think sometimes someone, a casual observer, thought it was, Yondr wouldn’t exist.

“When you get down to these societal problems and start pulling them apart, to actually make something work and stick for a school, it takes some knowhow, and it takes some support.

“Our perception is that teachers are already working hard or are overworked. They’re stretched and they’re trying to wrestle with something that’s woven through every student’s

Profile: Yondr

home life, through their personal psychology, and then through the school ecosystem.”

On the for-profit element, Dugoni adds: “I don’t shy away from that. But I didn’t start the company for it to become a business. I did it out of what I saw as this social counterculture that needed to develop and grow.”

The benefits of a ‘ban’

The rise of solutions like phone pouches is set against the backdrop of a fierce debate over whether the UK government should mandate a ban on phones in schools.

Ministers say a full statutory ban isn’t needed because most schools already restrict phone use.

The Conservative Party now wants a full ban, despite opting not to put one in place during 14 years of rule.

Dugoni says having “legislative tailwinds massively helps in the US”. He mentions Arkansas and New York, which recently implemented state-wide bans.

He says these moves have been “incredibly beneficial because it gives school leaders and communities a sense that, yes, we wanted to do this, but now there’s some higher level support for what we’re doing”.

But he says most now talk about being “phone free”.

The difference is “really important, because phone ban is something negative. It’s like students are doing something bad”.

Schools going phone-free often face a mountain to climb with getting pupils – and their parents – onside.

For example, it might become a source of anxiety for parents who have got used to being able to communicate with their children throughout the school day.

But Dugoni argues making schools phone free gives leaders the opportunity to talk to parents about wider worries, such as those explored in the recent hit Netflix drama *Adolescence* about a teenage boy who murders a girl from his class.

It’s a “way to start to talk to different types of parents and say, ‘hey, all these things that you’re worried about, your kid scrolling on Tiktok 24/7,



‘I saw this as a social counterculture that needed to grow’

online bullying. These are big, nebulous societal problems”.

Also, for parents who text their children throughout the day, “some of those social norms have to be unwound a little bit, so that the parent knows that when [they’re] doing that it’s actually incredibly disruptive to the learning environment”.

Dugoni has deep broader concerns about the use of technology, particularly artificial intelligence.

He describes phones as the “most hyperbolic expression of the themes we’ve been talking about, but it affects all modern, especially digital technology”.

He sees a pattern of students “becoming totally and utterly – or even people of all ages – really reliant on AI”. Yondr has blocked AI tools on its email servers and other systems.

“The main reason was I want our team to develop. I want them to maintain the ability to think critically, to write well, have their personal voice come through.”

Ex-ministers and stars backing phone-free spaces

So how does Nick Gibb fit into all this? He served as schools minister for around 10 years across three different terms and is

credited alongside Michael Gove with steering Conservative education policy for around three decades.

When he announced he was quitting Parliament at last year’s election, Gibb was hoping for a diplomatic post. How did he end up advising a company that makes phone pouches?

“I think when you meet people who are really sharp and really passionate about helping kids achieve their potential, fundamentally, that creates a lot of overlap in our goals,” says Dugoni.

“And when I first met Nick, that’s what I picked up on. Here’s someone who’s vastly experienced in the education world, who cares about the same things that I do. I would say that’s true for everybody that we work with.”

Much of Yondr’s work is outside education – its phone pouches are promoted by prominent musicians and comedians to improve the experience of their gigs.

“There’s a similar thread between, I would say, the Chris Rocks, the Jack Whites, the Dave Chappelles, to the Nick Gibbs.

“There’s people who are paying attention in society, and they’re trying to help, basically. And that’s honestly how I view Yondr, as part of this cultural movement.”



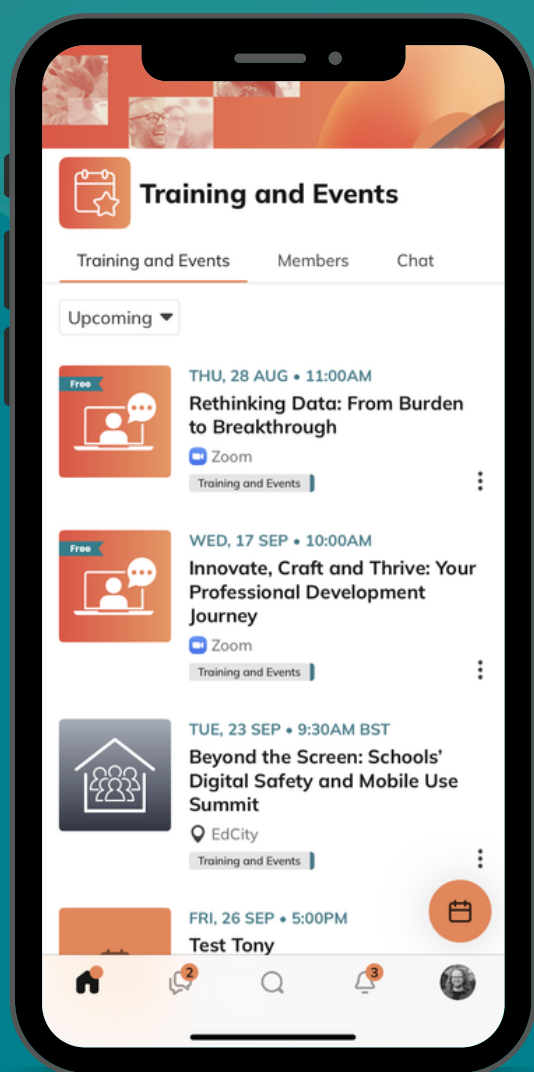
Nick Gibb



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SAM
HENSON

Deputy chief executive,
National Governance Association

We don't need another hero: how to fix school leadership

No one leader can be expert in all areas of school life, which is a belief the Three Strands of Leadership guidance seeks to dispel, says Sam Henson

Our education system has, at times, relied far too heavily on "heroes". And sure, we all love a hero – but every hero, from Marvel to history books, comes with a bruising origin story. The cost is always high.

In education, that cost has too often fallen on school and trust leaders, with society expecting them to be superhuman; expert in pedagogy, finance, HR, estates governance, the lot.

It isn't fair, it isn't wise and it certainly isn't sustainable. If we want a healthy system, we need to stop pretending heroism is a viable leadership model.

I recently heard a brilliant headteacher speak about loving their role – and surviving it. Their secret? Refusing to be a "martyr to exhaustion". This line nails the spirit of the guidance we have created with the Institute of School Business Leadership and the Association of School and College Leaders, the *Three Strands of Leadership*.

This isn't radical. Plenty of thriving organisations already work this way. But it does challenge some of the sector's most entrenched assumptions about where power and expertise should really sit.

The omnipotent leader myth

Research paints a pretty clear picture: 73 per cent of school leaders say workload is harming their mental health. Many feel stretched well beyond their expertise.

MAT CEOs tell us the same thing: genuine culture change only happens when people understand what their role is and isn't for.

The problem isn't individual leaders; it's the long-standing belief that one person can, or should, do everything.

Modern education just doesn't work like that. Research shows heads and CEOs often struggle to delegate tasks they've always owned, while business professionals are still sidelined from decisions where their expertise would make a huge difference.

We like to think the "hero head" era is fading. But for many schools and trusts, it's still very real.

The debate is clouded by the sheer diversity of the sector. Leading a small rural primary is nothing like leading a 40-school trust spread across regions.

Many trusts have already accepted this by building innovative central teams or appointing CEOs with operational or financial backgrounds. These roles don't replace educational leadership; they recognise it as one specialism among several, not a solitary superpower.



Tina Turner, Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome

“ Heads and CEOs struggle to delegate tasks they've always owned

Three equal partners

The three-strands model treats governance, educational leadership and business leadership as equal, interdependent parts of one system.

Governance sets direction and holds the organisation to account; educational leaders drive pedagogy and improvement; business leaders keep the place sustainable and functioning.

But the barriers to joined-up leadership aren't just structural, they're cultural.

We still undervalue business expertise in education. Nearly 60 per cent of school business professionals say they've had no career development conversations at all. Many are shut out of board-level or senior strategic discussions, despite bringing expertise the organisation can't function without.

Emma Balchin, the NGA's chief executive, argues this approach is "not only important but fundamental to a well-functioning system".

When governance, education and business leadership work in genuine partnership, "the system is stronger, more coherent, and better placed to deliver for pupils and communities".

This takes more than warm words.

It needs deliberate action: a truly shared vision and values across all three strands, clear communication between them, joint accountability, and talent development that values every form of expertise equally.

A liberating vision

At its heart, the three-strands model offers a genuinely liberating view of school leadership. It widens accountability and lets leaders focus where they add the most value. It recognises that lasting excellence comes not from heroic individuals but from weaving together different forms of expertise.

With a white paper and new accountability frameworks on the horizon, we have a real chance to embed this thinking. It's not about forcing every school or trust into the same shape; the model works whether you're a maintained school or a large MAT.

It's about accepting a simple truth: no single voice or mindset can meet the challenges our schools face.

Pupils deserve leadership that draws on every insight available. The evidence shows this approach works. The only real question is whether we're willing to put it into practice.

Opinion

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LISA
BOORMAN

Headteacher,
Queen's Online School

Virtual teachers can stop kids fully dropping out of education

We need to act faster when attendance drops, and secure a plan to keep children learning if they stop going to school, says Lisa Boorman

As a headteacher, and a former headteacher in a mainstream secondary school, I have seen the same story play out too many times.

A child who attended regularly begins missing days. Parents say mornings are becoming a battle. School tries to support them. Pressure builds. Then one day the pupil simply stops coming in. Within two weeks, they are formally removed from the school roll.

Fourteen days. That's all it takes for a young person to move from struggling to completely deregistered, often with no structured educational plan in place. It is a point of no return that can feel like a choice but often isn't.

We only tend to talk seriously about alternative pathways after attendance has collapsed. By that point, families are anxious, defensive or exhausted. Some feel they have no choice but to take control themselves, turning to home education without fully understanding what it involves.

We need to ask harder questions about what happens before families reach that point.

Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) isn't new, and it is rising. For some pupils, school

becomes overwhelming, whether due to anxiety, neurodiversity, bullying or fear of failure. These are children refusing education because they no longer feel safe or capable within it.

When I led a mainstream school, reintegration plans were often offered too late. Since moving into online education, I meet pupils who have been out of school for months. They are often bright, articulate and deeply anxious. Many were once thriving.

There needs to be a formal early-intervention route before families reach withdrawal. Online schooling is not a magic answer and should never be a dumping ground – it should never be used as a substitute for staffing or cost-cutting. But for some pupils on the verge of withdrawal, it can be a structured bridge.

Small live classes, visible teachers, real peers and academic continuity can help pupils rebuild confidence. It offers safety without abandoning structure. For some, it becomes a permanent solution. For others, a point of recovery before returning to mainstream.

So what could that early-intervention pathway look like? It might include:

- clear triggers for review when attendance begins to fall
- a shared plan between school, parents and local authority
- access to short-term, quality-



“ A planned pathway would give families support, schools clarity, and pupils dignity

assured provision, including online or hybrid learning

- agreed review points so decisions remain purposeful, not permanent

In the delayed SEND white paper, the government has an opportunity to rethink how schools, families and alternative providers work together.

Engagement has often been reduced to parent-contact metrics or attendance data. It must also mean conversations about what happens when a child begins to withdraw.

The current system leaves families facing a binary choice between attendance or deregistration. We need a stepped pathway. This would require agreed criteria, quality assurance and accountability. It would also require trust.

Funding could sit within existing attendance and alternative-provision budgets, but ring-fenced for early intervention rather than crisis response.

The government could set guidance and quality standards while enabling local partnerships between schools, councils and approved providers. The aim should be to make early support accessible.

Mainstream schools should not feel they are losing pupils forever. Parents

should not feel judged for accepting support. Children should not feel excluded from education because they are struggling.

For school leaders, some of this work can begin now. Building relationships with reputable providers early means that, when difficulties arise, families can be offered supported options rather than emergency exits. Staff training on EBSA and early identification would make the difference.

If we treat alternative provision as something that happens only after a crisis, more children will fall through the gaps. Some will resurface in another setting. Others will not.

When parents take a child out of school, the 14-day period often ends with them being removed from the roll and left without support. Local authorities are already stretched and cannot offer the outreach home-schooling demands.

We need to stop assuming attendance issues can be fixed by attendance drives. Attendance is a signal, not the cause. If we want children in education, we need to make sure they feel they belong in it. That sometimes means offering a different doorway, not shutting the main one faster.

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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KRISTY EVERS

Director,
ImpactEd Evaluation

Phillipson should look to Nordics to help guide 'edtech testbeds'

The government recently invited schools to become 'edtech testbeds'. Kirsty Evers explains what they are, and how they can be run successfully for everyone involved

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson has promised to deliver a “digital revolution in education”.

To evaluate how “innovative education technologies” can improve teaching and learning, the government has invited schools to become edtech “testbeds”.

A testbed, in this context, is a structured environment where schools and edtech companies work together to trial, refine and evaluate digital tools in real classrooms. Ultimately the goal is to help find scalable solutions to cut teacher workload.

In September, I joined a full-day workshop in Malmö, Sweden, organised by the Global EdTech Testbed Network and local partners Ifous and EmpowerED.

The focus was on the state of testbeds across the Nordics and Europe more widely. I went to share what we're developing in the UK – and, more importantly, to learn from others. Below are five lessons that feel particularly relevant as England shapes its own approach.

1. No one testbed fits all

A key message from the day was that testbeds come in many forms

and that's a strength.

Different contexts require different models. Some testbeds focus on early-stage innovation, helping founders iterate and refine prototypes with direct input from teachers and students. Others aim to generate robust evidence on impact, testing products that are further developed.

The scope also varies. Some testbeds target specific outcomes, such as reducing teacher workload. Others are geographically defined, for example, the city-wide programme in Tallin, Estonia.

The implication for England is clear: a single testbed cannot meet every need. Instead, we are likely to require a small ecosystem of testbeds, each with a distinct purpose.

2. Focused on teacher time

Teachers are central to the success of any testbed, and across the Nordics the message was consistent: pilots only work if they support teachers' day-to-day practice rather than add pressure.

That means embedding activities into the curriculum rather than expecting teachers to find extra hours in their week. It also means keeping demands practical and proportionate.

As one colleague noted, it is unrealistic to ask a headteacher to spare two hours for an interview without a clear benefit.

Helsinki exemplifies this principle.



Malmö, Sweden

“Pilots only work if they support teachers' practice”

All pilots are directly linked to the national curriculum, so they become part of teaching and learning rather than an add-on. Teachers' motivation comes from professional curiosity and the chance to offer students meaningful, real-world learning experiences.

3. Clear application process

Another lesson from Helsinki was the value of clarity and consistency. Having run its testbed for nearly a decade, the city has developed a predictable and repeatable process.

When a company applies, there is a standardised intake procedure, review by pedagogical experts, and a matching process with suitable schools. Agreements set expectations and, crucially, protect schools – for example, preventing companies from using pilots as a marketing opportunity.

This structure reassures schools and teachers while also helping companies know exactly what to expect.

4. Buy-in beyond education

Several European examples highlighted the benefits of cross-departmental support. In the Netherlands, one AI-focused testbed is jointly funded by departments for education and departments

for trade, innovation, or economic development.

This dual focus matters. It acknowledges that testbeds aren't only about pedagogy. They are also about innovation, economic growth and national competitiveness. Such alignment helps testbeds position themselves within wider strategies for both education and industry.

5. Share learning internationally

Finally, there was a strong sense of the value in sharing experiences across borders. Testbeds inevitably evolve differently depending on local needs and policies. Learning from one another helps identify alternative approaches – what works, and what doesn't.

This benefits edtech companies too. Products rarely transfer seamlessly between contexts, and international collaboration helps companies adapt thoughtfully and scale responsibly.

The Malmö workshop reinforced that there is no single blueprint for an edtech testbed. But the lessons from the Nordics and wider Europe give us a useful foundation.

If England wants to make testbeds a success, we will need clarity of purpose, teacher-centred design, robust processes, cross-government support and strong international connections.

Opinion

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CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW



TOM ROSE

Education director,
Oak National Academy

Foundations are already there to build the curriculum reforms

Change is imminent following the curriculum review's publication. Tom Rose offers practical steps schools can take now – plus a few they should avoid

Curriculum change is coming. Across the country, schools are poring over the review, checking timelines and thinking about next steps. Headlines have focused on the big shifts, and in some subjects the revisions will be substantial. New cross-curricular themes will also run across different areas of learning.

Even so, the review builds on the strong curricula many schools already have in place, so this isn't about starting from scratch. That's the approach we're taking at Oak. The Department for Education has asked us to update our curriculum and teaching resources so they align with the refreshed national curriculum.

So while the DfE revises the programmes of study, we've been auditing our latest resources to identify where the biggest changes are likely to fall and where we already have strong foundations to build on. We wanted to share our reflections as many schools work through the same process.

1. Ignore the unknowns

Consider putting aside the big unknowns. There is little value

trying to second guess decisions that have not yet been made.

Among the unknowns, primary citizenship is becoming statutory, there will be significant changes to RE if it shifts from being locally determined to nationally defined, and English language GCSE is to be overhauled.

There are also proposals for a Year 8 reading test and broader reforms to computer science. We simply need to wait for clarity here.

2. Guessing what's staying the same is risky

We are avoiding the temptation to try to work out what is going to stay the same in each subject.

This will be hard to get right. The DfE response to the review makes clear that getting the right level of specificity in foundation subjects will be important, especially in foundation subjects, and all GCSEs will be updated for teaching from 2029 onwards.

Certainly, some subjects will change more than others, but we could all waste a lot of time speculating.

Waiting for the draft programmes of study and updated GCSE content and new specifications might be wiser.

3. Diversity that reflects modern Britain

We do have more clarity in some areas, though. The review is clear



“There is little value in trying to second guess

that the curriculum should more strongly reflect “the diversity that makes up our modern society, allowing more children to see themselves in it”.

Many schools have already taken major steps towards this. Now is a good moment to revisit those choices and ensure they reflect this principle, both at the curriculum level, such as the selection of texts or music, and within individual resources, including the images, examples and voices used.

At Oak, one in four authors in our secondary English curriculum is a writer of colour. Images used across our slides and teaching materials are chosen to reflect modern Britain.

4. The cross curricular themes

Oracy, media literacy, digital literacy, financial education, sustainability and climate change are themes that will all run across the refreshed national curriculum.

They are built in part on the good work already happening in classrooms. Schools may have more in place than they realise.

Many have been thinking deeply about oracy, for example, weaving

it into English and many other subjects, adding opportunities and tasks to support pupils to speak confidently and effectively. That's a good foundation to build on.

Climate change and sustainability is also an area many schools have included in their curricula across science, geography and beyond.

On financial education, Oak has just released resources for over 70 lessons which provide a useful model.

5. SEND

Finally on SEND, the curriculum review is clear. It recommends evidence-led resources to support curriculum adaptation for all children, including those with SEND.

Schools could start now to engage with “accessibility by design” across their curriculum resources.

This discussion paper by Steplab is thoughtful and has helped us and many schools develop resources accessible to all learners.

Beyond this, the DfE will also be working with schools and experts to develop Curriculum in Practice resources to showcase adaptive teaching

Solutions

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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KERRY WESTBROOK
Trust counsellor and senior mental health lead, HEARTS Academy Trust

How schools can put mental health support at their heart

The strain posed by pupil mental health needs is increasing, but Kerry Westbrook believes her academy trust has a blueprint for success

In today's educational landscape, schools are expected to support every aspect of a pupil's development, including emotional wellbeing and mental health. This has become a central concern, often underpinning or exacerbating other needs. In 2023, one fifth of children aged eight and over had a probable mental health issue, up from 12 per cent since 2017.

This growing demand raises a vital question: How can schools meet these needs effectively, affordably and ethically?

At HEARTS, we have an innovative strategy we think others can learn from.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing (SEMH) is placed at the centre of the trust's three-year strategic plan, resulting in a comprehensive model addressing five key areas:

- Early intervention
- A child-centred, holistic approach
- Support tailored to level of need – not all concerns require counselling
- Staff CPD and training to embed a culture of “think mental health”
- Inclusive support for parents and staff

Empower staff

The first logistical challenge was affordability and ensuring a whole-school approach. Our solution: empower staff.

Through targeted CPD, individuals passionate about mental health were trained as mental health first aid champions via St John Ambulance and Mental Health First Aid England.

As regular users, we are now offered a substantial discount directly with the trainer.

Every school has at least one youth and one adult champion. In the past year alone, these champions conducted 590 consultations across the trust.

The support network has been expanded by utilising staff experience, or by training staff through government and private sector schemes, to create learning mentors, Thrive practitioners, spiritual leaders and wellbeing committees. This results in a responsive, needs-led system.

Regular mental health awareness training is delivered to all staff. These sessions have become powerful platforms for sharing stories of resilience and recovery, reinforcing the trust's message: ‘think mental health’.

As Ofsted recently noted at one of our schools: “Within the school, pupils' wellbeing is a high priority. The Mental Health Champions, as well as the Trust's counsellor, are integral to supporting this.”



“ Trainee counsellors were seeking clinical placements

Tap into voluntary placements
Despite this, the trust has seen a rise in complex or chronic mental health needs among pupils, parents and staff – especially post-Covid.

In 2024, nearly 40,000 children nationally were waiting at least two years for support, a challenge mirrored across HEARTS schools.

Hiring more counsellors wasn't financially viable. But a breakthrough came through trainee counsellors seeking clinical placements. As part of their qualification, trainees must complete 100 hours of voluntary placement.

So we developed a robust clinical placement package, now recognised as exceptional by colleges and universities. Every school benefits from therapeutic support delivered by trainee counsellors, available to all.

We currently manage the caseloads of 13 trainee counsellors and psychotherapists, which significantly reduces referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

Sustaining strategy

We also use mental health data, gathered from assessments with

pupils and staff, to inform targeted support for the following academic year.

For example, a high number of anxiety-related referrals led to the development of a trust-wide anxiety response plan tailored to each school's needs.

This proactive approach has reduced referrals and aligns with best practices outlined in Ofsted's inspection framework.

Each school also has a qualified senior mental health lead who oversees the HEARTS triage system and support structure.

The leads plan, implement, and evaluate the trust-wide SEMH strategy. They also coordinate awareness events.

In terms of what comes next, we recognise that deeper parental engagement is essential to sustaining this strategy.

Therapy alone cannot address the complexities of modern parenting.

While sharing good practice and learning from others remains fundamental, we are now exploring how best to support families within the constraints of an educational setting.

THE BOARDROOM LEADER

The governance view on education's top priorities



The five ways we promote and champion school governance

Susanna Bradbury, governance manager, and Rebekah Rowan-Robinson, governance support officer, Learn Sheffield

Governors are vital to the communities they serve. But too often, those communities are unaware of what governors do and how rewarding the role can be.

When volunteers are supported and celebrated, boards become stronger – and children benefit.

Learn Sheffield, which supports schools across the city, was recently awarded the National Governance Association award for outstanding contribution to visible governance.

Here are five things we've learned about how to give governance more of the spotlight.

The three Vs

Governance should be visible, valued and vibrant.

Sharing real stories from volunteers, through short videos, case studies, or simple written reflections, can help make the role feel accessible and meaningful.

Highlighting a range of voices also encourages people from different backgrounds to step forward.

For example, we produced a film celebrating governors from across Sheffield, who shared their motivations for taking on the role. Governors in the film speak candidly about the joy of being part of a school community, developing skills and making a huge difference to the lives of young people.

The film played a key part in our recognition for the award, with the NGA declaring it the perfect example of how to make governance more visible and attractive, to boost recruitment efforts.

Another way to widen the pool of potential governors is to develop partnerships with local organisations and employers. This can allow you to reach individuals who may not have previously considered the role but who possess valuable skills, perspectives and community connections.

Strengthen the 'why'

Volunteers are motivated when they understand the difference governance makes. Providing prospective governors with opportunities to speak



with individuals already in the role is often the most effective way to do this.

Invite existing governors to share their personal experiences – whether through testimonials, information sessions or informal conversations. Hearing about the impact volunteers have on children, communities and school improvement helps build a sense of purpose.

Communication is all important and it's essential that recruitment materials are well designed and highlight the importance of the role, as they serve as powerful tools for reaching volunteers. Delivering these materials across multiple formats not only increases accessibility for diverse audiences but also fosters engagement.

Make support easy to access

Confident governors make confident boards. High-quality induction, ongoing training and opportunities for peer connection all contribute to effective governance.

Schools and trusts can draw on local expertise, national training tools such as the NGA's Learning Link, or shared networks.

Governors also have access to a local governance expert for quick resolution of board-specific queries. Timely, trusted guidance provides reassurance and can introduce a personalised element to a wider support offer.

Keep workloads manageable

Retention improves when governance fits realistically around people's lives. Flexible meeting structures, online training options and

clear expectations all help.

Skilled, consistent clerking also plays a vital part in reducing administrative pressure and supporting boards to work effectively.

Our trained governance clerks help boards work effectively, reducing administrative burdens and using tools such as our newly created board health check to support ongoing development.

By valuing dedication while avoiding overload, governance remains effective, sustainable, and people-centred, ensuring governors feel supported, motivated, and able to make meaningful impact.

Celebrate commitment

A simple thank you goes a long way. Recognising governors' contributions, whether through events, personal messages or national moments, helps volunteers feel valued and part of a broader civic community.

We mark National Volunteers' Week and National School Governors Awareness Day by personally thanking every governor for their dedication.

Championing the experiences of those already in the role is important, which is why we regularly invite governors with different levels of experience to contribute to our newsletters.

Appreciation should be embedded in governance culture, not treated as an afterthought. Celebrating small wins and highlighting dedication consistently will strengthen trust, motivate ongoing commitment, and shows governance is about people as much as policies.

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

FRIDAY:

Another week, another Department for Education communications howler.

This time it's a video promoting their school breakfast clubs with parents being asked: "What would you do with an extra 30 minutes in your day?"

Selling breakfast clubs as a way for parents to ship their kids off for longer is pretty demeaning, given most parents actually like their kids and have to put them in childcare only out of necessity so they can pay their ever-increasing bills.

Celebrating parents spending less time with their kids: another DfE success!

MONDAY

Loyal *Schools Week* readers will remember our lovely friends at PA Consulting, one of the country's biggest consultancies that threatened to take *Schools Week* to court if we dared to reveal how much their senior consultants were being paid by the government to trial SEND reforms.

(Just to refresh your memory: we couldn't afford to take on their very expensive American lawyers, so instead chose to tell our readers how we were gagged from revealing important information in the public interest, with a headline on a blank front page reading, "The story we're not allowed to tell".)

Well, we are absolutely heartened to see the firm has bagged a £140,000 contract, this time with Ofsted, to oversee a review

of regional hubs.

Sir Keir Starmer, ever keen to show he's down with the kidz, encouraged primary pupils to do the 6-7 trend (If you don't know what this is, have a Google – we don't have the will to explain) at Welland Academy, in Peterborough, during a visit.

A video of him leaving the classroom shows (seemingly) the headteacher saying: "Thanks for that lovely 6-7, you know children get into trouble for saying that in our school."

Starmer put his head in his hands and muttered: "Sorry about that."

Pretty on brand.



Another example this week of Labour just not answering a parliamentary question. We've chronicled a few before, and it seems to be an increasing occurrence.

Liberal Democrat Pippa Heylings asked for a "planned timeline" for the promised

new oracy framework.

But schools minister Georgia Gould only repeated what we all knew already. Disappointing they couldn't even be arsed adding the usual "in due course" line.

WEDNESDAY:

Absolute bedlam as the Office for Budget *Responsibility* leaked the actual budget hours before it was published.

Not happy with that, the OBR had to make the mother of all corrections to their estimations for the impact of SEND funding – saying the impact on schools would be a 4.9 per cent fall in per-pupil funding for mainstream schools, instead of the 1.7 per cent it originally envisaged (see image).

And just to give us even more comfort that our government is not totally clueless, the Department for Education then issued a swift comeback saying the OBR's calculations were incorrect.

Perhaps the Office for Budget Irresponsibility is more apt!

PS The department may be even unhappier with the budget's sugar tax expansion that will cause price rises for dozens more popular brands, including Bridget Phillipson's much-loved Irn Bru.

However, our award-winning investigative journalists have since discovered that Our Bridge drinks the sugar-free version.





Bradford Forster Academy



HEADTEACHER

Leadership Salary L30 – L36 (£105,595 - £122,306)
Start date: April 2026



BDAT is looking to appoint an inspirational Headteacher for this exciting leadership role. Our goal is to transform the lives of our students, staff and community and to inspire each other to keep on developing and improving.

This post is a fantastic opportunity for an ambitious leader looking either to extend their experience of headship or to start their first headship in a highly supportive and rewarding environment.

We offer access to high quality personal and professional development for all our staff, with a great emphasis of supporting and developing the lives of everyone in the academy. You will also benefit from the close partnership working with the four other secondary academies within our multi-academy trust and the support of our colleagues in the Diocese of Leeds Education Team.

We need from you

- A commitment to ensuring our children achieve their biggest and bravest ambitions.
- A love of teaching and learning.
- A passion for developing your team.

- Strong, innovative and strategic leadership and management.
- A firm commitment to achieving success through partnership and teamwork.
- Excellent interpersonal and communication skills.
- Drive, ambition and high expectations.
- Commitment to the vision and values of the school and trust.

We can offer you

- A supportive and forward-thinking leadership team in an inclusive academy and trust.
- A stimulating, attractive and welcoming learning environment.
- An approach that supports and stimulates professional growth, with a bespoke CPD package.
- Cross-trust opportunities for collaboration and development.
- The opportunity to make a positive difference to the lives and careers of pupils and colleagues.
- A career in a forward thinking trust.

Visits to the academy are welcomed and actively encouraged,
please contact jill.geering@bdat-academies.org

BDAT (Bradford Diocesan Academies Trust) 2nd Floor, Jade Building, Albion Mills, Albion Road, Bradford, BD10 9TQ

[Click here for more info](#)

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SENIOR CO-CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Scholars' Education Trust

**Salary range: £167,800 to
£181,000 (5 point scale)**

Required for September 2026



Scholars' Education Trust (SET) is seeking an exceptional leader to join our Executive Team as Senior Co-Chief Executive Officer, guiding our diverse family of schools into the next stage of growth and excellence. This is a rare and exciting opportunity to shape the future of a successful and expanding multi-academy trust.

SET is a cross-phase trust of thirteen schools across Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and West Essex, educating nearly 10,000 pupils from nursery through to sixth form.

Our vision is clear: to work collaboratively so that every young person in our care achieves more than they ever believed possible. Our values: Achievement, Care and Excellence (ACE), underpin everything we do.

We are looking for a strategic and inspirational leader who shares our commitment to improving standards and outcomes for all pupils. The successful candidate will have a proven track record of leadership at scale, with the ability to drive educational excellence, foster innovation, and build strong relationships with stakeholders.

They will bring the vision and resilience to lead a complex organisation, ensuring sustainability and growth while maintaining the highest standards of governance and accountability.

As Senior Co-CEO, you will:

- Provide strategic leadership across the Trust, working in partnership with Trustees, Headteachers and civic partners.
- Champion educational excellence and inclusion, ensuring every child receives a high-quality education.
- Lead the School Improvement Team and act as the Trust's Accounting Officer, upholding probity and compliance.
- Shape and deliver a people strategy that attracts, develops and retains outstanding staff.
- Represent SET nationally and locally, influencing policy and promoting our civic mission.

The job description and responsibilities of the current Senior Co-CEO of SET will form the basis of the role. We are, however, willing to be flexible and would be open to a discussion with the successful candidate about the exact scope of the jobs, its responsibilities, and its hours.

You will be supported by a highly experienced Executive Team and a committed Board of Trustees, as well as a collaborative network of schools that share best practice and innovation.

If you are a visionary leader with the ambition to make a lasting impact on thousands of young lives, we would love to hear from you.

For more information about the Trust and the role, please see the Senior Co-CEO Information Pack, including job description and person specification.

Applications

Please download the SET application form from our website: :
Current Vacancies - Scholars Education Trust
Applications should be sent to Geoffrey Payne, Chair of the Board of Trustees, via Hazel Wale at
h.wale@scholarseducationtrust.co.uk.

A conversation with our Chair and/or a visit to our schools can be arranged – please contact Hazel Wale on the above email or call 01727 734420.

Closing date: Friday, 09 January 2026 at 9am

Interview date: WC 02 February 2026



Regional Education Directors – Secondary

Salary: Highly competitive

Start date: As soon as possible

Are you a future CEO? Driven by the opportunity to make an impact at scale and inspired by the mission of an excellent education for every child, in every classroom, every day?

We're looking for two exceptional, system-focused leaders to define the future of education across one of the country's most respected and ambitious trusts:

- Regional Education Director – East
- Regional Education Director – London & South

As Lift Schools continues to grow, we're reshaping the way we lead. Reporting directly to the CEO, our new Regional Education Directors (REDs) will have executive-level responsibility and regional autonomy, shaping the vision and performance of their region while contributing to the strategic direction of the wider network.

Each RED will hold a remit comparable to the CEO of a small or medium-sized trust supported by the collective strength, expertise, and collaboration of a national organisation.

Your impact

This is a unique opportunity to drive system-wide excellence through four key areas of leadership:

1. Regional leadership and vision

You will set a unifying, ambitious vision for your region, aligned with Lift's mission and the needs of your communities. You'll build capacity, nurture leadership talent, and embed our culture of excellence, equity, and inclusion. With strategic clarity and moral purpose, you'll inspire others to lift the bar and sustain it.

2. School improvement

You'll be relentless in pursuit of Lift Schools' mission: delivering an excellent education for every child. You will play a pivotal role in achieving our trust-wide Lift490 goals that by 2028, 90% of pupils meet the expected standard in phonics, reading, KS2 outcomes, and GCSE English and maths. You'll bring deep expertise in leading improvement across multiple schools, with the credibility and conviction to raise standards in diverse contexts.

3. Talent development

We are proud to be an incubator of future CEOs for the sector. You'll provide exceptional support, guidance, and challenge to our Principals and Executive Principals, underpinned by a best-in-class professional development offer. You'll also shape a regional talent pipeline, ensuring potential is recognised, developed, and celebrated. You'll be a people-first leader — ambitious, grounded, and trusted.

4. Delivery of network priorities

You'll collaborate with fellow REDs and the national education team to align local priorities with our trust-wide strategy. Working together, you'll champion evidence-informed practice, accelerate improvement, and ensure that our most disadvantaged pupils are never left behind. Why join Lift Schools?

Lift Schools is a national network of 57 primary, secondary, and special schools, educating more than 33,000 pupils. Our mission is an excellent education for every child, in every classroom, every day. And we're guided by three core beliefs: Education changes lives. Talent drives performance. Trusts are a force for good.

You'll join a forward-thinking, high-performing organisation where innovation thrives: from how we harness AI to reduce workload, to how we collaborate and lead system-wide change.

We offer:

- A highly competitive salary
- Up to £100,000 investment in your professional development through our Individual Development Account
- Real influence and regional autonomy, backed by national expertise and support
- A sector-leading coaching and leadership development package
- Opportunities to shape strategy and contribute to national thinking
- Ambitious, values-led colleagues who challenge, inspire, and champion one another
- The chance to leave a lasting legacy for children who need it most

This is your moment to lead boldly, shape futures, and transform education at scale.

For a confidential conversation, please contact Tanya Bentham at recruitment@liftschools.org.

Closing date: Wednesday 3 December 2025, 5pm

**Assessment day: Week commencing
8 December 2025**

Interviews: 17 December 2025

**CLICK HERE
TO APPLY** ➔