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WHITE PAPER 'WILL BRING CASH FOR SCHOOLS AND LAS'

- Minister reassures sector 'additional' SEND funding is coming
- Councils warn current high needs freeze will worsen deficits
- Still no firm date for final reforms as leaders await answers

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SCHOOLS WEEK

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Freeze in high-needs funding leaves councils floundering

It is welcome that the government has confirmed that the upcoming schools white paper will “set out additional funding for both schools and local authorities to drive forward much-needed reform of the SEN and disability system”.

We understand the delays to the document and the government’s wider plans for SEND stem from a need to get this right. The life chances of future generations of children depend upon it.

Funding uncertainty, however, is one of several ramifications resulting from the delay.

The fact the white paper is coming after details of the local government funding settlement in December means there are unavoidable concerns about the short-term impact on councils’ high-needs budgets.

While it is right that as it considers reforms the government also examines whether the current national funding formula (NFF) is fit for

purpose, a decision to temporarily suspend it for high needs next year leaves councils in a tricky position.

As local authorities have told us, most of the rises they are now due to receive next year are eaten up by the ongoing costs of recent school staff pay rises.

The minister says extra funding is coming with the white paper. We hope this is not just token funding for implementation, but real funding for delivery, able to reach the system quickly enough to stop further detriment to councils’ already precarious funding situations.

Bear in mind we still do not know what the government plans to do about councils’ historic deficits when it assumes responsibility for the cost of SEND in 2028. These are set to balloon to £14 billion by then.

Reassurance for schools and councils about future funding of the system will be critical as reform plans emerge.

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- 2 [No internal audit for trust with £8.4m deficit](#)**
- 3 [How falling school rolls are not just London’s crisis](#)**
- 4 [New powers to close academy trusts ‘must be used with caution’](#)**
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SCHOOLS WEEK School leaders’ most-read: Teacher Tapp survey in June of 607 headteachers on education media read in past month

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More children educated at home – or missing out altogether

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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Mental health concerns and dissatisfaction with school and SEND support is driving more pupils into home education, new government data shows.

Annual figures published by the Department for Education shows 126,000 children in elective home education on October census date last year, up almost 13 per cent from 111,700 in autumn 2024.

Overall, 175,900 children were in home education at some point in the 2024-25 academic year, up almost 15 per cent on the 153,300 in 2023-24.

The data also records families' primary reason for withdrawing their children for home education.

Last autumn, 16 per cent cited mental health as their primary reason, up from 14 per cent the year before. There were also increases in those citing general school dissatisfaction (7 to 8 per cent) and dissatisfaction over SEND (3 to 4 per cent).

The proportion citing philosophical or preferential reasons dropped from 14 to 12 per cent.

It comes as the government prepares to introduce mandatory registers of children not in school, as well as requirements for families to



get council permission to home educate some children.

The DfE has also published data on children missing education – those out of school but not learning at home.

It shows 34,700 missed education on census day, down from 39,200 the previous autumn. The number missing education at some point in the academic year also fell slightly from 149,900 in 2023-24 to 143,500 in 2024-25.

However, the DfE said that “as a relatively new data collection, changes over time are likely to be in part due to improvements in data quality and recording practices”.

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the NAHT school leaders' union, said the increasing use of home education and “worrying number” of children still missing education highlighted

the importance of the government's plans for a register of children not in school and a single unique identifier for each child.

More investment is needed in vital community services, including children's social care and mental health, and as part of the government's promised SEND reforms to ensure families get the help they need.”

He said that it was “striking how mental health remains the reason most frequently identified, and the increase in the proportion of pupils being educated at home for this reason highlights the need for further investment in community mental health services.

“It is vital to ensure that families have made the choice to home educate for the right reasons, have the right support they need to provide a great education for their child, and know where to go for help if they need it.”

The DfE's data shows that “school application awaiting outcome” is the most reported reason for children missing education. The proportion of cases citing this has increased from 8 per cent in 2023 to 13 per cent last autumn.

The cases for which the primary reason was where councils believe a child is not receiving suitable elective home education rose from 6 to 9 per cent over the same period.

SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER | @SCHOOLSWEEK

Starmers 'looking at' social media ban for under-16s

The prime minister has suggested he is open to considering a ban on social media for under-16s, as the House of Lords prepares to debate an amendment on the issue from a former academies minister.

According to The Guardian, Keir Starmer told MPs this week he was alarmed about the amount of time children spent looking at screens.

He reportedly told parliamentarians the government was “looking at” Australia's recent ban, adding there were “different ways you can enforce it”.

The ban in Australia now restricts access to platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, X and YouTube.

Lord Nash, the former Tory academies minister, has proposed the ban in an

amendment to the government's children's wellbeing and schools bill.

It would force the education secretary to “require all regulated user-to-user services to use highly effective age-assurance measures to prevent children under the age of 16 from becoming or being users”.

Another amendment would seek to prevent under-16s from using virtual private networks, or VPNs, to skirt a ban.

Nash told The Guardian that “raising the age limit for social media now has backing from across the political spectrum, including Labour and Liberal Democrat parliamentarians, the NEU and the NASUWT.

“The evidence is overwhelming and the political support is there. The government should back my amendment and begin to



reverse catastrophic harm to a generation of children.”

The children's wellbeing and schools bill is currently going through its report stage in the House of Lords, after which it will return to the Commons, offering MPs a further opportunity to make changes if Nash's amendment does not pass.

Suspensions tumble as trust embraces 'emotional intelligence'

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

A "turnaround" trust once criticised for controversial behaviour policies has revealed plans to boost its academies' "emotional intelligence".

Outwood Grange has been praised by ministers for its track record in improving some of the toughest schools in the most challenging regions.

But it has also been criticised – including by Ofsted – over its exclusion and suspension rates. Critics have argued a turnaround model based on high exclusion rates is "not sustainable school improvement".

Schools Week revealed accusations in 2019 that Outwood Grange (OGAT) had held "flattening the grass" assemblies, with former teachers accusing the trust of shouting at and humiliating pupils.

Lee Wilson, its chief executive appointed in 2024, previously revealed plans to move away "from a central view" of education and temporarily stop taking on the toughest schools.

Now, speaking exclusively to Schools Week, he has announced the MAT will roll out a framework across its 41 schools to make them more "emotionally aware and intelligent".

Suspensions tumble

"We've got to make sure children want to come to school because they feel that school is part of their extended family," he said.

"[We've got to make sure] they can talk about why they're finding certain challenges in school, rather than 'you haven't met the expectations, [and] there's a consequence'."

Figures shared by the trust show it made 98 suspensions per 100 pupils in 2023-24. That fell to 68 a year later.

Wilson, who replaced current Ofsted boss Sir Martyn Oliver at the head of the trust in 2024, expects the rate to fall a further 30 per cent "at least" by the end of this year. So far in 2025-26, the rate stands at 21 suspensions per 100 pupils.

In comparison, the rate nationally was 11.31 in 2023-24, the latest year government data is available for.

New framework

Wilson believes Outwood's gains will be aided by the launch of the framework.

The document will contain an "audit tool" that



Lee Wilson

'We've got to make sure children want to come to school'

will ask heads, among other things, how they offer "a safe space for children to have conversations they might want to have [about what happened] at home that day".

It will also pose questions about "the language teachers use around the school".

Examples from across the trust "that have been particularly successful" will also be given. Wilson hopes this will help heads to draw up their own programmes.

The change in approach signals a shift from a "turnaround mindset" to one where it will achieve "sustained success".

"What this is about for me ... [is] to make these schools not just national average schools ... [but] exceptional schools.

"We've got to empower the group of heads to say when you look at the reasons why children aren't attending school and ... why suspensions happen in your school, the best place for you to have that knowledge is in your school, not in the trust to centrally dictate."

Scripts and welcome areas

Wilson says the framework will "consolidate" what his schools' have so far learned from local initiatives and build a set of "common principles" to "guide a more consistent strategy".

Some of the trust's schools have already been working "with local educational psychologist

services or [the] NHS". Others have "really invested in emotion coaching".

This has resulted in some "scripting conversations" for situations that could result in conflict. One example Wilson gives is a child arriving in class late being "welcomed" into the lesson, rather than being "questioned".

As part of this push, Outwood Academy Ormesby in Middlesbrough recently opened a "welcome hub" in which pupils can collect uniform they may need, eat breakfast and receive support from pastoral staff.

The facility – which is open every morning – has also partnered with a charity to give parents, carers and children toiletries.

But standards 'the same'

Wilson stresses that the trust isn't going soft. Expectations of children will "remain exactly the same", and so will its behaviour policy.

"It's much more about 'how can we support you to meet the expectation,'" he says.

Heads also won't be issued with suspension targets as Wilson does not want "to tie [their] hands behind [their] back.

"We all agree that the best place for children to be in terms of life chances ... is to be in a full and successful day in school.

"That's the challenge we've got to set for ourselves."

Extra cash coming says DfE as councils' woes deepen

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

EXCLUSIVE

Ministers have promised extra cash for schools and councils will come with the white paper, as town halls warned a freeze on high-needs funding will drive them further into the red.

Local authorities with "safety valve" deals aimed at reducing their SEND deficits told *Schools Week* they had expected real-terms lifts in their high-needs block allocations next financial year.

But the Department for Education said in December the use of the national funding formula (NFF) to allocate high-needs cash to councils had been suspended for 2026-27, and that funding would remain at 2025-26 levels.

Ministers announced last year that future SEND cost pressures will move on to the government's balance sheet from 2028, leaving it facing a £6 billion annual shortfall.

However, the government has not set out its plan to deal with councils' historic deficits, expected to balloon to £14 billion, insisting in December its support "will not be unlimited".

Georgia Gould, the schools minister, confirmed in a written parliamentary question that the white paper would "set out additional funding for both schools and local authorities to drive forward much-needed reform of the SEN and disability system".

Last year's spending review earmarked £760 million for SEND reforms, but only over two years.

The DfE said at the time the cash was just "one part of the investment government will make in SEND reform". Ministers had not said how the money would be distributed.

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the school leaders' union NAHT, said it was "very encouraging to hear the minister talking about additional funding accompanying the white paper".

But he said ministers must "ensure all schools have the resources, access to expertise, and capacity needed to deliver on the government's inclusion agenda".

Councils remain "concerned" about the NFF freeze as they set budgets for the next financial year. Instead of the usual uplifts, they have been told they will receive



nominal increases in funding based on a variety of factors.

Analysis by Special Needs Jungle shows these rises range from 1.7 per cent for the East Riding of Yorkshire to 9.5 per cent for Sunderland.

However, councils warned the actual real-terms impact will be much smaller, because the increases include teacher pay and national insurance grants from previous years which have now been rolled into next year's funding.

Kent County Council, a safety valve council, told *Schools Week* it was now facing an in-year deficit of nearly £70 million for 2025-26.

Christine McInnes, its director of children's services, wrote to headteachers that whilst the government "refers to a future review of funding there is no information as to what this will include, and we are hoping this may be linked to the publication of the SEND white paper later this year".

Hillingdon council in north London is receiving a 5.8 per cent increase from last year (£72.8 to £77.1 million). A spokesperson said the real-terms increase was just 1.48 per cent, after taking existing grants into account.

It has forecast an in-year overspend of £10.6 million for 2026-27.

Documents for Bexley in south London say its 7.2 per cent increase "appears substantial", but most of the uplift is through previous grants rolled into the next year.

This would raise the high-needs block from £56

million in 2025-26 to £60 million for 2026-27.

Documents from Cambridgeshire's schools forum state its high-needs block is increasing by 5.3 per cent, from £115.4 to £122.7 million.

But regardless of the rise, Cambridgeshire said without extra funding it would have an additional £3.5 million pressure on its budget this year, contributing to an estimated in-year overspend of £35 million.

And Slough council, which faces a £33 million cumulative deficit on its dedicated school grant in 2026-27, said: "Without further safety valve funding, higher levels of high-needs block DSG, changes to national policy or local mitigations to reduce and manage costs, the growing deficit on the DSG will undermine Slough's overall financial recovery."

Slough has been given a 6.3 per cent increase from £40.1 to £42.4 million.

The Local Government Association said councils had "concerns", warning "inflation and rising need" were "increasing pressure on already overstretched high-needs budgets".

Gould has been repeatedly pressed on when the delayed white paper will finally be published.

At the final national SEND conversation session on Wednesday, she said there was no "exact date".

She also dodged a question on whether reforms would ensure a legal framework for children with SEND.

"I can only repeat what I've said, that we understand there needs to be a legal framework and there needs to be accountability."



Paul Whiteman

SCHOOLS WEEK

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Regulator to investigate use of AI in coursework

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

Ofqual is investigating the relationship between exams and 4,000-word coursework performance to see if it can tell whether pupils have been using artificial intelligence.

Sir Ian Bauckham, the chief regulator, has "signalled" his "anxiety" to ministers about the use of AI in "extended writing" A-level coursework.

He said there was "relatively little" of this coursework, but highlighted history and English A-level, where 20 per cent of the qualification was extended writing.

This could include essays of up to 4,000 words, such as a "historical investigation" in history.

Bauckham has commissioned work that will look at whether coursework grades have risen higher than exam results.

He told *Schools Week*: "Protecting students and upholding standards is at the heart of our work. Ofqual will ensure qualifications remain trustworthy as generative AI develops.

"We are analysing the relationship between exam and coursework performance over time to inform our consideration of this issue."

The chief regulator told MPs on the education committee this week that part of the "driver" for extended coursework lay in the way the content was designed by the Department for Education.

For example, in the history content pupils were



Sir Ian Bauckham

expected to "carry out a historical enquiry that is independently researched".

Ofqual's guidance to exam boards states it "would expect the total length of such an extended response, or extended responses, to be between 3,000 to 4,000 words".

Since 2024, the regulator has required awarding bodies to report AI-specific malpractice. Last summer, there were 100 cases of plagiarism involving the misuse of AI, up from 85 in 2024.

Bauckham said there were some ways to reduce the risk of coursework malpractice, such as disclosures that "probe the extent to which the candidate may have accessed AI".

An AQA spokesperson said they "set clear expectations for teachers on how students' work must be marked and checked to reduce the chance of AI misuse" which are consistent with Joint Council for Qualifications' guidelines.

"We moderate samples of coursework and

use a combination of trained moderators and technology to detect possible use of AI, taking action where we suspect misuse. We will continue to work on reducing AI risks to coursework."

Bauckham said the regulator's work will ascertain the extent of this risk and what the options might be while "assuring ourselves of the integrity of these qualifications".

He added he was "concerned" after a "number of teachers" raised the issue.

The DfE was approached for comment.

Bauckham also said Ofqual did not believe AI was yet ready to undertake sole marking of pupil work as it still made mistakes and was hard to challenge.

But he said it could be used to "quality assure, detect, for example, unexpected patterns in examiners' marking...but not sole marking".

The DfE has committed to reduce exam time by 10 per cent on average, a move that Bauckham described as "sensible, rational... and also achievable".

Ofqual has so far refused to publish the modelling that informed the key curriculum review policy.

Pressed by Peter Swallow, the MP for Bracknell, on whether it would release it, Bauckham said the evidence was "provided for the purposes of ministerial policymaking so we wouldn't routinely publish that information at an early stage".

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBOTH

Gould 'encourages' boards to offer BSL exam

Schools minister Georgia Gould has urged exam boards to offer the "important" British Sign Language GCSE, after none committed to creating it.

Ofqual published its official rules to guide the design of the new BSL qualification in November.

AQA, Cambridge OCR and Pearson EdExcel have all decided not to offer the qualification, and WJEC Eduqas had previously not made a decision.

In a written parliamentary answer, Gould said decisions were "for exam boards" but added: "I have written to the boards to encourage them to seize the opportunity to offer this important

qualification."

Caroline Voaden, the Lib Dem MP for South Devon, said in an education committee hearing there were "concerns that there may be no exam board that wants to offer it".

Michael Hanton, Ofqual's deputy chief regulator, said it did not have the power to force a board to offer a qualification but "there is the opportunity for an awarding organisation to become recognised to offer a GCSE in this particular area".

"That is a route that is open and we would welcome conversations about that."

On how long that could take, Sir Ian Bauckham, Ofqual's chief regulator, said: "It

depends how strong they are and how ready they are for recognition. GCSEs are high-prestige qualifications. We would want to make sure that BSL GCSE stood muster against all other GCSEs."

A blog by technical awarding organisation Signature, which teaches BSL, suggested it might try to become accredited.

Its directors met with disabilities minister Stephen Timms and said he was "very supportive of Signature seeking approval from Ofqual to develop and deliver the British Sign Language GCSE, and said he was happy to provide any support that is needed to help Signature gain Ofqual approval".

Repeat Ofsted report card visit 'distressed' staff

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

Ofsted has published its first report cards from new school inspections, as the leaders of featured schools warn about the impact of repeated visits and question some of the outcomes.

Reports for 22 volunteer schools – 13 primaries and nine secondaries – inspected under the framework that took effect in November had been published by the time Schools Week went to press on Thursday.

After single-phrase headline judgments were scrapped in 2024, schools are now given one of five grades across up to eight inspection areas.

The inspectorate previously said the “likely three most commonly awarded grades” will be the middle three – ‘needs attention’, ‘expected standard’ and ‘strong standard’.

Schools Week analysis shows of the 150 individual grades awarded, just four ‘needs attention’ grades were given across four schools. No school received the lowest ‘urgent improvement’ rating.

The grades were instead largely clustered around the middle and second-highest point on the five-point scale, with 79 at ‘expected standard’ and 58 ‘strong standard’.

Meanwhile nine ‘exceptional’ grades were awarded across two primary schools and one secondary.

School ‘distressed’ by follow-up visit

Leigh Academy Halley, a secondary and sixth-form in Greenwich, south London, was the highest rated of the 22 schools with five ‘exceptional’ grades and two ‘strong standard’.

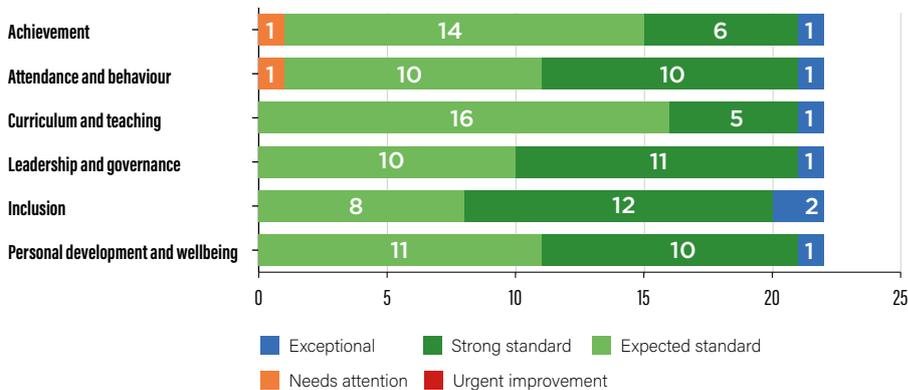
Inspectors said pupils “from all backgrounds are welcomed, nurtured, challenged and supported” at the “exceptionally inclusive” school, where they “feel safe, attend very well, and thrive”.

But Simon Beamish, the chief executive of its sponsor the Leigh Academies Trust said: “Although the outcome from this inspection was superb, it didn’t feel like a more humane experience.”

Ten HMI inspected the school across two days from November 11. But the report says inspectors had to return almost a month later to “gather additional evidence”.

“As you can imagine this was distressing for staff.”

Grade breakdown by judgment area



Source: Ofsted

SCHOOLS WEEK

Beamish believes inspectors had initially failed to enter evidence on laptops “during every inspection activity, as directed”.

Ofsted was approached for comment.

Achievement descriptors ‘one-dimensional’

Beamish also said some grade descriptors in the ‘achievement’ area appeared “very one-dimensional”. Context was not taken into account as much as “we had been led to believe”.

“It is only right that in a school like Halley with a very high level of mobility, disadvantage and EAL, these [descriptors] are interpreted carefully with proper regard to the...pupil cohort.”

He said inspectors “eventually took this on board”, but “it took some time”.

St Leonard’s Church of England Primary Academy, in Hastings, received six ‘expected standard’ grades, but ‘needs attention’ for attendance and behaviour.

Inspectors said “pupils behave well” but “attendance is not high enough”.

“Leaders have taken steps to reduce the barriers some pupils face” but “this is not yet effective enough” meaning some pupils “miss too much school”, particularly those with SEND.

Faith Rew, the school’s head, said it was “regrettable” that under the new framework, her school’s “well-established strengths in behaviour are obscured by a ‘needs attention’ judgment relating solely to attendance”.

The school’s absence rate was 7 per

cent in 2023-24, above the national average of 5.5 per cent. Persistent absence was 19.1 per cent, above a 14.6 per cent national average.

Meanwhile, Ark Castletown Primary Academy in Hastings was graded ‘strong standard’ for ‘attendance and behaviour’ despite having similar levels of absence (6.7 per cent in 2023-24) and persistent absence (19 per cent).

Inspectors said “detailed and precise work with pupils and families” had led to “notable improvements in attendance”. Attendance among disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND was above average.

Ofsted has made clear inspectors will take context into account and look beyond numbers alone when grading.

Ark Schools managing director Venessa Willms said attendance “has been a top priority for the Ark network this year, and we’re delighted that Ofsted has recognised our hard work”.

‘New format makes it easier for parents’

Lorraine Clarke, Ark’s director of primary, said the new report format “makes it easier for parents and the wider community to understand what really matters.”

Others disagreed. One X user described Ark Castledown’s 16-page report as “not very friendly for viewing”.

Meanwhile Beamish warned new report cards “are much longer”. “I do wonder how many parents will get to the end”.



Lorraine Clarke

Photographers' work removed from GCSE assessments

JACK DYSON

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EXCLUSIVE

England's biggest exam board has scrubbed the names of two photographers from one of its GCSE assessments over concerns their websites contain images that "may not be appropriate" for pupils.

In an email to schools last week, AQA announced that references to Sam Taylor-Johnson and Tim Walker in questions for an art and design paper had been removed to "protect" pupils.

One of the pages contains a video of a naked man, while the other has photographs of models appearing to simulate sex.

Teacher flagged the issue

An AQA spokesperson said: "We recognise that the photographers are distinguished artists in their field, but some of their content may not be appropriate for GCSE students."

Both photographers were referenced in questions in this year's externally set assessment for GCSE art and design.

The papers are usually shared with pupils in January. They contain seven "starting points" on different themes for pupils to choose from and suggest artists to research.

Pupils then use them to inform their preparation for a ten-hour supervised assessment, by the end of which they will have produced their own piece.



AQA confirmed it had been informed by a teacher earlier this month about material on one of the artist's websites. It made "further checks" and found another "whose website similarly had images that were potentially not appropriate".

...but no complaints received

It has since "updated" the papers to remove the references to Taylor-Johnson and Walker. In the email, the board said its "priority is always to protect our learners".

Despite this, the spokesperson said it has "not yet received any complaints about this matter".

"AQA follows strict safeguarding principles while selecting artists, based on information available to us at that time.

"We do however recognise that online content can change and we're looking into

further processes to reduce the chance of this happening again."

Teachers using printed copies of the assessment have been asked to "redact the names of these artists and their work" themselves, or to print the new version.

'No impact on work'

The AQA spokesperson stressed the "starting points for students' research are unchanged, so ... this matter has no impact on the way we will assess their work".

Taylor-Johnson's website contains various photographs and videos of celebrities, including David Hockney, Daniel Craig, Kirsten Dunst and the footballer Megan Rapinoe

It also promotes a number of the films she has directed, including *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the Amy Winehouse biopic *Back to Black*.

But among the pieces displayed is *Brontosaurus*, a 10-minute, slow-motion video of a man dancing naked in his bedroom.

Meanwhile, Walker's page features work produced for publications that include *Vogue* and the *Evening Standard*. Among them are photographs of Harry Styles, Cillian Murphy and Vivienne Westwood.

But there are also topless pictures of singer Beth Ditto and images of men appearing to simulate sex.

Representatives of both artists have been approached for comment.

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

DfE announces SEND training for all teachers in England

All teachers in England will be eligible for SEND training as part of a £200 million new development package.

Announcing the news today, the government committed to investing in the scheme this parliament, which runs until summer 2029.

The SEND code of practice will also be updated with a new expectation that all staff "in every nursery, school and college" should receive training on SEND and inclusion.

The training will help teachers "deepen knowledge of how to adapt their teaching to meet a wide range of needs", said the DfE. It comes as the government strives to increase inclusion in mainstream schools as the SEND

crisis deepens.

This will include adapting teaching for pupils with speech and language needs, and visual impairments.

The training will also include "building awareness of additional needs amongst all pupils", and training teachers on how to improve access to education, such as with the use of assistive technology.

The "comprehensive" scheme will launch next year, although it is not yet clear if this means next academic year or calendar year.

It will be "delivered flexibly to slot into teachers' busy schedules", with online self-session sessions and in-person lessons.

The DfE said while current training provided through ITT and NPQs focused on trainees and those stepping up to leadership, there "is a clear gap in support for those in-post looking to build their skills".

"The new training courses will help target this gap."

Investment in training for teaching assistants will also form part of the package, but the department provided no further details.

It did not respond when *Schools Week* asked whether this would be free for schools.

It is not clear who has devised the training.

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DfE wants to scrape more real-time data from schools

JACK DYSON

@JACKDYDS

EXCLUSIVE

The government wants school management information systems (MIS) providers to help it “harness the potential” of the real-time data they collect to inform policy decisions.

The Department for Education is calling on the tech companies to take part in a series of trials to feed up-to-date information from schools straight to officials.

Ministers believe the scheme could help heads benchmark their schools with others across the country and contribute to government decision-making much quicker.

Nick Finnemore, an educational technology consultant, believes the move could also improve the “outdated” way “statutory returns are currently handled”.

“In a modern data environment, the government should be able to access the statutory data it needs, when it needs it, rather than relying on periodic, manual submissions.

“[The pilot’s] success will depend entirely on getting all MIS suppliers on board.”

Tender documents show the DfE is planning the pilots will explore how it “can harness the potential of data to provide new and valuable insights” for schools, trusts and councils.

Working with “multiple MIS suppliers”, officials “aim to test the value of increasing data flows” from the systems to “improve the breadth and timeliness of information available”. Each trial will run for up to 12 weeks.



The department believes that having “access to near real-time” figures would enable “policy decisions to be informed more regularly and more effectively by data”.

Schools will be able to use the information to “benchmark themselves against other similar establishments nationally”. They could also “feed into department policies much quicker, which will ... directly support improved outcomes for pupils”.

Among the data MIS providers collect are figures for attendance, payroll, admissions, behaviour and assessments.

Duncan Baldwin, an education consultant, added that the scheme – if it is rolled out – would “require less time spent in schools on census returns and lead to benchmarking data” provided earlier.

“But whenever MIS providers have to deliver

new services there is always the question of who pays. The costs must not be passed on to schools in the form of increased annual charges.”

The government is calling for MIS firms that can provide access to data for either a small group of local authority schools and/or an MAT of more than 20 academies to step forward. The pilots are expected to begin in 2028.

Towards the end of last year, *Schools Week* also revealed the government is bidding to shield schools from the £200 million MIS turf war by drawing up a new framework through which leaders can purchase edtech.

Officials launched a consultation on how to simplify buying software and reduce the “legal risks” schools face.

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

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

Ark CEO and ex-civil servant among Ofsted board appointees

The head of one of England’s largest academy trusts, a former civil servant and a leading safeguarding expert have been appointed to the board of Ofsted.

Lucy Heller, Alan Wood and Hardip Begol are among five new appointments, alongside Frances Wadsworth and Jo Coburn.

The appointments come after Christine Gilbert, a former chief inspector, was made chair of the watchdog’s board last year and follow criticism in her review of Ofsted’s response to the death of headteacher Ruth Perry that the board’s role “appears curiously limited, apparently leaving some of Ofsted’s most critical activities outside of its control, unless Her Majesty’s chief inspector

(HMCI) chooses to let it have some control”.

“This degree of autonomy and entitlement for HMCI does not make for effective governance,” the review said.

Heller joined Ark Schools as founding director in 2004. She was previously managing editor of *TSL Education* and *The Observer*. She was appointed chief executive of Ark, the trust’s parent charity, in 2012.

Wood held leadership positions in the London boroughs of Southwark and Hackney. He led a recent local child safeguarding practice review into Mossbourne Victoria Park Academy in Hackney.

It found the school’s success had been “achieved at too high a cost for some pupils”.

He has declared his membership of the Labour party.

Begol worked at the DfE for almost two decades and is also a former academy trust chief executive who now sits on various boards, including those of Oak, Ofqual and the Education Policy Institute.

Wadsworth, the government’s deputy further education commissioner, is a former interim chair of Ofqual. Coburn, a former BBC News presenter, now presents *The Times* at One for Times Radio.

Heller, Wood, Wadsworth and Wood will serve for three years from February 1. Begol will serve for three years from August 1.

RISE consultation pushed back to this term

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

A government consultation on the broadening of its RISE school improvement teams' remit has been delayed.

RISE targeted support has only been given to "stuck" schools, those rated 'requires improvement' following an earlier below-good inspection grade.

But in documents published in September, the government said it would begin "informal engagement" with those deemed to have "low or concerning attainment".

The DfE added it would also sound out the sector over the autumn on "further options" to use the teams to address poor outcomes.

But this week, the department confirmed the consultation has been pushed back to this term. Details will be "set out in due course".

Government papers said the informal



engagement would involve RISE teams meeting with low-attaining schools to "discuss their attainment trends".

They would then "agree actions, including how they will work with hubs, higher performing schools and other sources of well-evidenced support, such as regional networks".

This was described as a "first step", before the launch of the consultation.

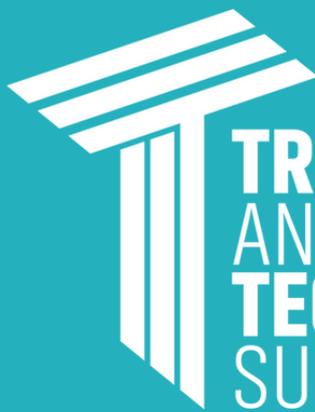
"Ofsted should remain the principal trigger for the department's accountability responses," the documents added.

"It is, however, important that schools with the very lowest levels of pupil attainment benefit from rapid access to the kind of intensive support the department is providing through the targeted RISE programme."

In these cases, the DfE said, it did "not think it is right to wait for a change in the school's Ofsted report card to take action in schools where children are being let down".

FFT Datalab previously examined the number of schools with Progress 8 scores of less than -0.5 in each of the past three years to understand how many could fall within the scope of the low-attainer push. In all, 277 fell below the threshold.

Of these, 163 (59 per cent) were among the 20 per cent most disadvantaged in the country.



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How a mobile ban rings true for a London school

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

The abuse of headteachers over phone bans in their schools was “completely unacceptable”, Bridget Phillipson told MPs last month.

The education secretary was responding to reports that one leader was “spat and sworn at” for implementing a ban.

That leader was David Smith, the head of The Fulham Boys School in west London, which enforces what is thought to be one of the strictest restrictions on phone use in the country.

This week he explained his thinking to Schools Week, maintaining the ban is necessary, and calling on the government to step up and back headteachers.

The Fulham Boys School banned phones in September 2024. The ban is total – no smartphones on site.

“They can’t lock them in pouches, they can’t have them in lockers. They’re just not allowed them,” says Smith.

If a pupil is found with a phone, it is confiscated for six school weeks.

“And that doesn’t include school holidays,” says Smith. “I took a phone in June off a student and he didn’t get it back until October.

But he believes a strong deterrent is essential.

If pupils get their phones back for holidays, he argues, there is little to stop them using them in the final days of term.

The school’s previous policy allowed parents to collect confiscated phones, but Smith said this was “not fair”.

Better-off parents with more time on their hands could easily collect them, while for others “the phone was there for two weeks”.

The hardline policy is not about behaviour or attainment.

“It is because there is a moral piece, from our perspective, that young people are damaged,” he says. “And it could be irreversible if we don’t do something around smartphone use.”

Smith highlights dangers posed by social media and internet access, saying that to be a teenage boy today is “really hard”. Schools must “educate around” sex and misogyny before they are exposed to it.

“If [parents] want us to really do our job well and effectively, we need to get



Fulham Boys School pupils

‘I’ve had complaints to Ofsted about the policy...complaints to the police’

there first. We need to tell them why their bodies matter, their voice matters, their belief matters, before the world tells them.”

Overstepping the mark?

Some parents feel The Fulham Boys School is “overstepping the mark”, something that Smith rejects.

Schools already deal with issues that affect children outside school hours, such as bereavement, sexting and bullying, he says.

“It is our duty to care about every single aspect of a young person’s life while they are as part of our school.

“Do [parents] want a headteacher that’s fully bought into their child’s education and cares about them holistically? Or do they just want a babysitting provision where they hopefully get good results? They want the first, and in this school, they get the first.”

‘Parents can be aggressive’

Most parents have responded positively to the ban. But some “genuinely believe” that Smith is making their child’s life and their life significantly worse.

Some have shouted ... “they’ve screamed. They’ve refused to leave the premises, we’ve had to call the police.

“I’ve had complaints to Ofsted about the policy... complaints to the police. Some parents can be aggressive.”

On one occasion – highlighted to the education secretary by Lib Dem MP and schools spokesperson Caroline Voaden in December – a parent spat at Smith.

“That was a one-off,” he says. “It was in anger, he apologised...it was fine.”

Smith said he feels “sympathy” towards parents who feel the school has “taken a limb” by confiscating phones, adding many are “used to parenting through a device”.

He absorbs the backlash. “I just say ‘blame me, this is my decision. It’s my school.”

But he admits it means he has developed a “really thick skin”.

‘Government must legislate’

Smith believes the government should mandate phone bans to take the pressure off heads.

“Ultimately, if the government just said [pupils] shouldn’t have [phones], then we wouldn’t have to



David Smith

Continued on next page



deal with the problem.”

Current non-statutory guidance says schools must have a phone policy “that prohibits the use of mobile phones...throughout the school day, including during lessons, the time between lessons, breaktimes and lunchtime”.

But a major survey by the children’s commissioner last year found wide variation in how restrictions are imposed. Ninety per cent of secondary schools restrict use, but only 3.5 per cent have a total ban.

The majority (79 per cent) allow phones on site if kept out of sight, while 3.9 per cent allow phone use at breaktimes.

However, heads remain divided on whether a government ban is needed.

It has repeatedly fended off calls for bans to be enshrined in law, despite entreaties from opposition MPs, and a failed bid by Josh MacAlister, then a backbencher and now children’s minister.

Phillipson has insisted leaders “do have the powers” to ban phones, with evidence showing they “are already [being] prohibited”.

But with schools told “left, right and centre what we should do” on issues from uniform to the curriculum, Smith feels it is “ironic” phone rules are left to heads.

Parental concerns

Parents’ main concerns, says the Fulham head, are around “tracking and safety”.

A ParentKind poll of about 2,500 parents last year echoes those concerns. It found 58 per cent would support banning smartphones for under-16s.

But most (82 per cent) agreed it was important to be able to contact their child, while 61 per cent valued being able to see their child’s location.

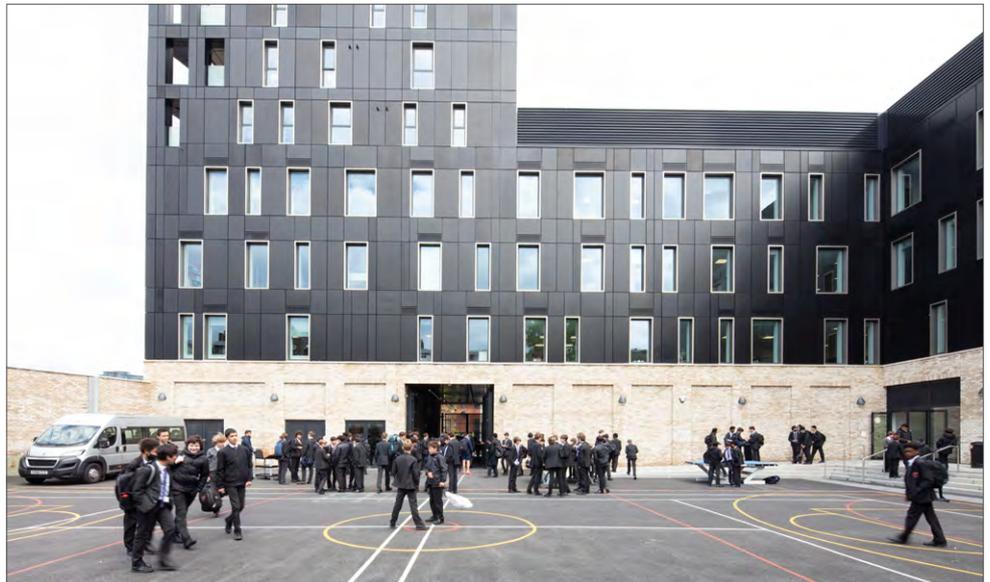
The Fulham Boys Schools allows pupils to have certain “brick” phones, that can only be used to text or call.

But Smith believes parents “have to let go”. “When their child is 25 [will they still be] tracking their whereabouts? When they get married, when they have children? ...It’s not healthy.”

He does not let his own daughter to have a smartphone, despite her secondary school allowing them.

“I presume she’s at school. I presume she’s safe. I presume she’s well – maybe she’s not, but she’s safer without one, so I’ll take that risk.”

Smith acknowledges phones “are helpful”, but adds that “at worst, I’m



adding a layer of inconvenience to someone’s life in order to safeguard them and their future”.

Changes in behaviour

Smith says the ban is working. In its first three months, phones were confiscated from 40 boys – around 5 per cent of the school’s pupils. A year on in the same period that total was six.

Since the ban, Smith says there has been a drop in boys “being unkind to one another online.

They talk to you and they look at you in the eye.”

And incidents of child sexual exploitation, including grooming and sexting, reported to its safeguarding team have dropped 90 per cent.

A few months after the

policy was introduced last year, some parents complained when they found phones would also be banned on the school’s annual ski trip.

Smith offered a full refund for parents who wanted to withdraw their child, but none took it.

At the hotel, Smith says his pupils were “playing card games with staff and enjoying their evening” while those from other schools were “sitting there on their phones”.

The day after Smith sat down with Schools Week, he was to take another 125 boys skiing to Italy. They would again not be allowed phones, including for the 18-hour coach journey.

“The boys and staff are just going to talk to each other.

“And when they get tired, they’re going to sleep... And that is lovely.”



Josh MacAlister



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Schools 'at the heart of SEND reforms', says adviser

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

Schools will be "at the heart" of ministers' special educational needs reforms, the government's strategic SEND adviser has said.

Dame Christine Lenehan said the government's reforms would "develop and look at the whole changing nature of the relationships between schools and local authorities".

It has been reported that one proposed change in the government's delayed white paper would give schools a greater role in deciding the levels of support for pupils and in dealing directly with parents.

Speaking at The Difference's IncludEd conference at the weekend, Lenehan, a former chief executive of the Council for Disabled Children, said: "When we get the white paper, which is soon, you'll see more of the detail on that, but schools [are] very much at the heart of it."

She said that part of her role was "making sure we have a language which enables schools to talk to health, to talk to social care, to talk to parents, to talk to pupils".

The government's ongoing reforms have prompted debate about the term "SEND".

Tom Rees, the government's adviser on inclusion, has previously said he would like to see the term "retired, because we've become much more precise in our understanding of different needs".

Lenehan said at the conference that SEND was "such an amorphous context...it means nothing. It's a word that's almost meaningless."

The National Audit Office has said that about 40 per cent of pupils are identified as having SEND at some point during their time at school.

"If you think we've got to a stage where some of the stats give up [to] 40 per cent of children in schools with SEND, they stop being special. What does it mean?" said Lenehan.

She had been in "interesting debates about SEND as a concept. In some ways, I'd almost get rid of it.

"How did we ever end up in a world where we have children and we have SEND children, as if they themselves are some strange sub-species, when they're clearly not?

"They're children who have needs, and some



Left to right Mark Vickers, Samantha Booth, Christine Lenehan, Pepe Di'Iasio

'SEND is such an amorphous context...it means nothing'

of those needs will cross over into poverty, some will cross over into racism and some of them won't. But they are children in a system and inclusion for me has to be all of it."

Lenehan said she had heard regional differences during the Department for Education's national "listening" conversation, which closed this week.

"One of the really strong feels in Leeds was the stuff around vulnerable children from socio-economically difficult backgrounds, the whole stuff about [pupils who were] previously known to social care.

"This is a whole school thing, it's not a SEND thing anymore."

Lenehan also said she was "really quite surprised about the lack of evidence on effective interventions and what works".

Mark Vickers, Ofsted's external adviser for inclusion, told the conference he hoped the new inspection framework's focus on inclusion helped schools "to really feel as if your work is being acknowledge, understood and recognised ... because it gives you the opportunity to describe the work you're doing on a daily basis".

Another key element of the government's white paper is expected to involve more training for staff on how to support pupils with SEND.

It comes after *Schools Week* documented how special educational needs' co-ordinators in schools were "burnt out and isolated".

The number of teaching vacancies mentioning "SENCO" or related terms soared from 37,737 in 2018-19 to 76,633 in 2023-24, SchoolDash analysis commissioned by *Schools Week* showed.

Speaking at IncludEd, Pepe Di'Iasio, the general secretary at the Association of School and College Leaders, called for the sector to "cherish your SENCO".

"We need to wrap our arms around them and we need to make sure that we give them everything that we possibly can do, because... if you don't know they are the most important person in the school, then you should do.

And the new Ofsted and new accountability framework is shining a massive light on them.

"There's an intensity on them, a level of interrogation on them that is greater than it ever was a year ago."

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Movers & Shakers

Your fortnightly guide to who's new
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**Chris
Woolf**

**Saracens Multi
Academy Trust**

Start date: January 2026

Previous role: Senior international director, Wellington College International

Interesting fact: Chris has taught in six countries; Fiji, Romania, Lebanon and the USA before training to be a teacher at the University of Cambridge. He is delighted to be back in London where he started his teaching career 25 years ago.



**Lisa
Fathers**

**Interim chief
executive, Bright
Futures Educational
Trust**

Start date: January 2026

Previous role: Deputy chief executive, Bright Futures Educational Trust

Interesting fact: Lisa will go to Buckingham Palace at the end of January to receive her OBE. So far, Lisa has purchased three possible potential outfits and is finding it hard to decide which one to wear.



**Rachael
Price**

**Head of inclusion,
Bradford Diocesan
Academies Trust**

Start date: January 2026

Previous role: Teacher in charge at Bradford local authority multi-sensory impairment team

Interesting fact: Rachael used to compete in athletics when she was younger and once beat Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill at a regional competition in South Yorkshire.



**Hannah
Fahey**

**Regional education
director, London and
south, Lift Schools**

Start date: April 2026

Current role: Director of secondary education and system leadership, Anthem Schools Trust

Interesting fact: She recently swam to the Isle of Wight for charity (and her 73-year-old mum did it too!).



**Gemma
Frost**

**Regional director,
east, Lift Schools**

Start date: April 2026

Current role: Director of education, Unity Schools Partnership

Interesting fact: She spent five summers as a waterfront director at a charitable American summer camp. She is also mum to two "wonderful teenage boys".



**Prof Leon
Feinstein**

**Director, Department
of Education,
University of Oxford**

Start date: January 1, 2026

Previous role: Director, Rees Centre

Interesting fact: His great-grandfather, grandfather and father were all migrants, initially from Russia to South Africa and then his father moved from Johannesburg to Cambridge in 1953.



**Abi
Jermain**

**Chief executive,
Climate Ed**

Start date: January 2026

Previous role: Development manager, Climate Ed

Interesting fact: She's passionate about fostering and adoption. Her "two incredible kids" came to the family through 'fostering for adoption,' and make life "wonderfully lively". The family recharges with walks in the Malvern Hills.

Profile

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS



Great expectations

When Dr Jenny Blunden took charge at her Cornish trust, its three schools were ‘broken’. But in a fight against low aspirations, the CEO has added successful schools and continues to battle for them as budgets remain squeezed

When Dr Jenny Blunden took the reins at Truro and Penwith Academy Trust, one of the first things she was told was “the children from this estate are never going to be able to achieve much”.

That opinion from a staff member triggered Blunden’s fight against complacency and she has worked to boost expectations across the MAT.

She has overseen the trust’s transformation from running three ‘inadequate’ schools dotted across the southwest, to it becoming one of the region’s largest operations.

Her influence has also grown as she sits on various national and regional boards.

However, Blunden holds a “healthy scepticism” about the government’s RISE school improvement scheme and believes Labour’s vision for the sector has been “missing” since it took charge of the country.

And after it was announced trust inspections could start next year, she warned Ofsted must not homogenise England’s MATs.

School visits

We meet at Schools Week’s London headquarters.

During a normal working week, Blunden

spends half of her time at her trust’s central base at a Truro business park, which counts architects, a pizzeria and the Women’s Institute as its neighbours.

“I like to make sure that I’m out visiting schools, meeting staff across our organisation,” she says.

“Sometimes it’s just to catch up, sometimes it’s about being able to monitor some of our targeted support schools.”

The 49-year-old does “quite a lot of system work” with the likes of Cornwall Education Partnership – a group of education providers and stakeholders – for which she’s led a project

Profile: Jenny Blunden

to boost attendance.

She's also a member of the Department for Education's southwest advisory board.

Conservation work

Blunden spent her childhood in the New Forest. Her father was a civil servant, her mother a "housewife".

She studied at the University of Surrey where she read a PhD in education and sustainable development. But despite securing her teaching qualifications while there, her first job after graduation was with advisory body English Nature, now Natural England.

For two years she worked as a conservation adviser, ensuring sites of special scientific interest were being managed appropriately.

Then in 2002, she began teaching. First, Blunden worked at a land-based college in Hampshire, teaching countryside management and environmental science.

She then moved to Truro and Penwith College where she eventually became the director of its teaching school.

In 2015, Blunden took the reins at the Truro and Penwith Academy Trust. It had three schools, all rated 'inadequate'.

She explains the schools were "all over the place" geographically which she believes was because "the DfE just wanted to find someone who would take three broken schools and be able to support them".

While it started as a turnaround trust, Blunden decided the MAT needed to bring in 'good' schools to "raise expectations".

And that decision was partly driven by her colleague's claim that children from a particular estate would "never achieve much".

She adds: "That was the trigger for me to say, 'No, we'll fight that.' They no longer work at that school."

Building trust

Blunden assured the staff at incoming schools they would be "valued and not just told what to do".

Some of her heads had worked with her during her stint at the teaching school, so they "had



'That was the trigger for me to say 'no, we'll fight that''

some trust in me that we really did believe in collaboration".

Slowly, Blunden says, staff began to feel differently about their schools, as they were "surrounded" with "positive thinking, people who have high expectations and are doing a brilliant job".

Today, Truro and Penwith Academy Trust runs 35 academies across the southwest.

Three joined from the troubled Adventure Learning Academy Trust (ALAT) following allegations by a BBC Panorama investigation that the trust and sister trust Bright Tribe had falsely claimed building and maintenance grants.

Meanwhile, six more schools are set to join next month following the completion of a merger with another chain.

Second-home squeeze

Two years ago, *Schools Week* revealed the trust was in talks to secure "special case" government funding to boost the viability of one of its academies, the Cape Cornwall School.

Accounts show the secondary's deficit more than doubled last year to £671,000 due to a failure to balance the books amid declines in population caused by a surge in second-home ownership.

Blunden says negotiations "failed to get any support from the government" for the "tiny" school.

Her trust has already "done everything [it can] educationally", having improved standards, secured an Ofsted 'good' rating and boosted its standing in the community.

She adds: "We want to keep the school open but it's a massive drag on our finances because it's got a deficit.

"We think we'd be able to get to a point where we can make sure the school is operating within its means. What it can't do is pay back a massive deficit."

Cash strapped

Blunden admits the rest of the MAT has been feeling the pinch in recent years.

"We're a prudent trust," Blunden stresses.

Profile: Jenny Blunden



Blunden with a goat from her smallholding



Blunden with her dogs



Blunden with her partner Adam



Blunden with her children Poppy (left) and Josh (right)

“We’re not spending money willy nilly – we’re just struggling to make it work.”

She says the level of “small school relief” offered by the government is not at the level set 10 years ago. Labour’s decision to scrap the trust capacity fund (TCaF) has also had an impact.

The scheme was used to help MATs develop capacity and take on underperforming schools, particularly in left-behind parts of the country.

Truro and Penwith secured TCaF support to aid its rollout of iPads across the trust for year 5s and above.

Before taking on new schools, Blunden now worries “how we’re going to afford to do that piece of work” if they’re lacking “significant reserves”.

“And then you layer on one of the big costs for all of our schools, [which] is special educational needs,” she continues.

“There is a big gap between what comes in – for example, from EHCPs – and the provision that is being put in place in schools to have safe and good support, which is not affordable long-term.”

Blunden says the trust is trying to “think differently” to make finances work. It’s seeking to market its school improvement services to other trusts for a fee and has also trialled “nurture groups” in its primaries.

These are separate classes run by teachers or higher-level teaching assistants that “children can

‘We want to keep the school open but it’s a drag on finances’

access for part of a day” for group work.

This is designed to put an end to TAs “taking out small groups of pupils to do interventions”.

Blunden adds: “Where children need to access different provision or additional support, it’s done in a more structured way in a separate class.

“We can’t afford lots and lots of general TAs, but we can potentially have something that’s more of a specialist provision that children can access ... [and] still be part of their mainstream classrooms.”

Lack of vision

Blunden is critical of Labour – she says a wider vision for the sector has “been missing” since Keir Starmer moved into Downing Street.

Since taking office in 2024, ministers have launched the RISE school improvement programme, kicked off new Ofsted inspections and moved ahead with the schools bill.

But a government white paper which is expected to set out plans for SEND still hasn’t arrived.

She says: “The white paper needs to draw it all together into a coherent narrative. There should have been a white paper up front and then all of these changes introduced after.”

Blunden sits on a RISE operations group as a representative for the southwest. Tim Coulson, the DfE’s director general for regions group, is a member, along with other school leaders.

Despite her close involvement, Blunden has a “healthy scepticism” of the RISE programme. Whether it can deliver “really strong, coherent impact over time will be the test”, she says.

She also urges caution over planned Ofsted inspections of multi-academy trusts, which could begin from September.

“I hope that we recognise diversity is good and don’t end up getting a very uniform [idea of] how a trust looks and feels in terms of context and shape,” she says.

“What we have at the moment is a really healthy diversity in the country. That helps with innovation and support for our schools.”

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Opinion

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DANIELLE LEWIS-EGNOU

CEO, Cygnus Academies Trust

Social mobility is harmful when it means ditching your roots

Schools need to replace deficit-based narratives with approaches that celebrate belonging, dignity and identity affirmation, says Danielle Lewis-Egnou

Social mobility is commonly described and oversimplified as the opportunity to move up the socio-economic ladder.

When successful, it can lead to improved educational outcomes, wellbeing and life chances. But when social mobility is framed, as it so often is, as an “escape”, it risks doing more harm than good.

Research from the House of Lords social mobility policy committee found that treating social mobility as a pathway “out” reinforces low expectations, entrenches false binaries and signals to pupils that who they are is not enough. In education, this narrative is deeply embedded.

We talk about “raising aspirations” as though they don’t already exist. We celebrate departure from communities without questioning what that suggests to those who remain.

When systems reward leaving without valuing continuity, they quietly teach children that belonging is conditional. While rarely intentional, the impact of this framing can entrench the inequalities social mobility is meant to address.

If we want to improve sector challenges, including attendance,

behaviour and attainment, and more importantly, nurture confident and capable young people who have the agency to shape their futures, we must reframe how we talk about social mobility.

That starts by moving away from deficit-based narratives and towards approaches rooted in belonging, identity affirmation, dignity and cultural agency.

At its core, reframing social mobility in schools is about encouraging pupils to accept and embrace themselves, despite outside views.

Cultural agency recognises that social mobility is not just about status or occupation. It’s about access to choice, stability and opportunity, and the belief that young people can shape their own lives without abandoning their identity or community in the process.

Across our trust, we’ve seen firsthand how embedding this philosophy through place-based, proactive strategies transforms outcomes for our children. This starts with genuine reflection and honesty about how systems, language and expectations interact.

We must acknowledge that false binaries exist in our education system, between aspiration and disadvantage and ambition and background.

These binaries can shape our unconscious expectations, influencing how pupils are supported. Too often, children from disadvantaged communities are judged on what they



“ Too often, children are judged on what they lack, not what they bring

lack rather than what they bring.

We can begin to rectify these binaries through frameworks. While they are not the answer alone, they send an important message to our communities about our intent. In the curriculum, for example, the books we teach, the histories we talk about and the voices we amplify signal whose knowledge matters.

Alongside this, policies around attendance, behaviour and inclusion must be rooted in high expectations and relational understanding, rather than solely metrics and compliance.

Equally important is the human element. Our leadership team has worked closely with colleagues across our schools to rethink how we support all children, examining the language we use, our assumptions and everyday practice.

We must show that identity and background are not barriers to overcome but assets to be valued. For pupils, this can be transformative. When young people feel seen and respected, engagement improves, belonging strengthens, and ultimately, agency grows.

How schools communicate with families and communities also matters. The tone we use and the

settings we meet in can reinforce an “us and them” mentality or build trust and partnership.

Meeting parents and carers where they are, without judgment, creates the conditions for honest, productive conversations that best support their child. These relational approaches are sometimes described as “soft”, but are foundational to long-term success.

To strengthen our work, we launched our charitable arm, the Cygnus Ambition Foundation.

This extends our commitment beyond the classroom and is designed to provide pupils with access to additional enrichment, digital skills, transition support and opportunities rooted in place.

Its purpose is simple but intentional: to ensure opportunity and cultural capital do not require disconnection from identity.

As a sector, we must move beyond debates and narrow measures of success, and ensure social mobility is embedded within the foundations of education, health and social care.

Ultimately, we must ensure that opportunity is positioned to the next generation not as leaving something behind, but as growing with confidence from where you begin.

Opinion

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SUMMER TURNER

Deputy CEO, Broad Horizons Education Trust and English teacher

Teachers can make English sing... or mute it with a fronted adverbial

English lessons can fire imaginations and open minds, but the DfE should consider five points when implementing recommendations of the curriculum review, says Summer Turner

My hushed classroom, the sounds of the city thrumming in the background, whilst 15-year-old boys listen to the sound of Sylvia Plath's poetry before bursting into discussion about what this version of womanhood means compared to the torment of Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

After the lesson, we will all go back to the melee of our lives, and they to their adolescence, but there is a sense in which something changed in that moment – a door perhaps began to open, or a hand reached out from the past to take them on a journey.

It is these moments which happen in English lessons when teachers are given the opportunity to make literature the beating heart of their classroom.

Such moments find a similar rhythm when students are given the chance to play with language, manipulate and juggle words and phrases with humour, anger or sorrow.

Yet such beats are reduced to

monotone when the lessons are constrained by the repeated horror of extracts and de-contextualised "inference", or into repeated shoehorning of fronted adverbials into voiceless pieces of writing.

And it is precisely why the curriculum and assessment review drew pleas from teachers and subject communities to tackle the distortions of English that present in key stages 2 and 4.

The panel seemed to listen, with their nods to adjustments needed to be made to key stage 2 grammar, the acknowledgement that literacy and English are distinct from each other and with the role of reading, writing, oracy and grammar being important "not just in English but across all subjects".

The changes to English language study at key stage 4 suggest a clear grasp of the different disciplinary roots in the study of language compared to literature and how this can be reflected more distinctively in the qualifications.

Finally, they recognised the emancipatory powers of access for all students to our "rich literary heritage" whilst also proposing "a broader range of texts and authors".

But there are areas to keep an eye on and the openness of some elements of the review leaves much to interpretation.

The mention of the "British



“ Ensure summative assessments don't drive the curriculum

Isles" as the area to find more diversity and the argument for more specified content in key stage 3, but also more autonomy over this broader text choice, seems somewhat contradictory.

A reluctance to tackle reductive and generic approaches to teaching "reading" and "writing" particularly in key stage 2 also seems like a missed opportunity.

The "powerful knowledge" philosophy which seems to be threaded through the curriculum and assessment review might be too subtle to hold its ground, and risks being diluted, if not lost, in the implementation phase.

Despite these concerns, there is room for hopeful interpretation.

I would offer the following five points of guidance as the DfE firms up this next phase:

1. Don't lose sight of the strands that make up "English" – language, grammar and literary studies. Any work to specify content in either the national curriculum or in assessment must recognise how these separate disciplines work.
2. Remember that literacy – reading, writing, oracy – are the ways in which we think and express our ideas and are not English-specific concepts.
3. Consider how pairing literary heritage texts with a range of contemporary texts can offer a rich diversity of literature whilst honouring the concept of texts talking to each other across time.
4. Ensure summative assessments don't drive the curriculum – a year 8 reading test can become a useful indicator of reading ages or can unintentionally reduce reading at key stage 3 to drilling question types and studying extracts.
5. Finally, if you are looking to celebrate oracy in its most meaningful form, let's pay heed to the role of storytelling and the powerful talk which bursts from us when we have a rich diet of literature that provides mirrors where students can see themselves reflected, windows to enable them to see beyond their own lives, and a community where they can find their place to belong.

Opinion

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COSETTE CRISAN

Professor of Mathematics Education, UCL Institute of Education

Forget speed maths, schools need teachers who learn by degrees

There's no quick fix to fill maths vacancies, but the maths degree apprenticeship will provide staff who can support pupils from day one, says Cosette Crisan

Recruiting and retaining specialist mathematics teachers remains one of the most persistent challenges for secondary schools in England.

In the absence of specialist recruitment, schools rely on short-term fixes: repeated recruitment cycles, stretching existing staff across key stages and redeploying specialists to examination classes while non-specialists cover lower years.

Such arrangements are rarely sustainable and do little to build long-term capacity within mathematics departments.

For many years, I have been involved in the design and delivery of professional development for non-specialist teachers of mathematics (Crisan and Rodd, 2017; Crisan and Hobbs, 2019).

Together with colleagues, I have learned what works, what does not, and most importantly, what cannot be rushed. There is no quick-fix retraining that produces a mathematics teacher.

Subject knowledge and professional identity develop together, over time. For many non-specialists, mathematics was previously experienced as a service subject – procedural, instrumental, and

oriented towards “getting the right answer”.

Teaching mathematics well, however, requires engagement with reasoning, structure, justification and generality: the core practices of the discipline (Crisan, 2021).

If pupils are to experience mathematics as something coherent and intellectually demanding, departments need teachers who have had sustained opportunities to learn mathematics in this way.

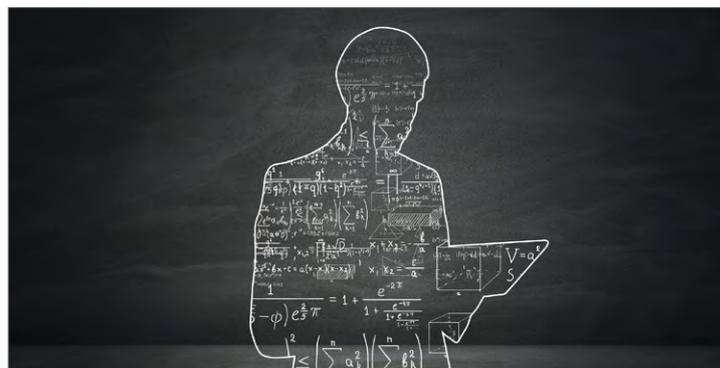
Seen in this light, the mathematics teacher degree apprenticeship represents a strategic investment for schools, grounded in partnership with training providers to support development and the growth of subject knowledge for teaching over time.

The teacher degree apprenticeship is a four-year undergraduate programme leading to qualified teacher status, with apprentices employed by schools from day one.

What matters most for schools is not simply that apprentices are salaried, but that the programme is deliberately structured to benefit departments.

Around 40 per cent of learning is university-led, with the remaining 60 per cent embedded in school. This allows school mathematics departments to gain additional capacity immediately, while developing specialists through a structured and educative process.

Rather than treating subject



“ Apprentices develop a professional identity rooted in school culture

study and professional learning as separate endeavours, the programme supports apprentices in deepening their mathematical understanding while developing the pedagogical understanding required to work with diverse learners in classroom settings.

Central to this work are school-based mathematics mentors in the employing schools.

Mentors adopt an educative approach to mentoring that supports apprentices' development beyond the immediate school context, connecting departmental practice with wider professional and disciplinary perspectives.

This learning is enacted in schools almost immediately. Apprentices observe lessons, support small groups, work with pupils with SEND, contribute to intervention programmes, assist with assessment and resource development, and gradually take on responsibility.

Schools report that apprentices add tangible value from the first year.

The Department for Education funding pilot for secondary mathematics which has been extended to include the 2026 cohort further strengthens the case.

Over the four years, schools benefit from a substantial salary subsidy – 60 per cent in year one, when apprentices are building foundational expertise, tapering across the

programme to 20 per cent in the final year, when apprentices teach up to an 80 per cent timetable.

Throughout, apprentices are paid on the unqualified teacher scale, reducing financial pressure on mathematics staffing. But the financial argument alone misses the point. For schools, the apprenticeship forms part of a longer-term approach to developing specialist mathematics teachers who understand the school's pupils, culture and curriculum.

Importantly, the benefits extend beyond mathematics. Apprentices often contribute to SEND provision, intervention work, literacy and pastoral systems.

They become visible role models and, over time, develop a professional identity rooted in both subject expertise and school culture.

If we want all children to appreciate and enjoy mathematics, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged communities where non-specialist teaching is most prevalent, then we need pathways that support teachers to engage deeply with the disciplinary practices of mathematics.

The degree apprenticeship offers exactly that – it's a pathway that resists shortcuts.

Schools willing to think long-term will find it a powerful way to secure and grow their future specialist mathematics teachers.

Opinion

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ADRIAN LYONS

Former HMI

Our game of guess the grade was more baffling than we'd hoped

How do pupils “thrive” in a school where curriculum and teaching aren't rated as ‘strong’? This and other questions were raised by the first Ofsted reports, says Adrian Lyons

Guess the grade became a new parlour game among some of my former HMI colleagues when the first Ofsted inspection reports under the new framework were published on Monday. Readers may wish to play along.

Take, for example, a secondary school in the east of England. Here is an extract from the report's evaluation of leadership and governance:

“The interests of pupils and their families are at the forefront of every action taken in this school... Leaders and governors have addressed the weaknesses highlighted in the last inspection... The culture of the school has improved...”

“Governors have an accurate oversight of the school and ensure leaders are held to account... Staff are proud to work in the school and value the care and attention leaders and governors give to workload and work-life balance.”

This reads as a highly positive account of leadership: purposeful, reflective, inclusive and humane. It

describes improvement since the previous inspection, effective quality assurance, strong governance oversight and a workforce that feels valued and supported.

Yet the grade awarded was merely ‘expected standard’.

There is nothing in the narrative to suggest what leadership is not doing, or why it falls short of something stronger.

Indeed, while the heading refers to “leadership and governance”, governance itself receives just two sentences in a lengthy section that would once have been challenged by inspectors as overly descriptive rather than evaluative.

A second report, this time from a secondary school in the north east of England, raised further questions. Here, achievement is judged to be “strong”, with inspectors explaining why:

“Vulnerable pupils make significant progress... By summer 2025, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving standard and strong passes in GCSE English and mathematics was well above the national average... Pupils are well prepared for their next steps and expertly supported to secure ambitious destinations.”

Few readers would dispute this judgment. Strong outcomes, strong progress, strong preparation for life beyond school.



“ The danger is judgments are harder to interpret

Naturally, this prompted me to turn to the curriculum and teaching section, expecting to read about the strong practice underpinning these outcomes. Instead, this area is judged only to be at the ‘expected standard’.

Again, the narrative is broadly positive: a strong focus on literacy and numeracy, effective support for weaker readers, purposeful teaching, careful assessment, improving curriculum quality across subjects, leaders who know where improvement is still needed and are acting on it.

Of course, it is entirely reasonable for inspection judgments to differ across areas. I frequently made such distinctions when leading inspections myself. But the onus was always on inspectors to explain why this was so, to help readers understand how the pieces fitted together.

Under the new framework, there is no overall effectiveness judgment to act as a synthesising lens. I therefore looked to the section “What is it like to be a pupil at this school?” for clarity. It begins, unequivocally: “Pupils thrive at...”

This leaves me genuinely puzzled. How do pupils “thrive” in a school where curriculum and teaching are not considered strong?

How do disadvantaged pupils achieve well above national averages if the curriculum that enables this is only meeting expectations? What, precisely, distinguishes “strong” from “expected” in practice – and where is that distinction made explicit?

If experienced inspectors, school leaders and policy watchers are left playing “guess the grade”, we have a problem. Inspection reports are not merely accountability tools. They are public documents intended to inform parents, guide improvement and build confidence in the system. Ambiguity, however well-intentioned, risks doing the opposite.

The danger is not that schools are being judged harshly, but that judgments are becoming harder to interpret, harder to trust and harder to learn from.

Clarity matters. Without it, even positive reports leave more questions than answers.

Opinion

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ANDREW RIGBY

National Director of Education, REAch2

Friendlier but focused... what we've seen in first Ofsted inspections

Inspectors spent more time in classrooms and drilled down into data – leaders need to know their school inside out, says Andrew Rigby

Ofsted's renewed inspection framework landed in November, and this week brings the first batch of reports.

One of our own schools, Aerodrome Primary, is in there, one of four inspections we have experienced so far. Here are some things we've learned – plus a few realities that keep us on our toes.

1. The vibe is warmer, but the scrutiny is everywhere

There's no question these inspections have "felt" different. Inspectors were more relational and improvement-minded.

No system this size can be perfectly uniform, but the intent and approach were consistent: regular wellbeing checks, reflection meetings that included leaders and a professional, inclusive dialogue.

But friendly doesn't mean fluffy. Inspectors were highly visible, spent more time in classrooms, were forensic with national data, rigorous about foundational knowledge and dug deep into the experiences of the most vulnerable pupils.

What really came through for us was the importance of knowing your school inside out. Organisation helps, but well-prepared folders

and paperwork don't talk. What matters is leaders who can describe strengths, explain next steps and point to live evidence with confidence. Daily culture isn't a sideline. It's the main evidence.

2. 'Expected' isn't a consolation prize

Yes, the bar has risen. We're fine with that if it means high expectations for children within a proportionate grasp of school reality.

We aspire to 'strong' and 'exceptional', of course. But 'expected' isn't "nearly there" – it really does signal that a school is doing the right things consistently and well. Inspectors reinforced this numerous times.

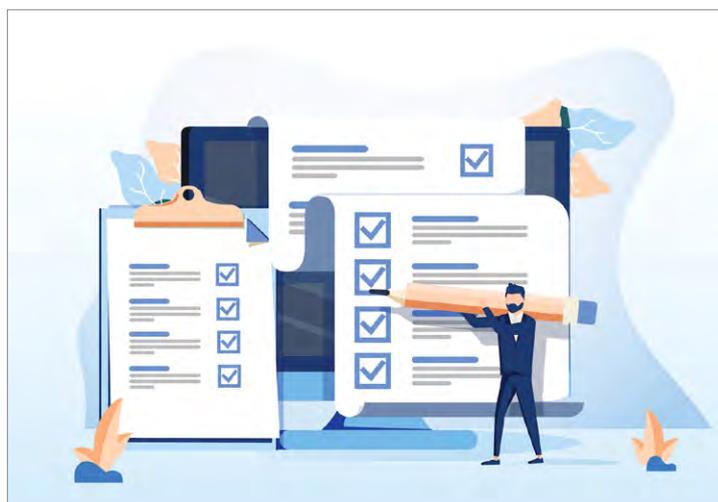
At Aerodrome, which also achieved some strong grades, we were pleased to see the report card text reflect what makes the school tick. You'd struggle to find a more driven, deeply committed staff team.

3. Secure fit doesn't always feel like recognition

That said, the secure-fit approach to grading is a double-edged sword.

We've seen schools meet every descriptor for 'strong' except one – and then land at 'expected'.

Procedurally, it's hard to fault how inspectors reached those judgments in a manner consistent with the toolkit. But school improvement isn't simply transactional. It's a profound investment in people who care.



“ Daily culture isn't a sideline. It's the main evidence

When you're shoulder-to-shoulder with your community, lifting outcomes and supporting vulnerable families, being held at 'expected' because of a single bullet point can feel like the grade doesn't fully capture the graft or the achievement.

And that's because it doesn't. Some schools at the expected standard will literally meet numerous bullet points within strong, but the grade won't reflect it.

This shift away from best fit feels quite challenging in reality and will take a little time for the sector to adjust to.

Whether this "secure fit" approach ultimately produces more or less variation than the old "best fit" model, only time will tell.

4. 'Needs attention' and 'exceptional': a lever, not a label

None of our schools have picked up a 'needs attention' grade so far. Good. But we're on board with the spirit: it's a lever for improvement, not a label to fear.

The sector must take responsibility for not treating it as 'requires improvement' or turning it into a badge of shame.

In reality, many very effective schools have an aspect that isn't good enough – attendance, outcomes, or a phase that's lagging.

The best headteachers already say "this isn't good enough for this school". An inspector agreeing shouldn't be a crisis.

Similarly, the new 'exceptional' grade should be more than a badge. It should be a platform to share the very best practice.

If we let it slip back into the old performative banner-waving of the previous 'outstanding' label, we'll have learned nothing.

That culture drove high stakes and pressure on leaders, rather than genuine system-wide improvement.

And finally...

High expectations aren't the problem, they're the point. The pride we take in the commitment of school leaders in our trust is matched only by our determination to keep getting better – for children, not for labels.

If the renewed framework can play a role in supporting that, then we welcome it with cautious optimism that what lies ahead could actually make a positive difference.

THE LEGAL LEADER

Expert advice on education and the law



Do you know what your pupils are viewing on school computer kit?

Ane Vernon
Partner, Payne
Hicks Beach



The Department for Education's technology in schools survey 2024-25 makes important reading for leaders and raises urgent issues arising from the use of education technology ("edtech") in schools.

Driven by government policy, teaching is becoming increasingly digital. The rationale is that the use of technology has the potential to reduce teachers' workload, increase inclusivity and support pupils to develop digital skills for opportunity and growth.

Schools also see the use of technology as an opportunity to cut costs.

Many parents do not agree. Voices are becoming louder, arguing that edtech has no place in schools.

Campaigning around the linked issue of online safeguarding enjoys high levels of public support. In particular, parents have very real fears about what children are able to view on devices provided to them by their schools.

Such fears are not baseless, as examples are beginning to emerge where things have gone badly wrong.

Last year, primary school pupils were able to access explicit material through search engines on iPad devices issued to them by Glasgow City Council.

The DfE survey suggests a high proportion of schools have education-specific filtering solutions in place to limit what can be accessed by pupils' devices. But the effectiveness of these solutions is questionable.

A tenth of IT leads reported having to deal with "unauthorised use of devices, networks or servers" by students.

This figure is likely to underrepresent the scale of the problem, given that roughly one in 10 IT leads also said that they didn't know if there was any unauthorised use in the last year.

A number of schools do not have a monitoring solution to check what pupils are viewing on their school devices. This is concerning – how can a school understand what content pupils are accessing and whether its filtering solution is



'It's likely the use of edtech will lead to litigation this year'

effective if it does not have a linked monitoring system in place?

Even when solutions are in place, schools must ensure these are subject to regular and robust review. The survey suggests many do not review the effectiveness of the solutions regularly, or only do so if an incident occurs.

Undoubtedly, financial resources have an impact. Schools with constrained resources are likely to find it more difficult to implement effective filtering and monitoring systems.

And the issue is not confined to the UK. Legal action is already underway elsewhere. Two live cases in California highlight issues schools can face if they do not take sufficient precautionary measures.

The first claim – *M.C. v Google* – alleges that by failing to prevent a child from accessing pornography on his school-issued Chromebook, Google is responsible for the child's debilitating pornography addiction.

The second claim – *Z.G. v Google* – alleges that by failing to prevent a child's access to Discord, Google is responsible for the child being targeted and sexually victimised on that platform.

Whilst both cases are against Google, one can

see how similar principles might be applied against schools or local authorities which enable (or fail to prevent) pupils accessing inappropriate content that leads to their harm.

With campaigners pressing the issue and DfE's survey revealing inadequacies in some schools' systems, it is likely that the use of edtech will lead to litigation of some kind in the UK this year.

In order to protect pupils from harm, and by extension to avoid legal action, schools should urgently reflect on their approach to devices that they provide to pupils.

A reduction in the use of edtech will reduce the risks but, given the rapid developments in technology and pupils' growing skill at circumventing restrictions, it is inevitable that issues will continue to arise.

As an obvious and immediate step, robust filtering and monitoring systems must be in place and their effectiveness reviewed on a regular basis.

It is also advisable to review all relevant internal policies and ensure these are clear, transparent and followed. If issues do occur it is critical to address them immediately, to prevent further harm and reduce associated legal risks.

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

SATURDAY

It was reassuring to see such a healthy turnout of about 800 at the annual IncludEd conference in London.

So much so, one speaker said it was like "Glastonbury for inclusion".

Later in the day, Pepe Di'Iasio, the general secretary of ASCL, joined a panel with Christine Lenehan, DfE's SEND adviser, and Mark Vickers, trust chief executive and Ofsted adviser.

He said: "I think this probably makes this panel the legacy slot, perhaps more of an age thing than because of any attributes we may well have."

TUESDAY

We've revealed how there's a risk that no exam board will deliver the much-awaited British Sign Language (BSL) GCSE.

Quizzed on this by MPs at the education committee, Michael Hanton, Ofqual's deputy chief regulator, said boards can't be forced to offer qualifications.

So Caroline Voaden, The Lib Dem MP for South Devon, joked (at least, we think?) that Ofqual top dog Ian Bauckham should use his flashy new "rebuke" powers if they don't do it.

Bauckham kept the sensible hat on. "We can only rebuke them for a regulator non-compliance and unfortunately it wouldn't be [this], it would be effectively a commercial and market decision."

This week the DfE launched its "Go All In" campaign for the National Year of Reading.



It held the launch not at a library or even a school but... the Emirates Stadium, the home of Arsenal Football Club.

In its press release the department said it was "highlighting how passions such as football can ignite a love of reading and lead to amazing jobs in sports punditry or production".

OK, we get it, you need to be relatable with the kidz, but it did leave us scratching our heads a bit.

But perhaps Bridget Phillipson proved us wrong later in the day, posting on Instagram a photo of her holding an Arsenal programme, saying it was "some reading material for the prime minister" – a massive Gunners' fan.

WEDNESDAY

Ofsted boss Martyn Oliver wants MPs to know he doesn't miss a beat.

In a letter to Laura Trott, shadow education secretary, saying that he supports headteachers "ban, ban, ban"-ing mobile phones, he asked to receive her correspondence "before it is sent to the press".

His letter, which we got our hands on this week, said: "My press team were approached by *The Express* about your letter on September 25, at 11:35 in the morning.

"I did not receive your letter until the afternoon at 15:18."

There's something quite *chef's kiss* about the precision in those times.

Any reader of *Schools Week's* profile last week will know that former academies minister Diana Barran has "a pretty analytical brain".

In the Lords, the now shadow education minister Barran asked when the government planned to produce guidance on the use of screens specifically for early years settings.

Labour frontbencher Judith Blake, baroness in waiting, replied: "I am used to the noble baroness asking quite specific questions. I do not know the answer to that; I am sure that it is being worked on and looked at."

High praise, high praise indeed!



Principal – Specialist Provisions

Education Village Academy Trust

Location: Darlington

Salary: Leadership salary scale L30 – L34 £105,594 - £116,455 (more may be available for an exceptional candidate)

Who we are

The Education Village Academy Trust is more than a multi-academy trust; we are a community where learning has no limits and our mission is to deliver exceptional educational experiences that inspire and challenge all learners to achieve their potential.

Our specialist provisions play a central role in meeting the full range of needs of children and young people with EHCPs. Our schools cater for all four broad areas of SEND: Communication & Interaction; Cognition & Learning; Social, Emotional & Mental Health; and Sensory & Physical Needs.

About the role

The Executive Principal – Specialist Provisions is a key executive leadership role with responsibility for the strategic direction, performance and development of EVAT's specialist schools. The postholder will have strategic oversight of our specialist provisions and ensure that the schools are delivering high-quality, holistic education and care. The postholder will ensure there is accurate

academy self-evaluation, impactful school improvement planning and ongoing curriculum development. for specialist settings

Who we are looking for

We are seeking an experienced senior leader with a strong track record in education including successful leadership as a headteacher or equivalent, and credible knowledge of SEND practice, curriculum pathways, assessment, transitions and commissioning. You will have a detailed understanding of the demands of specialist provision and the importance of high-quality teaching, safe practice, and well-organised leadership. The role requires strong people leadership skills, including experience of mentoring, managing and developing senior colleagues. Above all, we are seeking a leader who is committed to continuously improving provision and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

Closing date: 9 a.m. Monday 2nd March 2026

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