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SCHOOLS
WEEK

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Got a story?

If you have a tip-off for the news team, or if your school is doing something new and interesting that you think warrants a visit from a journalist, please email news@schoolsweek.co.uk.

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SCHOOLS WEEK

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This week was a lesson in how not to announce an important new policy.

Leaders would, we believe, welcome clarifying guidance on the role that internal exclusion can and should play in their settings. The government is right that it is currently inconsistent.

But language matters and talk about "internal suspensions" – the government's words, not ours – has muddled the waters.

At present, suspended pupils cannot remain in school. If they are in school and away from lessons for behaviour reasons, that is internal exclusion.

Hence the confusion of many school leaders. Is the government saying schools should try to use internal exclusion before considering suspension? As some leaders have pointed out, many schools already do this.

Or is the government saying it intends to change the rules on suspensions, to create a two-tier system – one for pupils who remain in school and others who

are sent home? This feels like it would be complicated and create a plethora of unintended consequences.

What leaders want the government to do is reach a conclusion on its proposals and then publish clear, unambiguous guidance, in draft form at first so they can have their say.

Instead, what we get is government by press release. "We need to say something about education today, where are we on that half-baked idea we discussed?" Downing Street inevitably asked.

It is not unreasonable to ask that, when the government announces it is releasing guidance on a particular issue, it has it ready for leaders to digest and respond to.

Instead, we are responding to a few lines of briefing from a government that does not appear to have made up its mind.

With a crucial white paper imminent, we hope that a more grown-up approach to policymaking – and communicating about it – emerges.

Most read online this week:

- 1 **Concerns over make-up of curriculum drafters group**
- 2 **'Universal RISE': How will the DfE's school improvement scheme work?**
- 3 **New mobile phone guidance: What does it mean for schools?**
- 4 **DfE schools boss gets new job as white paper looms**
- 5 **Attendance and behaviour hubs: 29 more lead schools revealed**

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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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Phillipson wants more suspended pupils to stay in school

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Schools should only suspend pupils for the most serious cases of violence and poor behaviour, ministers have said, as the Department for Education (DfE) looks to publish guidance encouraging the use of “internal suspensions”.

Often referred to as internal exclusion, the practice involves a pupil being removed from a classroom but remaining within the school. Suspensions involve the pupil being sent home.

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said suspensions – which increased by 21 per cent between 2022-23 and 2023-24 – can “easily mean children retreating to social media, gaming and the online world instead of serving their punishment”.

A Schools Week investigation recently found widespread use of internal exclusions, with some secondary schools isolating almost a fifth of their pupils from their classmates at least once each year.

The DfE said its new framework would ensure “consistency, fairness and quality” and “strengthen the impact of suspensions, reduce exposure to social media and safeguard young people”.

But headteachers will retain autonomy over the use of both suspensions and internal exclusions, as they are best placed to make decisions, the DfE said.



And “the most serious and violent behaviour will still result in pupils being removed from the school environment and the new framework will not replace at-home suspensions”.

‘Inconsistently applied’

The government said the national framework will be included in the upcoming schools white paper, before a consultation with headteachers.

Internal exclusions are currently “informal and inconsistently applied”, the DfE said. Pupils are sometimes set “generic work that does not support learning or reintegration”.

Suspensions have ‘huge impact’

Phillipson said: “Time out of school doesn’t just disrupt learning – it can have a huge impact on a young person’s life chances.

“Suspensions will always play a critical role in helping heads to manage poor behaviour, but time at home today can too easily mean children

retreating to social media, gaming and the online world instead of serving their punishment.

“That has devalued suspensions and led to high levels of lost learning.”

‘Heads know their schools best’

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders’ union NAHT said it was “reassuring to note that it will still be down to headteachers to decide what form suspensions take as they know their schools and pupils best”.

He added that “many schools already use internal suspensions”.

“However, any suggestion that this should become the default position for all suspensions raises a range of important questions, including how schools will be able to supervise those and whether or not all schools have space to make that work.”

Legal experts have also cited concerns about using internal suspensions.

Ane Vernon, partner at law firm Payne Hicks Beach, said she was “concerned that in practice we will see an increased use of pupils being placed in seclusion rooms – a practice which raises its own safeguarding and human-rights concerns”.

And Philip Wood, principal associate at Browne Jacobson, raised “concerns about the extra administration and potentially investment in appropriate facilities this may involve if it becomes a new requirement”.

EXCLUSIVE

JACK DYSON | [WEEK.CO.UK">JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLS<span style=)

Moynihan’s pay reaches £530k after third rise in a row

England’s best-paid academy boss has been given another pay rise, taking his salary to at least £530,000.

Harris Federation chief Sir Dan Moynihan took home between £530,000 and £535,000 last year, accounts show, after seeing his wages increase by around £15,000.

Schools Week analysis suggests all but three of the country’s largest academy trusts increased their leaders’ salaries over the same period. This is Moynihan’s third pay rise in a row.

In 2022-23, he was given his first uplift since 2018-19, as he went from earning between £455,000 and £460,000 to a minimum of £485,000.

Moynihan became the first trust boss to

cross the £500,000 threshold the following year, as he again topped the list in *Schools Week*’s annual CEO pay audit.

The next highest-paid – Simon Beamish, of Leigh Academies Trust – took home a minimum of £350,000.

Harris – which is the sixth biggest trust in the country – had six more employees earning over £200,000 in 2024-25. Of these, one made between £280,000 and £290,000.

The 55-school trust has frequently been at the centre of controversy for its executive pay figures.

Of the 21 biggest trusts in the country, 13 have published their CEO pay figures for last year. Of these, 10, including Harris, improved the pay of their chief executives.

Harris’s accounts also show that it “entered into certain supplier contracts in the year that were not fully compliant with procurement regulations”.

Meanwhile, a £30,000 severance payment “was not settled in line with the requirements of the academy trust handbook, which requires prior [Department for Education] approval of such payments”.

But, in the accounts, the trust said that “overall compliance and oversight” was “deemed to be adequate due to the improvements that have been implemented in the year by an experienced senior team”.

It has been approached for comment.



NEWS

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Schools cry foul as DfE data shortens their working weeks

EXCLUSIVE

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The government appears to lack a clear picture of which schools are defying its expectation that they should operate a 32.5-hour week, with dozens of leaders crying foul over national data which suggests one in six is not compliant.

The Department for Education (DfE) said that, from September 2024, it expected all schools to be open to pupils for a minimum of 32.5 hours a week, inclusive of break and lunchtimes.

The expectation breaks down to 6.5 hours per day, but the guidance is non-statutory.

The government has collected data on the length of lessons for years in its termly school census. But this category was relabelled as "school time" in the 2024-25 academic year.

Guidance made it clear that this should include the whole school day, not just lessons. Schools must now also display their opening hours on their websites.

Figures from the 2024-25 "schools, pupils and their characteristics" dataset, which is informed by the censuses, suggested that 3,256 schools out of 20,000 – or around 16 per cent – operated a week that was shorter than 32.5 hours.

The data suggested that some schools had weeks of as little as eight hours, while others ranged to over 52 hours.

When approached about their data, many schools and trusts told Schools Week that it was incorrect.

Figures submitted to the DfE suggested that seven academies that are part of Lift Schools had a week shorter than 32.5 hours, with the deficit ranging from 0.25 hours to 7.5 hours per week.

But Lift, which runs 57 schools across England, said all figures below 32.5 hours were incorrect.

"Over the past few years, we have been focused on ensuring all school are delivering the minimum of 32.5 hours and can confirm that all of our mainstream schools are delivering a timetable that meets this requirement," Lift said.

The data showed that Affinity Learning Partnership had two schools operating at 7.5 hours below the target. But a trust spokesperson said it "does not recognise where these figures have come from and is keen to try and rectify them".



'We wouldn't be surprised if the 16 per cent figure is inaccurate'

Harris Garrard Academy and Harris Academy Greenwich, run by the Harris Federation, also rebutted data which suggested that they had a 25-hour school week.

A federation spokesperson said that both schools were "fully compliant" and it "appears that [the schools] submitted incorrect data to the DfE". This was now being corrected.

Data for Equals Trust showed seven of its 15 schools were below target. But a trust spokesperson said the figures had been "captured incorrectly between the DfE and the MIS".

They added: "The school census is a task our office staff take great care in completing and it is disappointing that the information passed between the two is not reflective of our individual schools.

"Our school websites show the times of the school day and hope that parents find these accessible and informative."

Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust said it had also identified a data processing error after 22 out of its 25 schools were recorded as operating below the target.

Maltby Learning Trust and Truro and Penwith Academy Trust also admitted to data synchronicity issues but

said it did not know how it had happened.

Individual schools flagged further concerns with the data when approached by Schools Week.

Stoke Park Primary School in Bristol, which was recorded as being open for just eight hours, said the data was wrong as did Haverley Hay Community School in Manchester, run by Children of Success School Trust, which was recorded as being open for 8.5 hours.

At the other end of the spectrum, Oaklands School in Medway was recorded as being open for 52.5 hours a week.

A spokesperson said this was also incorrect and they were rectifying the figures with the DfE.

Pepe Di'lasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders said: "We wouldn't be surprised if the 16 per cent figure is inaccurate, as it has always been the case that the overwhelming majority of schools operate for at least 32.5 hours.

"This was true even before the non-statutory guidance was brought in, and it is unclear why this fairly minor issue has received so much government attention."

The DfE was approached for comment about the data issues, and whether it is investigating schools that appeared to be operating below the 32.5 hour week.



Pepe Di'lasio

Councils snub alternative funding to press on with special schools

EXCLUSIVE

SAMANTHA BOOTH AND RUTH LUCAS

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At least one in 10 proposed special and alternative provision free schools put into limbo by the government now looks set to be built, as councils decide whether to shelve the projects or expand existing provision.

But two councils where special free school projects were scrapped altogether are appealing against the government's "damaging" decision.

Ministers announced in December that they were scrapping 28 mainstream and 18 special free school projects.

For 59 more proposed specialist settings, councils have a choice between proceeding as planned or taking a three-year, £50,000-per-pupil cash alternative to create new places in existing schools.

This is on top of their share of £3 billion capital funding for 50,000 new specialist school places announced last month.

So far seven of the 59 special and AP school projects look set to continue. The remaining councils are considering their options ahead of the deadline next month.

Norfolk's education lead Penny Carpenter said she was "strongly minded" to move ahead with two schools and turn down £13 million in alternative funding.

These schools, expected to cost £40 million, will "support children with the highest needs and reduce the time they have to travel to school", Carpenter said.

Bristol intends to go ahead with its 164-place school for youngsters with social emotional and mental health needs and severe learning difficulties, run by the Enable Trust and approved in March 2023.

It warned in council papers how "delays in delivery have a significant impact" on the number of children waiting to access "suitable" provision.

The DfE said alternative funding could be used by councils in a "more flexible way", for example by creating the same number of places in SEND units and resourced provision, expanding existing schools or adapting mainstream settings.

But Worcestershire is set to turn down the £5.7 million alternative funding and proceed with a planned new special school. Stephen Foster, the council's education lead, said it was expanding



mainstream "wherever possible".

"What we are desperately short of is SEND school capacity," he added.

Adam Johnson, strategic director of children's services, told a council meeting that it may be September 2029 before the school, run by Macintyre Academies, can open. A decision will be made next month.

Salford will go ahead with a 150-place primary school for children with autism, communication and interaction and speech and learning difficulties.

The alternative £7.45 million could have been used to build specialist provision at 10 existing schools. But council officers said these would be "very different" to the existing enhanced provisions in 20 of Salford's schools.

"The pupils' high level of need would mean that the pupils would not be able to integrate in the mainstream school, and the provisions would need to be totally self-contained," the council said.

"It is acknowledged that opening a new school using the DfE process can be a long process, but this project was well advanced at the time of the pause."

The school is now due to open in December 2028.

Darlington officers are recommending that councillors approve a 48-place special school for 11 to 19-year-olds with autism.

They said the proposed £2.3 million alternative funding "does not like-for-like match our estimates of the capital investment" for the school.

They said the average cost of a new special school development in 2023 was £96,806 per place, so "[the alternative funding] appears unaffordable based on current information".

Out of 20 alternative provision schools, one looks set to be approved so far: Nottingham "intends to proceed" with Bowden Academy. Other councils are still working out if the alternative funding is a better option.

Cambridgeshire said it will consider "if there is a most cost-effective and timely way to use the offered funding settlement to provide these much-needed school places within the county".

The DfE scrapped 18 special school projects in December and handed councils direct funding for expansions. The projects had been approved in May 2024, but no trusts had been appointed.

Buckinghamshire council plans to submit a detailed business case to "restate the case" for a 152-place SEMH school. Education lead Carl Jackson said it would write to education secretary Bridget Phillipson to "ask her to reconsider the damaging plans".

Westmoreland and Furness also said it "will be appealing the decision and considering options available".

It established 51 resource provision places in mainstream schools in September, but its most northern special school is an hour's journey from the site of the cancelled school.

The DfE said the £3 billion will ensure every child "no matter their background, can achieve and thrive close to home".



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Alarm over ‘generic’ wording on 12 Ofsted report cards

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Ofsted has refuted claims that its new report cards are being written using AI, following concerns over “generic” wording.

An investigation revealed the same paragraph was used in report cards for 12 different schools – more than 10 per cent of the 103 to have been graded at that point.

The 12 schools spanned a range of settings – three primaries, four secondaries, two special schools, an all-through school and two technical colleges.

Ofsted has now admitted the “generic wording” and said it is “working to make sure ... more bespoke language” is used “that speaks to the school’s context”.

The 71-word passage was used in the “next steps” section of the report cards, where inspectors recommend follow-up actions.

Former HMI Adrian Gray, who uncovered the issue, said he was “horrified to find the exact same text appears ... in multiple reports”.

He added: “I first noticed this with a special school and a secondary academy – it seemed unlikely to me that two such different schools would have identical next actions ... but they do.”

The paragraph recommends that leaders “sustain the effectiveness of their work in all areas” and “seek continued improvement, overcoming barriers and challenges, in order to drive a transformational impact for all pupils”.

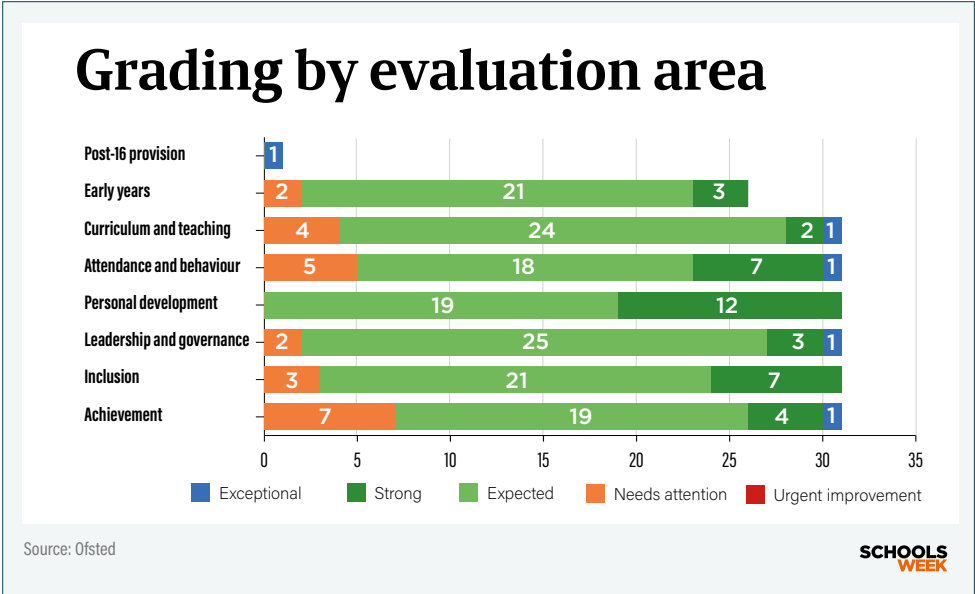
An Ofsted spokesperson said that where schools receive ‘strong standard’ and above grades across all areas – as all 12 of these did – “the ‘next steps’ will naturally lean heavily on the criteria for achieving an ‘exceptional’ grade”.

They said a “richer, more comprehensive dialogue” is shared with schools during the inspection and in feedback meetings.

First insights on new report cards

Meanwhile, early analysis also reveals that just one of 31 schools graded under routine inspections using Ofsted’s new framework has been deemed ‘exceptional’ in any area.

Schools Week previously reported on patterns in the first tranche of reports, but these were for schools which volunteered to be inspected and were therefore more likely to be performing well.



Report cards have now been published for 27 primary schools. Four secondary schools received routine inspections under Ofsted’s new framework in December.

None of the schools have received the lowest ‘urgent improvement’ grade.

However, more than one-third received at least one ‘needs attention’ assessment. Eleven schools received this grade, across a combined 23 judgment areas.

The ‘achievement’ evaluation area received the highest number of ‘needs attention’ grades (seven). This was followed by ‘attendance and behaviour’ (five) and curriculum and teaching (four).

Just one school – Ashcroft Technology Academy, in Wandsworth – received ‘exceptional’, achieving the top grade across five judgment areas.

Special recommended for special measures

A special school has been placed in special measures after a damning Ofsted report saw it given ‘urgent improvement’ ratings across the board, and found safeguarding standards were “not met”.

Trinity Academy Newcastle is understood to be the first school rated in need of ‘urgent improvement’ or placed in special measures since the new framework was introduced.

It was not included in our above analysis of routine inspections, as Trinity’s inspection was triggered by a monitoring visit.

The latest report said that pupils “are not safe” and “wander around school when they should be in lessons”, with some leaving the building.

It also noted that “bullying, swearing, derogatory language, and aggressive and intimidating behaviour happen frequently”.

Persistent absence rates were 82.4 per cent in 2023-24 – more than triple the national average of 25.6 per cent. Overall absence was at 41.2 per cent, compared to an 8.9 per cent national average.

Ofsted’s report said the school required special measures “because it is failing to provide an acceptable standard of education, and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school”.

However, the school has two sites, and inspectors found pupils at its lower site “attend school regularly ... enjoy their learning and achieve well from their different starting points” while “skilled staff provide pupils with highly effective support”.

Trinity said: “While we respect the process, we do not believe the final judgment reflects the current strength of our provision, particularly the strong practice at Trinity Academy Newcastle Lower.”

Ofsted will now monitor the school.

Inspections will usually be termly, according to the new monitoring policy, although the number will depend on the extent of issues found. Schools in special measures can receive up to six visits within 24 months.

Teachers infuriated by upper pay range 'barriers'

EXCLUSIVE

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"Unfair barriers" stop teachers advancing to the upper pay range, a report has warned, as school staff reported goalposts "shifting all the time".

In England, pay scales for classroom teachers comprise nine points: a six-point main pay range (M1 to M6), and a three-point upper pay range (U1 to U3).

Outside London, MPR advisory salaries range from £32,916 to £45,352, while UPR salaries range from £47,472 to £51,048.

Any teacher can apply to move to the upper pay range. But data collected for the National Education Union found teachers faced obstacles leading to a bottleneck, as well as slow progression once they reached the UPR.

An Incomes Data Research survey gathered responses on the UPR from 2,300 union members, across primary and secondary.

Of them, 52 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that "unfair barriers are put in place" to prevent teachers reaching the UPR.

Examples included inconsistent criteria between schools, financial constraints and "excessive" evidence requirements.

Slower progression on UPR

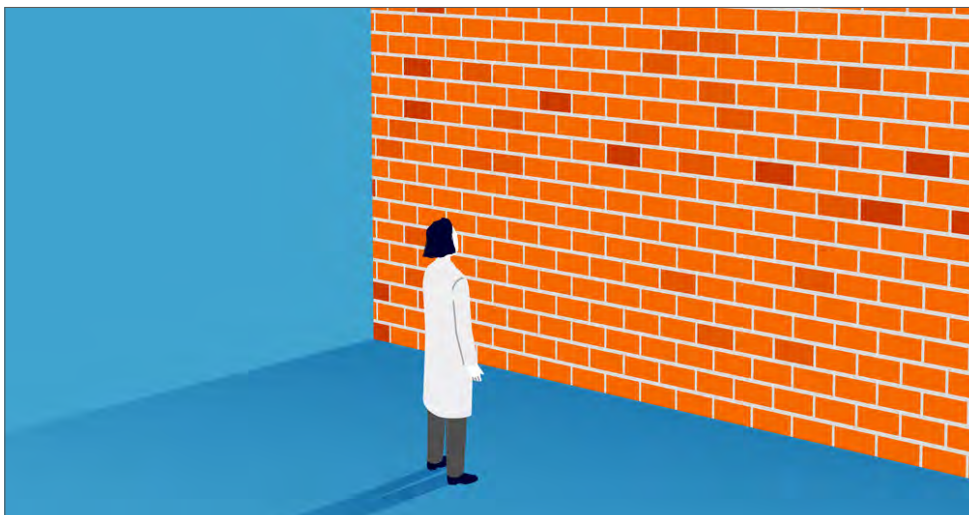
Once teachers reached the UPR, around three-quarters said they experienced slower pay progression, with many reporting negative effects on morale and retention.

Female teachers and primary teachers were particularly scathing. They were less likely to say the current speed of progression "fairly reflects" their experience and contribution. They were also 10 percentage points less likely to find expectations of UPR teachers "reasonable and achievable".

NEU general secretary Daniel Kebede said the findings "underline" concerns around equality in teacher pay and conditions.

"Those with family commitments, caring duties or other roles outside of school are likely to find inflated expectations of work intensity insurmountable," he said.

Overall, thirty-seven per cent of respondents said expectations of UPR teachers "are not reasonable or achievable", often involving "significant" extracurricular responsibilities, or additional work



like CPD, mentoring and admin.

The union believes the current structure should be replaced by a single six-point scale for classroom teachers, with automatic annual pay progression.

Kebede said the "unfair pay and unreasonable expectations" associated with the UPR "make a significant contribution to the exodus of talented and experienced teachers".

Department for Education guidance states teachers may apply to move onto the UPR "at least once a year".

Applications should be accepted where teachers are "highly competent in all elements of the relevant standards" and make a "substantial and sustained" contribution to their school. However, this guidance is non-statutory.

'Goalposts kept shifting'

One special school teacher who spent 10 years on the first point of the upper pay range told Schools Week: "Every time I was asking to move up, they were giving me new targets."

Frequent changes in line managers exacerbated the situation.

"I'd get a new one, and they'd say... 'I haven't seen you do these things, so you need to demonstrate them.'"

She felt her experience was also affected by taking maternity leave twice.

"The goal post basically was shifting all the time, and every line manager [said]... 'you're going to need to show us the evidence again.'"

After nearly a decade, she was told progression would have to wait

until a new national pay policy was published.

"That's kind of what broke me," she said.

She added her headteacher appeared to have "a total lack of accountability", with benchmarks being set without "any kind of empirical evidence". She has since left, and is now on the UPR at a different school.

Wider evidence

Research by Teacher Tapp suggests such experiences are not unusual.

In December, more than 10,000 teachers were asked whether their school's process for progressing to the UPR was fair.

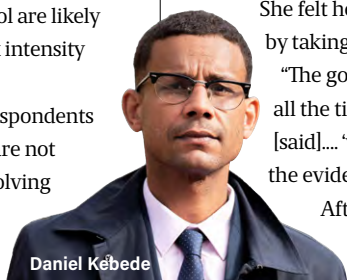
Just under half (49 per cent) said it was, while almost a third said they did not know what the process was. Seventeen per cent said it was unfair.

Fifty local authorities now provide teachers on the UPR with annual pay progression, it is understood.

This month, West Sussex County Council confirmed progression on the UPR could now be annual, replacing its previous approach that allowed two-year progression unless in "exceptional circumstances".

Tom Chitty, joint assistant secretary for the NEU's West Sussex Branch and District, stressed the UPR "is not a promotion, but in practice it has been treated as one, with progression slowed, blocked or made conditional on factors that have nothing to do with classroom teaching".

Last year's School Teachers' Review Body's report to ministers highlighted "inconsistent approaches to pay progression decisions" and a "lack of clarity on the purpose of the upper pay range".



Daniel Kebede

Full list of 93 behaviour hubs revealed

SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER
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The government has named the remaining 36 lead schools for its behaviour and attendance hubs programme, completing the list of 93 settings that will lead its work across England.

The Department for Education (DfE) said the hubs would “draw on best practice to improve attendance and tackle the root causes of poor behaviour before problems escalate”.

Lead schools are those “with a proven record of turning behaviour and attendance around”.

“These hubs will support other schools to identify absence early, build positive cultures, engage parents, and establish strong routines.”

The DfE has also published a final evaluation of the previous government’s behaviour hubs scheme. The current government merged behaviour and attendance hubs, cutting funding for the scheme from £10 million to £1.5 million.

It found the programme “largely achieved its objectives, driving nationwide, systemic, sustainable improvements in how schools managed behaviour and in the way they designed, developed, tested and implemented their behaviour policies”.

There was “strong evidence that pupil behaviour improved following the programme; in some instances, these improvements could be directly attributed to the programme itself, but additional causal factors also played a substantial role”.

And 80 per cent of schools that participated in the evaluation “found the programme very useful, particularly those with small pupil numbers”.

However, the evaluation report does not set out details on pupils’ views.

Overall, the proportion “rating behaviour positively decreased from 27 per cent to 25 per cent” over the period.

In schools with high deprivation levels, the figure slightly improved from 25 per cent to 28 per cent. But in better-off ones, the “percentage decreased from 27 per cent to 24 per cent”.

List of hubs

East of England

Tennyson Road Primary School
Denbigh High School
Bedford Free School
Purford Green Primary School
Woods Loke Primary School
Southfield Primary Academy
The Eastwood Academy
Chesterton Community College
Ely College
Hewett Academy

East Midlands

Bluecoat Wollaton Academy
Charnwood College
Granville Academy
Sir Jonathan North Girls’ College
The Newark Academy
Church Lane Primary School and Nursery
Sneinton St Stephen’s CofE Primary School
Hollingwood Primary School
Keelby Primary Academy
Welton St Mary’s Church of England Primary Academy
Landau Forte College

London

Tidemill Academy
Charles Dickens Primary School
Forest Academy
St Paul’s Way Trust School
Drayton Manor High School
Riverside School
Swanlea School
Mulberry Academy Shoreditch
St Edward’s Church of England Academy
Cumberland Community School

North East

Ashington Academy
Croftway Academy
Hawthorn Primary School
St Bede’s Catholic Academy
Dyke House Sports and Technology College
Belmont Community School
Macmillan Academy
Caedmon Community Primary School

North West

The Beacon CofE Primary School
Wright Robinson College
Dean Trust Ardwick
Our Lady’s RC High School
Workington Academy
Oasis Academy Harpur Mount
St Barnabas and St Paul’s Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Webster Primary School
Co-op Academy Woodslee
Evelyn Street Primary Academy and Nursery
Archbishop Blanch CofE High School

South East

St Edmund’s Catholic School
The Langley Academy
Lord Grey Academy
Worthing High School
Chilton Primary School
Ark Little Ridge Primary Academy
Seymour Primary School
The Leigh Academy Cherry Orchard
The Leigh Academy Rainham
Maudene School

South West

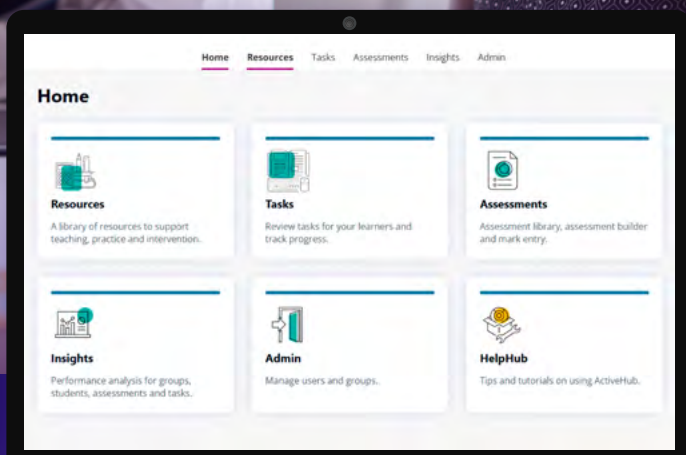
Wallscourt Farm Academy
Marine Academy Primary
St James’ School
Glenmoor Academy
LIFT Hazelwood Academy
Avonbourne Boys Academy and Avonbourne Girls Academy (joint)
Somervale Secondary School
Five Acres High School
Lostwithiel School
Penrice Academy
Cranbrook Education Campus

West Midlands

E-ACT Heartlands Academy
E-ACT North Birmingham Academy
Shireland Collegiate Academy
Moat Farm Junior School
The Khalsa Academy
Ark St Alban’s Academy
Brookfields Primary School
Chadsmead Primary Academy
St Mary’s Catholic Primary
St Thomas Cantilupe CofE Academy
Q3 Academy Langley

Yorkshire and the Humber

Moor End Academy
Dixons Trinity Academy and Dixons Kings Academy (joint)
St John’s CofE Primary School
Spring Grove Junior and Infant School
Carr Manor Community School
Royds Hall, a Share Academy
Corpus Christi Catholic Primary School
Willows Academy
Edlington Victoria Academy
Horizon Community College
The Laurel Academy



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Upgrade the role of governor, NGA tells policymakers

EXCLUSIVE

JACK DYSON
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Ministers are being urged to recognise the role played by governors as a “core component” of the accountability framework for schools.

A study, released on Thursday, found schools with effective boards were better prepared for Ofsted visits and “more likely to sustain improvement beyond the inspection cycle”.

The report, by the National Governance Association (NGA), also stated “governance-related issues commonly precede formal intervention”.

NGA chief executive Emma Balchin challenged leaders to “develop a system-wide understanding of governance as something to be acknowledged, celebrated, scrutinised, invested in, and kept firmly on the agenda”.

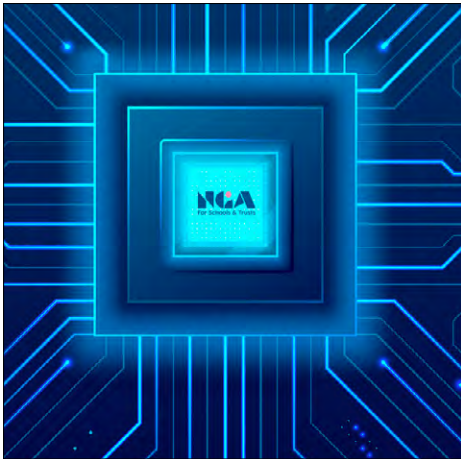
Bad governance precedes intervention

The report noted that analysis from the Department for Education and NGA’s external reviews of governance (ERGs) show “governance-related issues commonly precede formal intervention”.

“These issues rarely stem from bad intent or lack of commitment,” it said. “More often, they arise where boards lack clarity about their role, confidence to challenge, or capacity to exercise effective



Emma Balchin



oversight”

The ERGs identified “recurring patterns in weaker governance”, including limited challenge to executive decisions, gaps in financial oversight and risk management, and an “insufficient strategic focus, with boards drawn into operational detail”.

Governance and inspections

The report added effective governance provided leaders with “intelligence” through “regular oversight of performance, finance, risk and culture”. Consequently, boards “are often the first to identify emerging issues”.

The ERGs showed “organisations with effective governance are better prepared” for Ofsted visits. They are “more able to respond constructively

to findings, and more likely to sustain improvement beyond the inspection cycle”.
“In this sense,” the NGA said, “governance acts as a form of system readiness, helping organisations translate external judgement into long-term action.”

‘Core component’

The report urged the government to “formally recognise governance as a core component of the national accountability framework”.

It also told policymakers to “invest in governance training, development and research”, including impact assessments.

Schools should “treat governance as an overarching strategic priority” and “commit to regular external reviews and internal self-evaluation”, it added.

The NGA study offered a vision for the sector if governance is recognised as “essential infrastructure”.

If this happened, “inspection, regulation and intervention would be designed to complement and reinforce” the work of boards, “rather than bypass it or relegate it as a side note”.

It said: “Where governance is strong, external accountability can be lighter-touch and more proportionate; where it is weak, support and development can be targeted earlier.

“Such an approach would reduce duplication, improve coherence and make better use of system capacity.”

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Struggling trust failed to clear payment to outgoing ‘senior executive’

An under-pressure academy trust broke rules over a £15,000 payment to a former school leader.

Latest accounts for the Tenterden Schools Trust (TST) in Kent show it made the error as it entered into a settlement agreement with an outgoing “senior executive” last year.

The six-school chain also admitted to failing to carry out internal financial checks last year. Its reserves fell by more than 40 per cent over the period.

Jonathan Wilden, TST’s CEO, said his academies were “finding rising costs a challenge while wanting to do as much to support children”.

He added: “They have no choice but to utilise reserves while conducting an accurate

analysis of curriculum and staffing models with headteachers.”

Accounts show a settlement agreement – entered into before Wilden’s arrival – contained a “provision for pay in lieu of notice together with pension contributions” for their notice period.

It is not clear who the member of staff was but, as their employment was “terminated” a third of the way through their notice period, it was “agreed the pension contributions would be paid as a lump sum”.

The trust received legal advice confirming that, if it did not do so, “it risked litigation”.

Despite this, the payment was found to have breached academy rules as TST did not receive the Department for Education’s “prior

authorisation”.
“The academy trust has been open and transparent with the DfE about this payment, and the DfE have acknowledged that ... [TST] acted in good faith and in accordance with the legal advice obtained,” the accounts added.
TST also revealed “no financial internal scrutiny checks were performed during 2024-25”.
This meant “key financial procedures and controls have not been independently reviewed”.
Wilden acknowledged this was also a breach of the rules but stressed the issue “has been rectified”.
By the end of August, TST registered a surplus of £297,000, down from £530,000 in 2023-24.

DfE to trial AI tutoring – but experts call for more research

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More research is needed into the impact of AI tutoring for pupils, experts have warned after the government announced plans to trial it in England's schools.

Ministers said this week they will trial "AI tutoring tools" in schools, claiming it could benefit up to 450,000 disadvantaged children a year within two years.

The Department for Education (DfE) warned that access to tutoring is currently "deeply unequal", with wealthier pupils far more likely to benefit.

Its pilot will test "safe AI-powered tutoring tools providing personalised, one-to-one learning support – levelling the playing field for those who cannot afford private tutors".

Professor Becky Francis, CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), said the benefits of tutoring "are clear" and it is "one of the most well-evidenced approaches" for supporting pupils needing additional help.

But, while there is "strong understanding of what effective human tutoring looks like", she stressed that "the evidence on AI provision is in its infancy".

Announcing the AI scheme, the DfE cited EEF research showing that one-to-one tuition can accelerate learning by around five months on average.

The EEF found short, regular sessions of around 30 minutes, three to five times a week, over a set period of up to 10 weeks delivered "optimum impact".

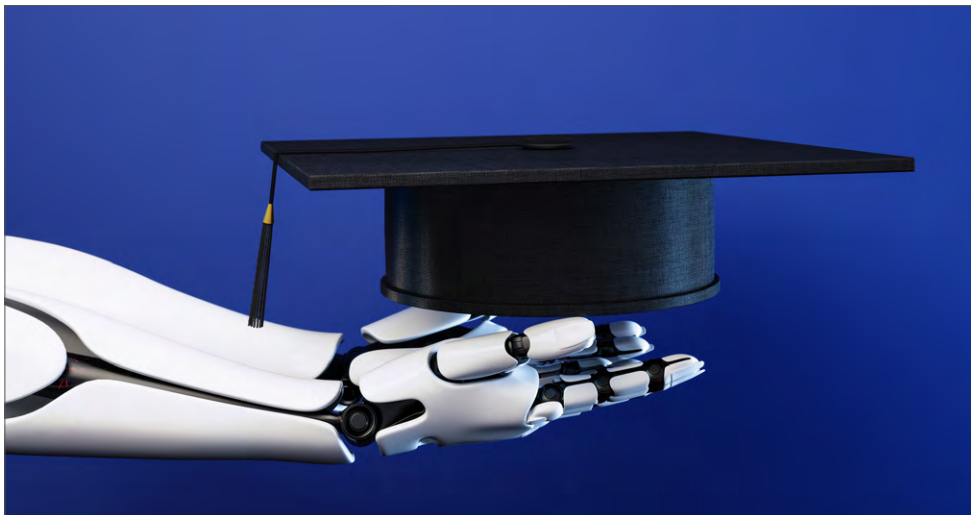
But the studies examined tuition delivered by "a teacher, teaching assistant or other adult giving a pupil intensive individual support".

Francis said AI models "hold potential", but she added: "We must build the evidence to ensure we are providing learners with provision that we can be confident will support their learning."

Jen Fox, CEO of Action Tutoring, welcomed the investment, but said: "Our mission is an equitable education system, and that requires more than just tools; it requires evidence."

Use of AI tutors must be 'carefully monitored'

Dr Cat Scutt, deputy CEO of the Chartered College of Teaching, said developing and implementing AI tutoring "effectively and safely" was "an incredibly



complex task, and its success or otherwise will be in the detail".

But she acknowledged its potential to make a difference to disadvantaged young people if "done well".

Co-creating the tools with teachers "will significantly increase the chance of success", she said.

Francis added that the scheme's impact will "depend on implementation".

"It is vital that any use of AI tutors is carefully monitored and closely aligned to wider classroom teaching," she said. "Both to make sure they are delivering for pupils, and to build the evidence base for what works."

The DfE said the scheme will help pupils "to access one-to-one tutoring", but it is not clear how involved human teachers and tutors will be.

Susannah Hardyman, CEO of Impetus and a former head of Action Tutoring, said: "When used in conjunction with human tutors and teachers who can keep a pupil engaged, encourage resilience, and establish trust, AI has the potential to scale some of the key aspects of tutoring."

She said there must now be "robust evaluation to learn how AI tutoring can work best", adding that the current disadvantage gap shows "the need is huge".

In 2024-25, just 25.6 per cent of GCSE pupils from a disadvantaged background achieved a grade 5 – or "strong pass" – in English and maths. This compared to 52.8 per cent of pupils not known to be from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Tools available to schools by end of 2027

The government will run a tender "for industry to co-create AI tutoring tools with teachers" from the summer term.

The DfE said it hoped this would bring the tools "to a similar level of quality, so that we can offer, at scale, the kind of personalised one-to-one support often only available to a privileged few".

The tools will then be available to schools "by the end of 2027".

The DfE said that, "from years 9-11 alone ... the tools could support up to 450,000 children a year on free school meals to access one-to-one tutoring".

By "adapting to individual pupils' needs, the tools could provide extra help when they get stuck" and identify where they need more practice.

The department insisted that the tools will "complement" high-quality, face-to-face teaching – but won't replace it.

And it pledged to "robustly test" the AI tutoring tools, "so they are safe and work for pupils ... and school staff".

"This includes ensuring they work in tandem with the national curriculum to build on children's learning in class."

Trials will begin this year with children in secondary schools.

School staff will be supported "with clear, practical training developed with the education sector, so they have the skills, knowledge and confidence to use AI safely and effectively".

Cat Scutt



Coast and Vale paid Delta £440k ahead of merger

JACK DYSON

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Almost £440,000 was spent supporting a merger that created one of England's biggest MATs.

Coast and Vale Learning Trust handed over the sum to the Delta Academies Trust last year, before they joined forces in September.

One sector leader said the payments highlighted how "all mergers" incur associated costs as the organisations carry out "essential" work to ensure they can function together.

A Delta spokesperson said: "We had already been working together extensively throughout the 2024-25 academic year, implementing Delta's proven and highly successful systems, structures and processes.

"This extensive work meant we could get ahead and have a positive impact in advance, and ensured a successful transition in September 2025, with all parties able to hit the ground running."

Coast and Vale's final set of accounts, published

this month, show it bought services totalling £437,687 from Delta last year.

The documents stated that the MAT "complied with the requirements of [the] academies trust handbook".

They also said Sir Paul Tarn, who was the CEO of both organisations at the time, "never participated in, nor influenced" the purchase.

The spokesperson said the work undertaken meant Coast and Vale could benefit "from the full range of Delta resources in advance, including capital projects, enhanced learning environments, IT assets and educational materials in advance".

Staff were also "able to access training and development opportunities". Meanwhile, Delta employees were seconded "to provide additional support".

A trust CEO, who asked to remain anonymous, noted "all mergers" come with costs attached "as systems and processes [need to be] aligned to ensure effective integration".

He said this is "essential" for MATs to ensure that they can "operate efficiently and effectively for the

benefit of all".

He added: "In this case, it is interesting how much work has been done in

advance ... this may reflect the confidence in this merger taking place and the desire to ensure the advantages of working together are realised at the earliest opportunity."

Schools Week previously revealed how Tarn took over the reins at Coast and Vale following an "in principle agreement" between the organisations to join forces formally in the future.

The merger plans were later referred to ministers to rule on by the Department for Education's regional director for Yorkshire and the Humber, Alison Wilson.

Along with the advisory boards of leaders who support them, regional directors can choose to "escalate" a decision to a minister in circumstances where they do not feel they can decide themselves.

The proposals were later given the green light, taking Delta's tally of schools to 63. Only United Learning Trust has more.



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No political bias at school that postponed MP's visit, says Ofsted

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Ofsted has found “no evidence” to substantiate concerns about political impartiality at a school which postponed the visit of an MP due to planned pro-Palestine protests.

Labour MP Damien Egan, who is Jewish, planned to visit Bristol Brunel Academy in his Bristol North East constituency in September.

But the visit was postponed following opposition by local campaigners and school staff who are members of the National Education Union.

The school said the visit was postponed due to safety concerns about a protest planned at the school site on the same day.

Ofsted then took the unusual step of announcing that it had sent inspectors into the school. They conducted an ungraded monitoring inspection earlier this month.

In its report, the watchdog said it had been “concerned by reports that a visit from the local MP may have been postponed due to coordinated pressure from staff and external groups, and, therefore, a potential insufficient observance of the Department for Education’s ‘political impartiality in schools’ guidance”.

But inspectors found “no evidence to substantiate these concerns within the school”.

Leaders and trustees demonstrated “a profound commitment to providing an inclusive learning environment that promotes tolerance and respect for the diversity of modern Britain”.

Inspectors found “no evidence of partisan



political views”, the report added, with staff telling inspectors of a “harmonious and religiously tolerant atmosphere”.

‘Diverse and inclusive’ school

“Staff do not shy away from dealing with contentious issues, but do so in a balanced and accurate way, discussing different perspectives and viewpoints. Pupils, in turn, respond to such debates with maturity and respect.”

Elsewhere, the report said Bristol Brunel Academy was “a diverse and inclusive community school, where pupils are tolerant and respectful of each other as they learn and socialise together”.

In interviews with staff members, Ofsted said there was “often deep hurt expressed at the way their school was being portrayed”.

And inspectors found “overwhelmingly positive” views about the school through surveys with 135 staff members and 143 parents.

Inspectors praised the school in all four categories of personal development and wellbeing, leadership and governance, curriculum and teaching and safeguarding.

The Cabot Learning Federation, which runs the school, said in a statement earlier this month that it had rescheduled Egan’s visit “long before any of the most recent concerns were raised”.

Cabot Learning Federation has already agreed to an internal review into the decision to postpone the visit.

Schools Week asked Ofsted what evidence was presented to warrant the inspection, but Ofsted declined to comment.

Egan’s office has been approached for comment.

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Unauthorised holiday fines up again – but not by much

<p>The number of absence fines issued to parents has levelled out following a post-Covid surge, but it remains nearly 50 per cent above pre-pandemic levels.</p> <p>Department for Education figures show councils handed out just under 493,000 penalty notices on behalf of schools in 2024-25, up 1 per cent on 12 months before.</p> <p>More than 90 per cent of the penalties last year were for unauthorised family holidays. This is in line with previous years and reflects the huge inflation in holiday costs during school breaks.</p> <p>No fines were issued during the pandemic, and fewer fines were issued in its wake as schools continued to grapple with the fallout from Covid.</p>	<p>The number later rose from almost 220,000 in 2021-22 to around 487,000 in 2023-24. This represented a 123 per cent jump in just two years.</p> <p>But the latest statistics suggest the increase could be starting to plateau. The data relates to the first year in which fines rose from a basic rate of £60 to £80.</p> <p>The 492,825 penalty notices issued in 2024-25 is 47 per cent higher than the 333,000 given in 2018-19 – the last figures before the pandemic.</p> <p>But there were big regional variations.</p> <p>The North-east witnessed a 53 per cent increase in the number of fines issued last year. The next biggest jump was in the South-west (23 per cent). Four other regions</p>	<p>recorded falls of up to 16 per cent.</p> <p>Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Pepe Di’lasio said the issuing of fines “risks damaging relationships between schools and parents”.</p> <p>There is also “good evidence” to suggest that missing class time “has a direct impact on a child’s attainment and future prospects”.</p> <p>He added: “We cannot continue like this, with parents choosing between an affordable holiday and good school attendance for their child.</p> <p>“We really need the government to consider any ways they can limit how travel firms raise their prices during school holidays. This is the driving factor behind these statistics.”</p>
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NEWS

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Phillipson makes the call for a phone ban

RUTH LUCAS

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Bridget Phillipson has written to headteachers urging all schools to implement a mobile phone ban.

The education secretary's move comes after the government issued "tougher" guidance on mobile phone use in schools last week, announcing that Ofsted would examine phone policies and how effectively they were applied during inspections from April.

The government will also launch a consultation on children's use of technology, just as an amendment to the children's wellbeing and schools bill forcing a ban on social media for under-16s was approved by the House of Lords.

Here's everything you need to know...

'Tougher' guidance

The government last week pledged "tougher" new guidance on use of mobile phones in schools.

While the Department for Education has always recommended that schools should be phone-free environments, it previously said it was "for school leaders to develop and implement a tailored policy".

New guidance states "all schools should be mobile phone-free environments by default, anything other than this should be an exception only".

This should include during lessons, between lessons and at break times and lunchtimes.

The guidance is non-statutory, meaning schools do not have a legal duty to follow it.

However, the DfE told Schools Week last week that an upcoming consultation would consider whether leaders "should have a clear legal obligation to consider the guidance in setting and implementing mobile phone policies".

Phillipson writes to heads

In a letter to headteachers on Monday, Phillipson said previous guidance "did not deliver the clarity or consistency that schools need, or help enough in setting out for parents that this is a clear national position".

"Schools should not only have clear policies, but should make sure those policies are applied



consistently across classes and at all times, and we want parents to back these policies too," Phillipson wrote.

Research by the children's commissioner, Rachel de Souza, found last year that 90 per cent of secondary schools and 99.8 per cent of primary schools already had policies that stopped the use of mobile phones during the school day, in line with DfE non-statutory guidance.

But the majority (79 per cent) of secondaries allowed pupils to bring phones to school if they kept them out of sight and did not use them.

Ofsted's powers

The DfE announced last week that Ofsted would check every school's policy on mobile phones during inspections.

The watchdog had already started looking at mobile phone policies under its new inspection toolkit launched in November.

The toolkit says leaders should "have high expectations for all pupils' attendance, behaviour and attitudes, and design effective policies that communicate these high expectations clearly to all staff, pupils and parents, including expectations related to mobile phones".

Ofsted had said the effectiveness of mobile phone policies would be considered when deciding grades.

Now, the government has said Ofsted will

check a school's policy from April 1.

Inspectors will discuss with leaders what their policy is, how it is communicated to and understood by parents and pupils, and determine whether it is consistently followed.

Conversations will differ depending on the policy. If a school has completely banned phones, inspectors will want to see how clearly it has been implemented. If a school has some exceptions, inspectors will want to understand why.

Not following policy?

If a school does not follow the DfE guidance, inspectors will continue to explore the impact of mobile phones on pupils' behaviour, safety and wellbeing, the inspectorate said.

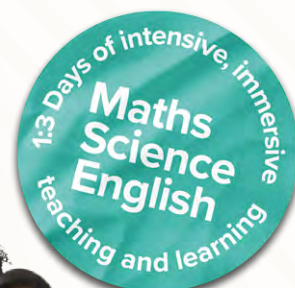
Inspectors will look at whether phones contribute to disruption, incidents of bullying and discrimination, or are detrimental to pupils' mental health and sense of belonging.

Evidence of one or more of these points would make it likely that a school's 'expected standard' for attendance and behaviour will not be met, Ofsted said.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders' union NAHT, said he "welcomed the clarity" provided by Phillipson.

But he said involving Ofsted was "both unnecessary and unhelpful" and would leave leaders feeling "threatened rather than supported by this approach".

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“

Please can you pass on my regards to the team members that supported all 3 sessions last week - the pupils gained so much from the sessions!

Zoe Edwards - Deputy Headteacher
Crestwood School



”

“

Happy helpful staff, well organised, good interactions. Fast pace, good chunky sessions and great student engagement.

James Tibbles - Assistant Headteacher
E-ACT DSLV Academy



”

“

Did the programme meet expectations?
Yes 10 out of 10
Rate how the operations team performed?
10 out of 10
Rate the performance of the on-site team:
10 out of 10

Jo Thomas - Deputy Headteacher
King Charles I School



”

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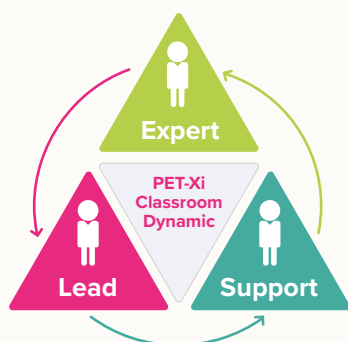
The text was well covered. It worked well as a revision and recap session, being delivered with a fresh voice.

They worked well as a team, were clear in their expectations, knowledgeable in the course material and approachable with the pupils.

Simon Davies - Baines School



”



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- Leading the team to bring energy and pace to make course success.
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- A passion to see young people succeed.

LONG READ: RISE

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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'Schoolboy error' sees smaller schools escape low attainment crackdown

JACK DYSON AND LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS
NEWS@SCHOOLSWEET.CO.UK

The DfE has not contacted primaries needing RISE support because low pupil numbers mean data goes unpublished, a Schools Week investigation finds

More than a thousand schools with poor outcomes slipped through the net of the government's low-attainment crackdown, exposing a "significant gap" in its latest bid to boost results.

The Department for Education (DfE) approached thousands of schools in England with the worst attainment rates, urging them to seek support from the government's regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE) programme's universal arm.

But hundreds more escaped the glare of officials because they were too small, Schools Week can reveal, despite registering some of the poorest outcomes in the country.

Reacting to the revelation, National Governance Association deputy CEO Sam Henson said: "Over a thousand schools appearing to fall through the cracks isn't a data technicality – it's a significant gap in the programme.

"Schools and boards that need support shouldn't miss out simply because of their size."

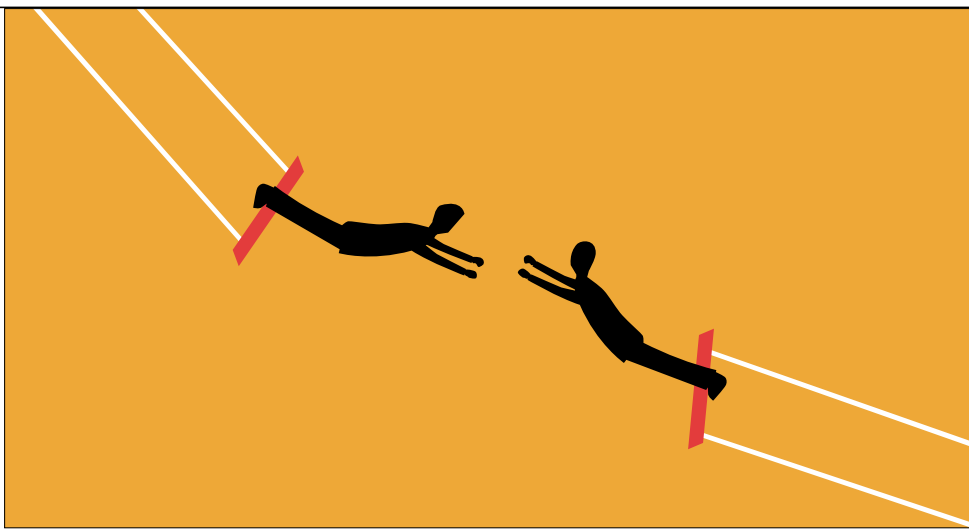
Hundreds slip net

On Friday, Tim Coulson, head of the DfE's regions group, wrote to responsible bodies for the 2,092 schools in the lowest 25 per cent for outcomes at key stages 2 and 4.

He contacted the leaders to "remind" them of the support available through the universal RISE programme, telling them to "please consider" accessing it.

Only those who fell below attainment thresholds for all pupils and disadvantaged children received the correspondence.

But FFT Education Datalab analysis, exclusively shared with Schools



'All schools can engage with the universal RISE offer'

Week, suggests that 1,063 poorly-performing primaries escaped scrutiny.

All were in the bottom 25 per cent for overall reading, writing and maths but, because they had so few children, data for their disadvantaged cohort was not published. This meant they fell outside the remit of the crackdown.

A DfE spokesperson stressed that the figures "for schools where pupil numbers are low [are] not published to protect individual privacy". This is why they "were excluded from the analysis that informed the list of schools that were sent letters".

"We are clear that all schools can engage with the universal RISE offer, which has been designed with all types of schools in mind," the spokesperson continued.

Schools with small pupil cohorts tend to experience more extreme fluctuations in results

year to year. However, disadvantaged children tend to receive lower grades.

Research by the Education Policy Institute found that poorer pupils ended secondary

school 19 months behind their peers in terms of attainment.

'Schoolboy error'

One academy trust CEO, who asked to remain anonymous, accused the department of making a "schoolboy error". Two of his schools received the letters.

"You wouldn't expect people to have slipped the net through a technicality. We just want a level playing field," the trust chief said.

"They need to focus on all organisations.

Let's face it, sometimes, because you are under scrutiny, it does push you into a different gear to improve at pace."

Henson added that the omissions show "the full potential of RISE is still to be realised".

Describing these as "reparable flaws", he urged the government to act "urgently to ensure the signals that prompt improvement conversations actually reach the boards who need them".

Schools targeted

The analysis suggests that 61 per cent of the schools which received Coulson's letter



Sam Henson



Tim Coulson

LONG READ: RISE

were run by an academy trust, with the rest under local authority oversight. Nationally, 55 per cent are in a trust.

United Learning has 11 academies within the scope of the crackdown. A spokesperson for the 95-school chain said: “The reality is that we are by some distance the biggest trust and we continue to take on a significant number of schools in challenging circumstances, many of which failed in the past.

“We are proud of our record of significantly raising attainment, which we continue to do.”

Regional disparities

Six more MATs had at least nine academies which received a letter. One of these was the Kemnal Academies Trust, which had 10.

Russell Hobby, its CEO, said the schools have been in the MAT “for a while” and that they “all serve areas of very high deprivation and often multiple overlapping issues”.

Some of the areas have “very weak employment prospects” and have been “neglected in terms of public services”. But he said this was “not an excuse – there are also schools who serve similar communities who haven’t received letters”.

“There have been good years and bad years [at these schools], and the job is to be more consistent,” Hobby explained.

“None of us think we’re producing the outcomes these communities deserve yet. But they will with the trust’s support.”

Datalab’s findings show the South-east and North-west accounted for the most low-attaining schools (both 17 per cent). Meanwhile, London and the North-east had the fewest (both 4 per cent).

The findings also suggest that the government push disproportionately targeted more deprived schools as well as those with historically lower-attaining intakes.

A ‘reminder’

The RISE scheme was launched last year, with its teams of “advisers” – leaders seconded to work alongside officials – tasked with intervening in so-called “stuck” schools.

David Carter, the former national schools commissioner, said the advisers “appear to be a very mixed bag”. He said the role “appears to be a smooth flightpath to retirement where making a difference would be a nice bonus”.

Universal support was later launched to “help every



Russell Hobby

Where are the low attaining schools?

Region	% of schools written to
North West	17%
South East	17%
East of England	14%
South West	12%
Yorkshire and The Humber	11%
West Midlands	11%
East Midlands	10%
North East	4%
London	4%

Source: FFT Education Datalab

SCHOOLSWEEK

‘We just want a level playing field’

school improve”. Key to the scheme is supporting them to access peer-to-peer support.

Leaders can identify “high-quality” help through regional RISE conferences, roundtables and networks, the DfE said. They will also be able to access toolkits and strategies from the RISE teams.

“[It] builds on professional generosity widely seen across the system and we want all responsible for governance and leading schools to know about all the support that is available,” Coulson said.

“It is for each school to choose what is helpful, and we are grateful for all who are contributing to the growing networks of support.”

... but it is optional

Low-attaining schools are not required to take part in universal RISE. In addition, it will be difficult for the government to monitor exactly how many engage with the scheme.

Carter believes it is “hardly a national school improvement strategy” if the DfE has to “ask schools politely to consider

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using it”.

“A universal offer is exactly that – an offer that does not address the exact needs of the school. The ability to diagnose and then move quickly to support is why trust leadership is a better approach.”

Loic Menzies, an associate fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research, described the service as “inevitably light touch”, noting: “The real job of school improvement is hard, long-term work requiring sustained engagement.”

Letters for high attainers too

On the same day Coulson sent out his missives, education secretary Bridget Phillipson wrote to the headteachers of the 3,326 schools in the top 25 per cent nationally, based on outcomes for poorer pupils.

Congratulating them on their “significant achievement”, Phillipson urged them to help share their experience and best practice with other schools by “engaging actively” with local RISE networks and contributing to roundtables.

United Learning received 36 letters, while Kemnal was sent 11.

Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Pepe Di’Lasio said his union was “not convinced this was the most effective approach”.

He argued that leaders are “already acutely aware of their performance data and are working exceptionally hard to improve outcomes, often under challenging circumstances”. So “an additional reminder of this may have been unwelcome”.

He added: “We would encourage the DfE to explore more positive and supportive ways of promoting the universal RISE offer in the future which reaches every school that may benefit from this support.”

Opinion

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JEN
CRAFT
Labour MP for Thurrock

Spending on speech and language therapy is vital to tackle SEND

Around two million children struggle with words, and when they don't get support it wrecks their life chances, says MP Jen Craft

I am honoured to serve as an MP, just as I am honoured to be a mother of children with additional needs.

This dual public and personal perspective makes one truth impossible to ignore – the current SEND system is forcing families to fight for the most basic expectations for our children.

I recently hosted a roundtable in Parliament with the Speech, Language and Communication Alliance and the Disabled Children's Partnership.

It was memorable because it focused on something many people take for granted – the right to be ordinary.

Ordinary is the child who can ask to join in a game at breaktime. Ordinary is understanding the teacher's instructions without panic rising in your chest.

Ordinary is being able to explain what's wrong when you're hurt, upset or afraid.

Yet for far too many children, an ordinary life is out of reach.

I know the love and the worry, the pride and the exhaustion. I know the background hum of advocacy that never really stops: the appointments, the school meetings,

the forms, the waiting lists, the fear that if you don't keep pushing, your child will slip through the cracks.

Speech and language challenges are now the largest single group of SEND needs in primary schools, and around two million children are currently struggling with talking and understanding words.

We often talk about "closing the attainment gap" and "breaking down barriers to opportunity". But we cannot do either if we allow communication skills, which are so foundational, so predictive, to go unmet at this alarming scale.

The system too often leaves families without guidance. They are not supported – they are sidelined. They are not empowered – they are overwhelmed.

We, the policymakers, are in effect setting families up to fail, and then blaming them when they can't navigate a maze designed without them in mind.

Families need actionable advice and education. They need practical strategies they can use every day, in real life, when under real pressure.

Simple tools, like visual supports, adapting how instructions are given and building communication routines into ordinary family life, can be transformational. This kind of accessible training for families is a low-cost intervention that is too often missing from the current offer.

When we withhold knowledge, we multiply inequality. Families



“We, the policymakers, are setting up families to fail

with time, confidence, connections and resources can sometimes piece together what their child needs.

Families without those advantages fall further behind. That is not a fair system – it is a lottery.

Early support is not only a benefit for the child. It is a protective factor for the whole family unit. It reduces conflict, stress and burnout. It allows parents to parent, rather than constantly manage a crisis.

Even if we set aside the moral argument – which we should not – the economic case is compelling. Without proper support, speech and language challenges can become a pipeline to NEET – young people not in education, employment or training.

When children don't get the support they need early, they enter adolescence with gaps in understanding, weaker social connections and reduced confidence. As adults, they face reduced employment opportunities and greater social isolation.

We must also face another difficult truth. Unmet speech and

language challenges can be linked to increased risk of later involvement in the justice system.

So, what should we do? We must move from firefighting to prevention, from bureaucracy to outcomes, from a system that rewards persistence to one that delivers fairness.

If we want children to have an ordinary childhood – and an ordinary chance at adulthood – we must stop treating speech and language support as optional.

That's why I'm calling on the Treasury and the Department for Education to view early intervention, the training of early years staff and teachers, and more speech and language therapy, not as an expense but as an upfront investment: one that saves money, strengthens families, reduces future demand on public services and most importantly, transforms lives.

Ordinary shouldn't be extraordinary for any child in any classroom, in any constituency, and not in a country that claims to believe in opportunity for all.

Advertorial

Equity and agency for a changing world – how six core skills are transforming inclusive education

Across government policy, curriculum reform and inspection frameworks, one question continues to surface: what is education really for?

Academic attainment still matters, but it is no longer the sole measure of success. Schools are increasingly expected to show how effectively they prepare young people for adulthood, employment and an unpredictable future. Skills such as communication, adaptability, problem solving and resilience now sit at the heart of reform – yet they can be difficult to define, evidence and embed consistently in classroom practice.

For more than 30 years, [ASDAN](#) has worked with schools and colleges to make skills-based learning visible, valued and meaningful, particularly for learners whose strengths are not always recognised through traditional assessment. Its approach is grounded in a simple principle: skills already exist across the curriculum. The task is not to add more content, but to recognise, name and develop skills intentionally.

As Dr Zoë Elder, Director of Education, Research & Innovation at [ASDAN](#), explains: “Skills are developed through everything learners do. The opportunity is to make them visible, track their growth and help learners understand their own strengths.”

When skills are made explicit, learners gain the language to describe how they collaborate, solve problems, make decisions and respond to challenge – qualities employers and training providers value. In this way, skills frameworks make learning clearer, fairer and more transferable.

Learning shaped by driving questions

[ASDAN](#) brings skills to life through driving questions. Rather than organising learning around tasks alone, driving questions frame learning as inquiry, encouraging curiosity, reflection and ownership.

For example, “Study the layout of a religious building” becomes “How do the spaces we build reflect our beliefs?”

“Attend a careers talk” becomes “What can you learn about future pathways by hearing from someone in the workplace?”

This shift connects learning to real life and helps



learners understand why it matters.

“Driving questions give learners agency,” says Zoë. “They’re not just completing tasks – they’re exploring something meaningful.”

[ASDAN's](#) renewed [Short Courses](#), including Gardening, Careers and Experiencing Work, are designed around this model, supporting applied learning and progression from Entry Levels to Levels 1 and 2. New [Personal Effectiveness Qualifications](#) further strengthen the focus on transferable skills for employability, independence and adult life.

Skills embedded, not added

Skills initiatives can feel like another layer in an already busy system. [ASDAN](#) avoids this by asking where skills are already happening. Teachers develop skills daily through discussion, teamwork, practical activity and problem solving. [ASDAN](#) helps make this learning visible through structured reflection on communication, decision making and collaboration.

Over time, reflection becomes habit rather than an extra task and builds confidence and self-awareness, particularly for learners who may not thrive in exam-heavy environments.

Plan, do, review: learning as a cycle

At the heart of [ASDAN's](#) approach is a simple structure: plan, do, review. Learning is seen as cyclical, with reflection positioned as a core part of progress. Learners plan activities, take action, then review what worked and what they learned about themselves, developing independence, resilience and ownership.

Equity through recognition

Equity is not only about access and attainment; it is also about recognition. When success is

defined too narrowly, many learners remain unseen.

“Equity isn’t about lowering expectations,” Zoë explains. “It’s about widening the ways learners can show what they know and what they can do.”

This principle underpins [Equitas](#), ASDAN’s digital platform for inclusive, skills-based learning. Learners can upload evidence in multiple formats – images, video, audio or practical outcomes – reflecting real-world demonstrations of competence and reducing barriers.

For teachers, [Equitas](#) provides clear oversight of progress. For learners, it builds confidence and supports transition, helping them articulate their skills and strengths.

As schools navigate curriculum reform and growing expectations around personal development and employability, [ASDAN's](#) inclusive, portfolio-based approach shows what is possible. By embedding skills in everyday learning, using purposeful questions and valuing reflection, schools can build equity, agency and confidence for all learners in a changing world.

Visit the [ASDAN website](#) and complete an [expression of interest form](#) to speak with the team about membership options



Opinion

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JON HUTCHINSON

Regional director, east of England, Reach Foundation

Gove’s traditionalists won, but now they see what was lost

Militant discipline and explicit instruction delivered higher exam grades but the debate has moved on as pupils disengage from school, says Jon Hutchinson

Fifteen years ago, we had a big old debate about education in England.

It largely took place online, with Twitter in particular becoming a kind of digital agora for how schools should be run.

This revolutionary zeal was supported with strong downward pressure from a government with an incredibly clear vision, and an upward momentum of teacher-bloggers unafraid to challenge and smash shibboleths.

The core battlelines were around whether traditional or progressive approaches delivered better academic outcomes for kids, especially poor kids.

The sometimes heated nature of disagreements led some to paint the other side as baddies. In reality, everyone wanted kids to do well. They just disagreed about the best way to achieve that.

But increasingly, we didn’t have to imagine or speculate.

The free schools policy and devolutionary principles of academies allowed leaders to put their money where their mouth was. We could start to point to

actual schools operating along those espoused principles and ideologies.

And the jury is in. On the point of “what supports children to make great progress and equip them with amazing grades”, the trads unequivocally won. It’s just not credible to look at a progress 8 table and come to any other conclusion.

But a new conversation is starting to bubble, taking us back to first principles.

Champions of progressive philosophies have begun to concede that it’s true that if you want to optimise for exam grades, then retrieval practice, drill and thrill, explicit instruction and militant discipline wins.

But they are now (and perhaps have always been) arguing that we simply shouldn’t (only) optimise for that.

Essentially, they say that too much gets lost, too much that is important. They point to persistent attainment gaps, poor mental health, drops in engagement and enjoyment with school, and a narrow and repetitive experience for kids in classrooms.

They argue that stuff that doesn’t show up on league tables but really matters has evaporated, and that we should be willing to sacrifice a bit of efficiency, a bit of knowledge in long-term memory, for some of that stuff.

And increasingly, I’m hearing lots of traditionalists quietly agreeing



“ We should be willing to sacrifice a bit of efficiency

with them.

It’s not a complete volte-face. They still believe in taking content seriously, sequencing curriculum and prioritising teacher-led instruction. But many have become uncomfortable with the logical conclusion of the ideology they championed.

Some schools have publicly pursued a “purist” vision of traditionalism, which appears to many previous allies to have prompted an arms race, where the approach is approaching a caricature of itself.

For these trads, there is a “not in my name” sort of objection. “I believe in this stuff, but I don’t mean that.”

Others, interestingly, have had their own kids move through the system and seen them become disillusioned and disengaged with school as a result of the sorts of policies they argued for.

And some just argue it’s a different time, with different problems to solve.

Whilst it may have been necessary to correct against ropery pedagogical

practices and woolly curriculum articulation, this is no longer the principal challenge facing school leaders and teachers in 2026.

All of this is taking place in a fascinating broader context.

In contrast to the Gove years, there is essentially a political vacuum when it comes to a government vision for what schools should be and do.

And this is precisely at the point where parents’ expectations are often painfully misaligned with a school’s goals and capabilities.

The old argument for getting every child “climbing the mountain to university” also feels far less relevant to many school leaders, parents and kids, due to huge student debt and poor graduate outcomes.

These debates are important. They can sharpen intuitions, build consensus, tease out nuance and allow for testable hypotheses. So although they may not play out online in the same way as a decade ago, we should keep the conversation going.



DR SIOBHAN
MELAY

Independent researcher

Support staff can recognise and share their value by journaling

By recording and reflecting, ‘invisible’ staff can evidence their professional judgment and creativity, says Siobhan Melay

Too often, learning support staff are viewed as supporting actors in their own schools.

Their work becomes defined by lists of tasks, usually dictated by someone else, rather than as an expression of their own expertise. Under these circumstances, professional identity is rendered invisible, or worse, non-existent.

Yet having a sense of one’s own professional identity is important, because it guides decision-making and strengthens confidence.

I’d like to suggest one potential simple and effective solution: journaling.

Through reflecting on the subtle interventions they enact daily and their approaches to problem-solving, support staff can make their skills visible and articulate the real impact they have on pupils’ learning.

For special educational needs coordinators (SENcos), encouraging this practice provides a way to unlock the full potential of their teams, and, ultimately, the classroom itself.

I know this from experience.

Before pursuing a PhD, I worked as a teaching assistant, so at times I felt the frustration of being “invisible” in the classroom and in staffrooms.

When planning my PhD project, I began with the justified principle that teaching assistants, like myself, were professionals, and I became committed to exploring ways of prioritising their voices in communicating that professionalism.

My own academic research, alongside numerous qualitative studies, shows that journaling allows staff to see and communicate the expertise in their everyday work. It captures the discreet but significant moments.

This could be the clever rephrasing that suddenly makes a concept click, or having the foresight to step back to allow a student to take ownership, or quietly supporting a learner so they stay engaged rather than switch off.

Through writing, these moments become evidence of skilled professional judgment and creativity.

In terms of practicability, journaling involves setting aside short but regular periods to describe experiences from the school day.

Using open-ended prompt questions such as “what are you most proud of this week and



“ It helps staff claim a professional identity

why?” is the most accessible initial method of entry for those unused to professional reflection.

Journals can be hand-written or digital. They can be private or selectively shared with a trusted colleague. Eventually, learning support staff would become more comfortable with moving away from prompts, deciding instead what they feel is worth reflecting on.

Of course, safeguarding and data collection must be taken into account. Journal entries should focus on thoughts and feelings rather than records of confidential details, and references to pupils and colleagues should be anonymised. Support staff will be well aware of the need for these precautions in their professional duties.

Over time, journaling can help staff build a coherent professional narrative. Patterns may emerge offering insights into relationship-building, mediation, problem-solving, emotional labour and pedagogical insight.

These are skills rarely reflected in

job descriptions, yet they are central to inclusive education.

Journaling also encourages metacognition (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017; Chirema, 2007) where professionals reflect on why they make certain decisions, what strategies work, and how their actions might incorporate their own values as well as those of the institution.

For SENcos, supporting this practice could also be an investment in the school’s professional capacity, as staff who can articulate their expertise are better equipped to seek targeted professional development and collaborate confidently with colleagues.

If schools want to stop underestimating the impact of learning support staff, they need to give them the tools to see and speak for themselves.

Journaling, on a weekly basis, is a way of helping staff articulate their contribution, and claim a professional identity they can be proud of.



MICHAEL GARDNER

Founder of The Oracy Shift and
teaching and learning lead at
Maritime Academy Trust

Talk isn't cheap: it sets up a
child to thrive in the classroom

**Oracy must be nurtured
across all settings – especially
as navigating AI demands
a mastery of language, says
Michael Gardner**

Enter a classroom in an
affluent area and you are met
by a cacophony of voices.

Whether debating, reasoning or
articulating thoughts, the talk is
planned and purposeful.

Walk into a school in a
disadvantaged community and the
contrast can be stark. For many
reasons – often systemic – these
classrooms frequently lack that
same deliberate, focused talk.

While the attainment gap remains
stubborn, the “silence gap” driving it
is largely overlooked.

As the curriculum and assessment
review (CAR) is scrutinised, we
face a reality check: narrowing the
attainment gap is impossible if we
ignore the oracy divide.

The review rightly positions oracy
as the “fourth R”. Social inequality
is complex, but the poverty of
language is fixable. Oracy is no
longer a “nice-to-have”; it must be
a non-negotiable that is nurtured
across all settings.

Quality over quantity

Over 30 years ago, Hart and Risley
identified the “30 Million Word Gap”.

While their specific figures
have been challenged, the reality
of language-poor households

influencing oral development
remains.

More recently, MIT research
highlighted the real deficit lies with
the quality of interaction: a lack of
“conversational turns”.

In language-rich homes, children
engage in continuous “serve and
return” interactions.

Whether over dinner or on the
way to school, they have ample
opportunity to converse, debate,
predict and question. In contrast,
in households facing financial
instability and time poverty,
language often becomes purely
directive and functional.

This contrast creates a widening
chasm: the “Matthew Effect” of
oracy.

Articulate learners get richer,
accessing the curriculum with ease.
Meanwhile, language-poor learners
fall further behind, struggling to
engage with the subject matter.

As they move up year groups,
this attainment gap grows, and
interventions become significantly
less effective.

Gateway skills

While schools constantly battle
with a widening attainment gap,
the underlying language deficit
presents a looming crisis for a
generation preparing for an AI-
driven economy.

As technology automates
routine tasks, human skills such
as collaboration, critical thinking



“ In an AI age, they
are survival skills

and persuasion, will be prized even
more by employers.

If oracy is treated as an “optional
extra”, we risk sending our most
disadvantaged young people into
the working world with one hand
tied behind their back.

These are not “soft skills”. In an
AI age, they are “survival skills”.
Mastering language is the gateway
and schools are the gatekeepers.

Permission to proceed

Recognising oracy as the “fourth
R”, the CAR provides a powerful
mandate for change.

It validates forward-thinking
leaders who already value its
impact. Where oracy was previously
sidelined in the pursuit of written
evidence, it must now step into the
spotlight as a serious pedagogical
offer.

Becky Francis, chair of the review,
calls for a shift from accidental,
ad hoc talk to a more strategic
approach.

Schools now have the impetus
to make oracy the golden
thread weaving through their
plans, policies and curriculums.
For schools serving deprived
communities, this is the moment

to place oracy at the heart of their
mission.

The review grants schools the
legitimacy to invest. Leaders can
confidently ring-fence time, budget
and resources to embed oracy
purposefully.

However, school improvement
is difficult and training is often
shallow. For oracy to have a lasting
impact on our most vulnerable
learners, schools must act decisively,
grounded in a shared understanding
of why this change is so important.

Breaking the silence

The earlier the intervention, the
greater our chance of narrowing
the oracy divide. We can no longer
pay lip service to “talk for learning”.
Schools must urgently build a
culture where oracy is explicitly
valued.

If we are serious about supporting
our most disadvantaged pupils,
we cannot simply wait for the new
curriculum to arrive.

The review has set the expectation.
Now leaders must think strategically
about how to begin. If we truly want
to close the gap, we must first break
the silence.

Opinion

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CARA BLEIMAN

Primary Mandarin project consultant, Harris Federation

A ‘ni hao’ from Chinese visitors was the ultimate language lesson

Saying ‘hello’ to pupils from Nanjing brought learning to life, but anything that adds context can ignite a child’s interest, says Cara Bleiman

The late Professor Eric Hawkins once said that in language education, “we are seeking to light fires of curiosity about the central human characteristic of language, which will blaze throughout our pupils’ lives”.

The Department for Education would do well to inscribe this as their motto as they work to draft the new core content for KS2 languages.

In the most recent GCSE reforms a focus on Eurocentric, high-frequency word lists failed to address the engagement crisis in languages.

While a carefully considered word list may provide the firewood for language learning in primary, a great primary curriculum will also need culture and contact to spark and sustain children’s interest.

Last year, more than 200 of our year 5 and 6 pupils passed the internationally recognised Youth Chinese Test Level 1, and our students regularly reach the national finals and win medals at the Chinese Bridge Primary Speaking Contest.

It’s satisfying to see so many start with no knowledge of Mandarin and make clear progress in vocabulary,

grammar and phonics.

These three “building blocks” are essential – but they’re not enough. To keep motivation alive, pupils need a strong sense of why. And that’s where culture and contact come in.

When I first moved from generalist primary teacher to Mandarin specialist, I launched straight into greetings and grammar with year 3.

After a few weeks of lessons, a pupil handed me a note: “I love Mandaring”.

He enjoyed the games and songs we used to remember words and phrases – but he had no concept of what “Mandarin” was, or the places and communities where it was spoken. For him, it was a lesson with fun activities where he got to talk more than in other subjects.

Ten years into the project, I’ve learned that sustaining pupil motivation in language learning means cultivating a clear sense of purpose.

Too often, the language-teaching community relies on distant promises: “Stick with the grammar drills and maybe one day you’ll travel there”, “Perhaps you’ll need it for work”, or even “It might help stave off Alzheimer’s in old age”.

To combat dwindling numbers at GCSE, A-level and university we need to show students the benefits first hand and give them a taste of what future learning offers – by focusing on culture and contact.



“ As we debate core content, let’s go beyond a word list

So what kind of culture is accessible to novice learners at primary level?

Few would dispute including “small c” culture – food, festivals, traditional costumes, basic geography.

And with limited curriculum time, it’s great when schools make space for this through the informal curriculum: hosting an international evening, a New Year dragon dance workshop, or a martial arts and music performance.

But what about “big C” culture – art and literature? Novices may not be able to access full texts or films, but short clips and even adverts can provide a “window on the world” and spark reflection on pupils’ own culture(s), belonging and identity.

In our curriculum, for example, students watch a cartoon version of *The Monkey King: Journey to the West*.

Whilst the original text is completely out of reach, they can write simple character descriptions and identify characters’ feelings at points throughout the story.

They also work on literary translation of a short poem – just 20

words – but it gives them a vital taste of future study and what it means to be a linguist.

And the best way to bring culture alive? Contact with speakers of the target language.

When 12 students from Nanjing Lixue Primary visited Harris Primary Academy Beckenham for a week, I could never have imagined the depth of impact across our school community.

Fist-bumped by classmates each morning and embraced with tears at the end of their stay, our sister-school partnership made the benefits of language learning real – right now.

When international exchanges aren’t possible, digital exchanges, local trips, language assistants and heritage speakers can all provide meaningful context for vocabulary, grammar and phonics.

As the language-teaching community debates the new KS2 core content, let’s go beyond a word list. Let’s ensure culture and contact are at the centre – so students experience the benefits of language learning from their very first lesson.

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LEE
WILSON

Chief executive officer, Outwood
Grange Academies Trust

Winter of discontent is a real danger for pupils' confidence

Data revealed pupils' sense of agency takes a knock from January, and we're taking steps to address this, says Lee Wilson

When pupils walk through our school gates each September, more often than not they believe that if they work hard, they can succeed.

But new national research from ImpactEd's The Engagement Platform (TEP) shows this crucial mindset, which is referred to as pupils' sense of control, significantly weakens as children progress through secondary school.

Changes in a pupil's sense of control matter for many reasons, but in particular we have been working with TEP and ImpactEd Group to understand how this interacts with pupils' reading development in our schools.

Professor John Jerrim analysed our anonymised TEP pupil engagement data alongside key stage 3 reading age tests over an academic year. The results were eye-opening.

Belief in learning is not fixed – and it matters

The research, drawing on data from all 28 schools across our trust, reveals something we've

long recognised intuitively: pupil engagement doesn't remain constant throughout the academic year.

Our pupils' sense that they can control their academic outcomes through effort and strategy drops markedly between autumn and spring terms, with year 7 pupils experiencing the sharpest fall as they adjust to the transition from primary.

What the data shows about reading progress

Remarkably, by then cross-referencing our TEP engagement data with outcomes from reading age assessments, we found that pupils who were able to maintain a strong sense of academic control made approximately two months more progress in their reading skills over a four-month period compared to peers who lacked this belief.

This was true even after controlling for prior achievement, demographics, the school attended and year group.

These findings have prompted us to rethink how we support pupils' reading development across our trust.

First, we now recognise that maintaining pupils' sense of academic control must sit alongside traditional reading interventions.



“Pupil engagement doesn't stay constant throughout the year

When pupils believe their efforts influence outcomes, they're more likely to persist through challenging texts, employ comprehension strategies and dedicate time to independent reading.

Second, the decline in engagement and pupil sense of control for our year 7 pupils, and indeed for year 7 pupils nationally, has reinforced our commitment to working on deeper transition plans for every child.

In line with the recommendations of the curriculum and assessment review, we want to see a key stage 3 that is engaging and that takes children's learning forward.

Third, the timing of our interventions matters.

The spring term emerges as a critical period when many pupils' belief in their ability to influence their learning starts to diminish.

This suggests that between

January and March might be an optimal window for targeted support focused on rebuilding pupils' confidence in their capacity to improve through effort.

The research found little evidence that maintaining a strong sense of control is more or less important for socio-economically disadvantaged pupils or those with different levels of prior achievement.

This suggests that our efforts to strengthen pupils' sense of academic control will benefit all pupils, regardless of background.

A lesson for leaders across the system

This work has given us pause for thought and has shown us how bringing data together around a child can act as a powerful lead indicator. It shows us as leaders where to best focus our time, energy and resources.

THE BOARDROOM LEADER

The governance view on education's top priorities



Governance in AP demands a non-mainstream approach

Nicola Hall

Chair of governors,
Educational
Diversity Blackpool



AP brings particular challenges, so governors should look differently at risk, accountability, attendance and results, says Nicola Hall

Alternative provision is often described as complex, high-risk and under intense scrutiny.

All of that is true. What is less well understood is that governing in AP requires a different kind of boardroom discipline, one that cannot simply be imported from mainstream schooling and expected to work.

As chair of governors of an alternative provision school in Blackpool, I see first-hand how governance sits at the intersection of safeguarding, accountability and reduced life chances.

The stakes are high. Many of the young people we serve are already on a trajectory of exclusion from education, employment or training. That reality must shape how boards think, ask questions and hold leaders to account.

Risk in AP is not a red flag – it is the context

AP boards must understand that risk is not something to be eliminated, but something to be actively governed.

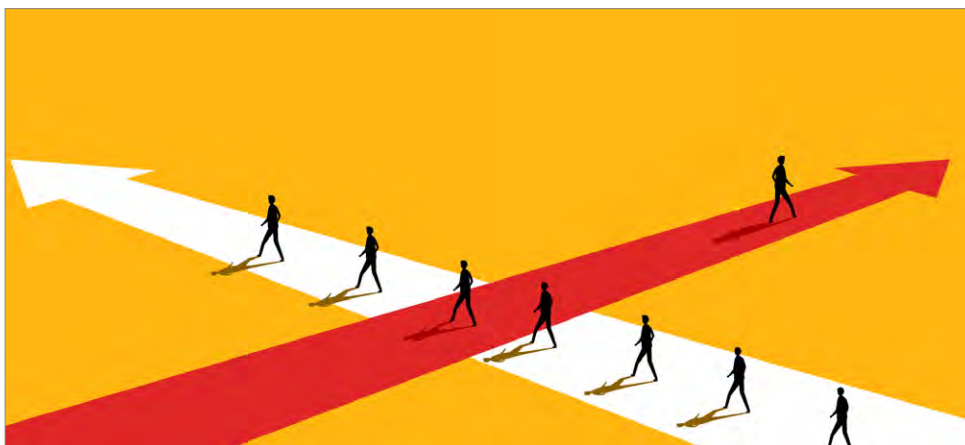
Pupils often arrive with disrupted education, unmet SEND, trauma, mental ill health and involvement with multiple services. These risks do not disappear when a child enters provision, they concentrate.

Effective governance means distinguishing between managed risk and unacceptable risk.

It requires close scrutiny of safeguarding systems, behaviour frameworks and staff training, while recognising that incident-free perfection is neither realistic nor honest. Boards that seek to sanitise risk often drive the wrong behaviours underground.

Accountability must be sharper, not louder

AP governance demands clarity of accountability, not performative oversight. Boards need to understand precisely where statutory



responsibility sits, particularly where pupils are placed by multiple commissioning bodies.

Blurred accountability between schools, local authorities and trusts can leave governors either over-reaching or under-challenging.

Strong boards ask uncomfortable questions: Who owns the outcomes for this child? Who tracks their next destination? What happens when they leave us?

Accountability in AP does not end at the school gate or the end of a placement.

Comparison is the real danger

Inspection pressure in AP is intense, and boards must be fluent in what inspectors are looking for. But the most dangerous mistake is allowing governance to be driven by inappropriate comparison with mainstream schools.

Attendance offers a clear example. When attendance data was first presented alongside a mainstream comparator, the numbers appeared stark.

The board paused and reframed the question: how long did it take each pupil to attend at all? For several young people, moving from zero attendance to partial, sustained engagement represented significant progress. That would have been invisible through conventional benchmarks.

The board question that followed was simple but transformative: "What progress would we recognise here if this child had not been able to attend school at all before they arrived?"

That shift, from compliance to re-engagement, changed the nature of scrutiny without lowering ambition.

The same principle applies to academic progress. Boards may accept uneven progress where pupils arrive with significant learning gaps and unmet emotional needs, provided leaders can evidence a coherent strategy for re-engagement, curriculum sequencing and long-term progression.

In AP, progress is not always linear, but it must always be planned and intentional.

The 'so what' of AP

Ultimately, AP governance must be anchored in a clear answer to one question: so what? What difference does this provision make to a young person's future?

Our raison d'être cannot be containment or compliance. It must be preparation for confident, sustained transition – whether that is reintegration, further education, training or onward pathways such as an apprenticeship.

For many young people in AP, this is their final opportunity to reconnect with learning and believe that education has a purpose.

Accepting alternative measures of progress is not low ambition. It is how boards govern bespoke, ambitious pathways towards sustained success beyond school and, critically, prevent young people from being not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Alternative provision is not a footnote in the system. For the young people who need it, it is the system.

That demands governing boards who understand risk, resist false comparison and never lose sight of the outcome that matters most: a future with real options.

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

WEDNESDAY

Exams regulator Ofqual updated its list of social media accounts this week to remove references to X, the hellhole formerly known as Twitter.

Lots of sector people have been leaving the platform amid concerns over content shared by its users, as well as its AI tool Grok's ability to produce sexual deepfake images.

Asked for its rationale for the omission, however, an Ofqual spokesperson said: "We've paused posting on X due to low reach and engagement. We're focusing our efforts on channels that better reach and connect with our audiences and we continue to monitor X."

Very diplomatic of them!

Former education secretary Gavin Williamson was forced to play down rumours of his imminent defection to Reform UK this week – and he had one of his predecessors to blame.

Michael Gove, now editor of *The Spectator*, told its Quite Right! podcast that the "The number one suspect for defection at the moment is ... Gavin Williamson", according to PoliticsHome.

Asked about the comments, Williamson said his defection was "news to me".

"Michael gets a lot of things wrong. He thought banning plastic straws was a good idea and replacing them with paper."

Ouch!

It wasn't just Gove and Williamson talking defections to Reform UK this week.

Baroness Spielman, the former Ofsted chief turned Conservative peer, was forced to dismiss "speculation in the education sector that she is being lined up to be Reform's education secretary", according to *The House* magazine.

The magazine claimed the rumours started after she shared the stage with Reform MP Richard Tice at a Policy Exchange event.

Spielman told *The House* it was a "bizarre rumour".

Would she rule out ever joining Reform or its cabinet, the mag asked.

"I am a Conservative. Kemi Badenoch nominated me to the House of Lords – I am there absolutely embracing the party I've joined. I have not previously been in politics, but I take seriously what I've undertaken. No, I'm not a floating voter looking for another flag."

THURSDAY

Many will have seen the headlines about the government encouraging the use of "in-school suspension" (more often called internal exclusion) this week, but behind them was yet another government communications crisis.

The government wanted to give the Daily Telegraph the scoop – but somehow passed the story to a well-known breakfast show too.

Other outlets found out it was coming on Wednesday afternoon and started

asking questions. They were told they would get the announcement the next day at 9.30am.

Then, at 6.30am, the DfE emailed journalists to tell them the embargo was now 8am, hours after many outlets had run the story.

What a mess!

Also, it turns out the new guidance about which the announcement made a big song and dance isn't even out yet. We'll have to wait until the white paper is released to see it. Much ado about nothing ...

Early education minister Olivia Bailey was mobbed by young "food ambassadors" when she attended a School Food Matters event in London this week.

They were there to ask Bailey pressing questions, as part of the charity's "Nourish" report launch.

One asked the minister: "What was the food like when you were at school?"

An apparently barbless question evoked a surprisingly politician-esque response.

"It was quite a long time ago ... my main memories of food at school were the wonderful staff in the canteen who were always very kind to me," said Bailey. "And I also remember just spending time with my friends, sitting together, talking about the day ... It was quite a long time ago."

Later, *Schools Week* asked Bailey if there was any timeline yet for the roll-out of the new School Food Standards. "We're working hard on it at the moment," came her reply.





HEADTEACHER GREEN MEADOW PRIMARY SCHOOL

We are seeking to appoint a Headteacher to join Green Meadow Primary School.

This is a pivotal and exciting time to join Green Meadow Primary School and make a real difference to children's progress and outcomes.

The Head Teacher will report to the Directors of Education and the Chief Executive Officer.

They will:

- support the Directors of Education and the Chief Executive Officer to set and review the school's priorities and objectives, leading activity to ensure these are delivered and standards are raised.
- demonstrate exemplary leadership.
- develop, motivate, and deploy teaching and non-teaching staff to secure the best possible use of available talent.

- determine and drive appropriate standards and targets to deliver improvement.
- promote and demonstrate strong parent partnerships.
- create an accountable, safe, and positive learning environment in which diversity and co-operation are celebrated.

We welcome applications from talented and experienced Head Teachers.

Our Excelsior People Strategy aims to get the right people into the right seats from where they will grow into bigger seats, enabling our Trust to meet the needs of all our pupils effectively. Your further growth into ambitious leadership within Excelsior here is key.

Closing Date: 23rd February 2026

Interview Date: 10th March 2026



Vacancies - Excelsior Multi Academy Trust - Driving Equality, Innovation & Aspiration

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFO](#)



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

[Click here for more info](#)



Headteacher Vacancy

We are seeking an exceptional Headteacher who shares our values and has the vision, drive, and resilience to lead Hob Green Primary School into the next phase of its development. This role offers a unique opportunity to secure continued and rapid school improvement, while also contributing leadership capacity across drb Ignite Multi Academy Trust, enabling schools to learn from one another and beyond.

Hob Green Primary School is a one-form entry primary school serving pupils aged 3-11 years, located in Dudley. The school is widely recognised for its deeply embedded inclusive culture and holds Centre of Excellence status for the Inclusion Quality Mark.

The school provides exceptional specialist provision, including:

- A well-established Speech and Language Resource Base
- A newly opened SEND Unit for pupils with a primary need of Communication and Interaction, providing specialist support to meet the complex communication and cognition set out in pupils' Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).

In its most recent Ofsted inspection in February 2025, the school was judged Good in all areas, with Early Years achieving Outstanding. We are now seeking an inspirational leader to build on this success and take the school to the next level in its improvement journey.

We are looking for a Headteacher who will:

- Demonstrate the resilience, experience and creativity, with a strong commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning, through continuous school improvement.
- Have proven leadership experience across the primary phase.
- Value every child and promote high aspirations for both pupils and staff.
- Act as a positive role model, with the ability to motivate children, staff and the wider community, inspiring all to reach their full potential.
- Champion a deeply inclusive ethos and show a genuine passion for ensuring every child thrives, regardless of background or ability.
- Be an active and influential member of drb Ignite Multi Academy Trust, contributing to trust-wide collaboration and improvement.
- Show a strong commitment to nurturing the development, wellbeing and professional growth of all pupils and staff.

What we can offer

- CPD opportunities which will support your career development
- Strategic support
- Collaborative networking
- An enthusiastic, skilled and dedicated staff team
- Clear pathways for professional growth and career development
- A strong commitment to staff wellbeing and in investing in our people

The post will be of interest to experienced and high-performing Headteachers, or Deputy Headteachers ready to take the next step, who are dynamic, emotionally intelligent, and resilient leaders. The successful candidate will value collaboration and embrace the mutual benefit of being part of a strong and supportive Multi Academy Trust.

Interested candidates can have an informal discussion about the role by contacting James Hill, our Executive Director of School Improvement at jhill@drbignitemat.org

Closing date: 9am Friday 13th February 2026

Interview date: w/c 23rd February 2026

Safeguarding

The Trust is absolutely committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and adults through its safer recruitment processes. An enhanced DBS check will be required for this post. All shortlisted candidates will be subject to online searches.

**CLICK HERE
TO APPLY**

