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The Difference

WHO IS LOSING LEARNING?

FINDING SOLUTIONS TO THE SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT CRISIS

Eleanor Harris, Cristín O'Brien, Kiran Gill, Loic Menzies, Efua Poku-Amanfo, Kirsten Rooney and **Jenny Graham**

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SECTOR CONSULTATION

The report is based on rigorous engagement with the education and children services sector. This includes five meetings with the Who is Losing Learning? Solutions Council, eight workshops with over 100 professionals working in schools, local authorities, and the voluntary and community sector, as well as engagement with young people with lived experience of lost learning. It has also drawn on the policy and practice expertise of the coalition members.

The costings work underpinning recommendation 4 was undertaken by Alma Economics and a full breakdown of the analysis is available upon request.

GLOSSARY

Alternative Provision	Education that does not take place at a mainstream or special school. This includes pupil referral units, alternative provision academies, as well as independent and non-registered schools.
Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce (APST)	An Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce (APST) is a workforce model which builds capacity and skills in alternative provision schools by co-locating specialists on the school site.
Children in need (CIN)	Children who have been assessed by a social worker under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and have been found to need help and protection.
Child protection plans (CPP)	A plan drawn up by social care services under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 to protect a child who they feel is suffering or is likely to suffer from significant harm.
Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS)	An NHS provision for young people with emotional, behavioural and mental health needs.
Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)	The person responsible for safeguarding and child protection in schools.
Education, health and care plan (EHCP)	A plan drawn up by the local authority for a child with special educational needs under section 37 of the Children and Families Act 2014 that outlines the provision needed to meet their special educational needs.
Elective Home Education	When a child is not on the roll of a school and is educated at home. Some parents make the free choice to home educate but others do so because they feel their child's needs are not being met.
Ethnicity	A group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, language, history, traditions, and sometimes a common genetic heritage.
Free school meals (FSM)	When a child does not have to pay for a lunchtime meal at school because they are considered disadvantaged. Eligibility includes families in receipt of certain benefits, asylum support or sometimes when they have no recourse to public funds.
Internal exclusion	When a school removes a child from their typical learning environment into a different designated space within the school. The spaces may be referred to as isolation or behaviour units.
Internal truancy	When a child attends school but is unsupervised and does not attend lessons.
Looked after child (LAC)	A child who is formally under the care of the local authority (also known as a 'child in care') under section 20 or section 31 of the Children Act 1989.

Managed moves	A permanent move of a child from one school to another. This should only take place when it is in the best interest of the child and on a voluntary basis.
Mainstream school	All schools that are not a special or alternative provision school.
National Funding Formula (NFF)	How the Department for Education allocates money for all state-funded mainstream schools. The formula takes a variety of factors into account, such as the number of pupils a school has and its location.
Off rolling	The practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interests of the pupil. This includes pressuring a parent to remove their child from the school roll.
Off-site Direction	A power in section 29A of the Education Act 2002 that allows maintained schools to direct a child off-site for their education for the purpose of improving their behaviour. Whilst the legislation does not apply to academies, they can arrange off-site provision for such purposes under their general powers.
Pupil Premium (PP)	Funding provided by the government to schools for children who have been eligible for free school meals in the past 6 years and children previously looked after by a local authority.
Progress 8	An accountability measure for secondary schools. It calculates scores for each child using their Key Stage 2 attainment data and then their attainment across 8 subjects at GCSE. A positive score shows progress.
Permanent exclusion	Permanent removal of a student from a school due to serious or repeated breaches of behavior policy, or to protect the welfare of that student or others.
Persistent absence	When a child misses 10 per cent of the school year or more.
Pupil referral unit (PRU)	A type of alternative provision, maintained by the local authority.
Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENco)	The qualified teacher in a school responsible for the day to day operation of the special educational needs policy.
Special educational needs and disabilities (SEN):	A legal term referring to a child with a learning difficulty or disability which calls for education provision that is additional to, or different from provision made generally available for other children of the same age.
School roll	The admission register of a school containing the details of all pupils in the school.
Special Educational Needs (SEN) support	Support provided by mainstream schools under section 66 of the Children and Families act to use their “best endeavours” to meet school-identified special educational needs.
Suspension	A sanction where a child is sent home for a period of time, up to a maximum of 45 days in a school year.

SUMMARY

A crisis of lost learning is sweeping across schools in England. This report is a follow-up to our report *Who is losing learning? The case for reducing exclusions across mainstream schools*.[1] Our first report outlined the scale of lost learning and how it disproportionately impacts children who already face barriers to opportunity: those living in poverty, with identified special educational needs, known to children's social care, and children experiencing structural racism, such as those from with Black Caribbean or Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller heritage.

Children cannot learn if they are not in school and not engaged. This means attainment cannot be raised further, employment outcomes cannot be improved, nor can the country's ambitious growth targets be met if a significant and growing proportion of children are unable to access a quality education. Reducing lost learning is, therefore, central to improving school standards and raising attainment.

An alarming number of children are missing out on the social and educational benefits of school. Lost learning occurs when a child is not at school, engaged in the classroom, participating in their education, or forced to move out of their local community setting. Suspensions and permanent exclusions have grown by a third in a single year; elective home education has increased by over 20 per cent; and absence levels are double pre-pandemic levels. New analysis has also found that for every child that is permanently excluded, 10 more invisibly move out of their school setting. This lost learning perpetuates cycles of disadvantage and stifles economic growth, casting a long shadow over the lives of children, families and communities.

To turn the tide of lost learning, the education system must evolve. Too often, the question of how best to improve behaviour, attendance, and support special educational needs have been seen as separate and unrelated challenges. For schools, this has often manifested in a costly siloed approach focussed on specialist support for children who reach a certain legal threshold - such as those who need education, health, and care plans, or child protection plans. This has led to a narrow definition of inclusion, with schools often seeing it as a separate objective, something that happens 'over there' perhaps by the SENCo, a teaching assistant, a safeguarding lead, or by special and alternative provision schools.

But the challenges of attendance, exclusion and the current special educational needs crisis are deeply related. They are symptoms of an education system where accountability incentives are misaligned, resources are locked behind thresholds, key expertise on inclusion and working with families is missing, and school data systems aren't set up to measure what matters most: whether the country's children are safe and well. We need to define inclusion in the broadest possible sense, so that all staff can support the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all children, so that they belong, achieve and thrive.

Improving schools so they can meet a broader range of predictable needs could be transformative for a generation of children. Imagine a school where every child, regardless of their background, ethnicity or learning differences, feels a profound

1 See: https://www.the-difference.com/who-is-losing-learning

sense of belonging. This is a school where inclusion isn't simply a policy, it is at the heart of the school's ecosystem.

New independent modelling conducted by Alma Economics demonstrates that early intervention can work. If the Department for Education invested £850 million in whole school inclusion, half a million children could receive quicker, more cost effective and dignified support over the next 5 years. This investment would pay for itself by 2030, by reducing the need for 35,000 EHCPs thanks to needs being met earlier.

While lost learning is a symptom of dysfunction, it also provides a benchmark against which future progress in education can be measured. This report sets out 10 recommendations for national government, local authorities, trusts and schools which, if delivered, would see a measurable improvement in inclusion, meaning fewer children would be losing out on learning.

The report sets out four principles of effective whole school inclusion.

1. **Inclusion is built from the universal up.**
2. **Inclusion is a culture that is led from the top.**
3. **Inclusion is community collaboration.**
4. **Inclusion is measurable.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our report provides 10 recommendations to deliver whole school inclusion.

1. **The sector needs a shared definition of measurable school inclusion.** The Department for Education, local government, trusts and schools should adopt this report's definition of whole school inclusion – "all staff supporting the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all children, so that they belong, achieve and thrive" – together with our four principles for success.
2. **Schools' cohorts should reflect their local community.** The Department for Education, local authorities and school trusts should take an active role in identifying and improving non-representative schools.
3. **School accountability should support all children.** The Department for Education should reform headline measures by introducing multi-year averages, and revisit which subjects are included in Progress 8 scores. Additional measures reflecting children's longer-term outcomes and schools' context should also be developed.
4. **The vast majority of children's needs should be met through a combination of timely universal and targeted support, rather than being locked behind legislative thresholds.** The Department for Education should provide £850 million of additional funding for whole school inclusion over the next five years.
5. **Every school needs leaders with inclusion expertise to set the culture.** Trusts, local authorities and the Department for Education should support this in their professional development offers.
6. **The most underserved schools should be able to recruit and retain the best teachers.** The Department for Education should further tilt funding towards underserved schools and encourage spending on incentives for teacher recruitment and retention.
7. **Working with families and local communities should be seen as a domain of professional practice in schools.** The Department for Education should make sure this is reflected in its suite of professional

qualifications, and trusts and local authorities should prioritise professional development in this area.

8. **Government must address the fragmentation of services for children and families, beginning with the development of a shared outcomes framework and the establishment of a governance strategy to monitor progress.** As a first step, the government should publish a plan to radically improve access to children's mental health and speech and language support.
9. **Every school should use data on student experience and lost learning across the continuum to develop a strategic response to all children's needs.** Ofsted should increase its focus on the strategic use of student experience data and lost learning data in school improvement.
10. **All pupil movements should be equally visible and accountable.** The Department for Education should introduce legislation that provides oversight of pupil movements off site and off roll.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE CHALLENGE: A CRISIS OF LOST LEARNING

A crisis of lost learning is sweeping across schools in England. More and more children are missing out on the educational and social opportunities that come from learning in class, socialising with their friends, and gaining the skills and experiences they need to become successful adults. This lost learning perpetuates cycles of disadvantage and stifles economic growth, casting a long shadow over the lives of children, families and communities. New analysis finds that children lost 6.8 million days of learning in the autumn term before the pandemic (2019/20) due to suspensions and unauthorised absence, but this rose sharply to 11.5 million days in the same period in 2023/24; that is an increase of 67 per cent (authors' analysis of Department for Education datasets: DfE 2024a, DfE 2024b). Each year, more children lose out on more days of school: there was a rise of 10 per cent alone between the autumn terms of 2022/23 and 2023/24 (ibid). Permanent exclusions are also up by over one-third,[2] and elective home education has increased by one-fifth (DfE 2024c, DfE 2024d).[3,4]

DEFINITION OF LOST LEARNING

The first report in this series defined lost learning and detailed the alarming scale of the challenge (Gill et al 2024). Lost learning occurs when a child is not at school, engaged in the classroom, participating in their education, or is forced to move out of their local community setting (ibid). In England today, this affects the lives of thousands of children, undermining their wellbeing and curtailing their potential.

The crisis of lost learning represents a fundamental fracturing of society. Children in England have the lowest life satisfaction in Europe (Children's Society, 2024), 1.5 million parents are unhappy with the education their child receives (ParentKind 2024), and 77 per cent of teachers experience poor mental health due to work (Education Support 2024).

Lost learning blights productivity and drives spiralling costs to the public purse. It is linked to poor academic attainment, low social engagement, poorer health outcomes, and increased anti-social behaviour and involvement with the justice system (Baker et al 2001; Gottfried 2014; McCluskey 2024). Each excluded child costs the taxpayer an estimated £170,000 over their lifetime (Gill et al 2024).

More children are being educated outside of mainstream schools at higher cost. Placements in private special and independent alternative provision schools have increased by nearly 30 per cent between 2018/19 and 2023/24, and the numbers

2 4,200 permanent exclusions autumn 2023/24 (up from 3,100 in 22/23) and 346,300 suspensions autumn 2023/24 (up from 247,400 in 22/23).

3 Only 24 per cent of those electively home educated (EHE) in the autumn term of 2024/25 reported choosing this based on lifestyle, philosophical or religious reasons. Based on the author's analysis of government education statistics.

4 In 2023/24 local authorities recorded 153,300 children as EHE at some point in the year, up from 126,100 (DfE 2024d).

of special needs tribunals has nearly doubled, which is contributing to a deluge of local authorities declaring bankruptcy (NAO 2024). This demand for places outside mainstream schools is seeing some private education providers taking home excessively high profits from the public purse. While the reasons for such placements are very real and often complex, our increasing reliance on private and specialist providers demonstrates that mainstream inclusion is failing.

Lost learning destroys opportunity for those who most need it. The first report in this series found that those children who are living in poverty, with special educational needs, known to social services and experiencing discrimination disproportionately experience lost learning (Gill et al 2024). These children are less likely to achieve well academically – the disadvantage gap is today at its widest since 2011 (EPI 2024). Raising school standards will only be possible if we tackle the challenge of lost learning, otherwise the most disadvantaged children will continue to miss out on all the benefits an excellent education has to offer.

Change is possible. While lost learning is a symptom of dysfunction, it also provides a benchmark against which future progress in education can be measured.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Imagine a school where every child – regardless of their background, ethnicity or learning differences – feels a profound sense of belonging. This is a school where inclusion isn't a policy, it is at the heart of everything the school does. Children enjoy coming to school and can participate in all that the school has to offer. They achieve and thrive academically and socially, developing their strengths and nurturing their interests.

Adults in school are equipped with the skills and resources to cultivate every child's potential, create a learning environment that is both academically rigorous and accessible. Excellent universal systems of support mean a wider range of needs are met by confident staff, and where children are provided with timely targeted support when challenges arise. Families, reassured and actively engaged, are supported to be partners in their child's education.

Up and down the country, schools are working hard to deliver this vision, but they are doing so despite the system. This report sets out 10 recommendations that would pave the way to an inclusive system by removing obstacles and realigning incentives. This is the first step on a journey to deliver whole school inclusion that allows every child to achieve and thrive.

The time to act is now

The need for schools to evolve hasn't been greater since the second world war. An estimated 30 per cent of children now live in poverty (Child Poverty Action Group 2023) and a million children live in destitution – meaning they are unable to stay warm, dry and fed (JRF 2023). This is having a profound impact on schools and other public services.

As poverty levels increase, more children struggle at school due to poor housing and food insecurity. As a consequence, certain types of special educational needs are on the rise: social, emotional and mental health (SEMH); speech, language and communication needs (SLC);[5] behavioural challenges; and lost learning are closely associated with poverty (Anders et al 2011; EIF 2017; Shaw et al. 2016; Kaiser et al 2017; Knifton and Inglis 2020; Zhang 2003). Poverty is also strongly linked to poor educational outcomes (Villadsen et al 2023). If the government wants to maintain its focus on school standards and improving attainment, it will need to rise to this challenge. While we await government action, schools and

5 See: https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CSJ-Social-Justice-Commission-Submission.pdf

local services continue to pick up the pieces of children growing up without food, shelter and other essentials.

Whole school inclusion does not fully mitigate the impacts of poverty; however, it has a role to play in reducing lost learning by maximising the amount of time children are able to spend and engage in school. The evidence is clear that engagement with school is a key protective factor in improving outcomes – including attainment – for the most vulnerable, disadvantaged children (CDC 2009; Goetschius et al 2023; Maclean et al 2016). Schools, alongside local government – including health and children's services – must work together to maximise engagement and cut lost learning if we are to deliver a meaningful improvement in standards and outcomes for children.

2.
THE SOLUTION: INCLUSION IN THE BROADEST SENSE

To turn the tide of lost learning, the education system must evolve.

There have been some significant improvements in schools in England in recent years, with high-quality evidence-based practice now embedded in teacher training (EEF 2021a). English schools are now a global top performer in maths[6] and the proportion of children reaching expected standards in the phonics screening check is returning to pre-pandemic levels (DfE 2024).

However, attainment cannot be raised further, employment outcomes cannot be improved, nor can the country's ambitious growth targets be met if a significant and growing proportion of children are unable to access a quality education. The disadvantage gap is at its widest since 2011 (EPI 2024). This is unjust: all children should benefit from rising school standards.

Reducing lost learning, therefore, is central to improving school standards and raising attainment. Children cannot learn if they are not in school and engaged. The system must evolve so that more children feel like they belong at school and are able to achieve and thrive. Fulfilling this ambition requires embedding inclusion at the heart of everything the education system does, so that more children are supported with their learning, wellbeing and safety needs.

The education system needs to promote a far broader definition of inclusion. Too often, inclusion is defined narrowly, with schools often seeing it as a separate objective, something that is done 'over there', perhaps by the SENCo, or a teaching assistant, and by special and alternative provision schools. But 'inclusion' is about more than just special educational needs and disability. As our first report set out, there is a large – and growing – group of children and young people who don't feel like they belong at school and who struggle to engage, leading to absence and exclusion (Gill et al 2024).

This means schools, children's services and government lack a comprehensive and shared definition of inclusion, making it impossible to implement at scale.

Through the Who is Losing Learning campaign's work with schools, trusts, local authorities and wider children's services, we have developed a definition of 'whole school inclusion' that would address the challenges of attendance, exclusions and the current crisis in special educational needs.

6 See: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/timss-landing.html

WHOLE SCHOOL INCLUSION

What: Whole school inclusion means all staff supporting the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all children, so that they belong, achieve and thrive.

How: Four principles of effective whole school inclusion.

1. **Inclusion is built from the universal up:** 'Inclusion' is not seen as a separate system or an add-on for certain children. Schools design their policies, curriculum and staff professional development from the knowledge that all children have learning, wellbeing and safeguarding needs. Schools admit and welcome any child from their local community, regardless of prior attainment, circumstances, or identified needs. The universal and targeted offer in a school aims to identify and support needs early, reducing the need for specialist interventions.
2. **Inclusion is a culture that is led from the top:** All staff see inclusion as central to what they do and the everyday interactions they have with children. School leaders develop and deliver with their colleagues a shared plan for inclusion that recognises and responds to the interrelated needs of children who are unsafe, struggling to access learning, and facing mental health challenges. All staff are supported to develop and repair strong and trusted relationships with pupils.
3. **Inclusion is community collaboration:** Schools know their students', families', staff and wider communities' strengths. In listening, reaching out and being tenacious in search of support, they improve their universal, targeted and specialist support through proactive context-specific partnership with parents and families, the voluntary sector and local authority services.
4. **Inclusion is measurable:** Schools see inclusion as a strategic objective which is ongoing and iterative. They seek to make progress against the following measurements.
   - **Student experience:** Understanding the wellbeing, safety and belonging of children in school.
   - **Lost learning:** Reducing lost learning across the continuum including suspensions, permanent exclusions, managed moves, off-site direction, elective home education, internal isolation, and internal truancy and absence. Reducing individual students' escalation up the continuum and improving their reintegration success, particularly for those who disproportionately experience lost learning.

Core to this definition of inclusion is its focus on 'universal support' – that is, what every child receives as standard and is ordinarily available from mainstream schools in England. The evidence is clear that improving universal support is key to improving attendance and behaviour, and meeting the special educational needs of children (EEF 2024; EEF 2021b; EEF 2021c). These approaches benefit all children, even those without identified needs. Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation suggests that by teaching all children social and emotional skills, such as expanding their emotional vocabulary and teaching them to use self-calming strategies, schools can reduce behaviour challenges (EEF 2021a).

Despite evidence that universal support is key to addressing all three challenges of attendance, behaviour and special educational needs, policy continues to drive siloed approaches. It is time to recognise that a crucial part of the answer to rising lost learning is a more inclusive school system, one in which a wider range of predictable needs are supported as part of 'business as usual'. While special and alternative provision schools will always be needed for some children with the most complex needs, it should become a rare occurrence that families feel forced to move their children out of their local mainstream school.

RECOMMENDATION 1: THE SECTOR NEEDS A SHARED DEFINITION OF MEASURABLE SCHOOL INCLUSION.

The Department for Education, local government, trusts and schools should adopt this report's definition of whole school inclusion – "all staff supporting the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all children, so that they belong, achieve and thrive" – together with our four principles for success.

PRINCIPLE 1: INCLUSION IS BUILT FROM THE UNIVERSAL UP

Government policies have a huge influence on the everyday elements that shape each child's experience of school: classrooms, teachers, routines, students, lessons. These universal aspects of school life are the foundation of belonging and inclusion.

Currently, mainstream education structures in England are not designed with inclusion in mind. Accountability policies and obstacles to accessing additional support have created barriers to earlier intervention, contributing to the rapid rise in children seeking education health and care plans (EHCPs) and placement in special schools. This has resulted in schools seeing inclusion as a separate system, rather than as fundamental to their universal practice.

There is an opportunity to pave the way to inclusion by reforming accountability measures. Resources could also be freed up so that schools can meet a wider range of needs as standard, and flexible targeted support can be accessed quickly when needed. Building inclusion from the universal up will, in time, reduce the need to rely on slow and adversarial specialist support in the form of EHCPs and placements in special schools. While some children will always require a detailed specialist assessment and placements, if more children are supported earlier, their needs will not escalate, enabling them to maintain belonging and engagement in their local mainstream school.

Accountability

> ***"If you know a poor Progress 8 score might impact your Ofsted outcome, which might put you into forced academisation, or even lose your job, individuals are no longer making decisions based on their own values or integrity. They are instead having to take a pragmatic approach based on the impact these factors will have on their school and themselves professionally. The current accountability measures are driving a wedge between what is right for the school and what is right for the students."***
>
> Patrick Cozier, headteacher, Highgate Wood School, London

Admissions and off-rolling

Most of the highest-achieving comprehensive schools in England do not fully reflect their local communities. The free school meal (FSM) populations of the top

Progress 8 schools averages at 4.3 percentage points lower than their catchment areas, and 5.8 percentage points lower for top Attainment 8 schools (Sutton Trust 2024a). This widens our national attainment gap: evidence suggests that greater socioeconomic diversity leads to improved outcomes for disadvantaged children (Gorard 2023; Sutton Trust 2024b).

Children with identified special educational needs are also segregated. Many schools admit fewer of these pupils, even after factors such as disadvantage are taken into account (Hutchinson 2021). Just as with poverty, this perversely worsens standards in the system: there is evidence that including children with special educational needs in mainstream classes improves outcomes for *all* children (EEF 2020; Szumski et al 2017). Children in contact with the social care system, and those of minority ethnic background, are also impacted by segregation as they are more likely to be subject to off-rolling and other unexplained exits (Gill et al 2024; Hutchinson and Whitney Crenna-Jennings 2019).

Parental choice may be exacerbating the segregating impact of accountability. Schools with a high proportion of pupils with special educational needs are referred to as 'magnet schools' and these schools tend to attract more parents of children with additional needs. Meanwhile, other local schools have fewer special educational needs pupils (Worth 2022). While schools can only admit pupils that apply, explicit/implicit methods employed by schools may be shaping this uneven parental choice.

> ***"Some parents of children with additional needs report that schools actively discourage them from applying, which means parent choice is greatly impacted and this creates imbalances in terms of pressure on schools."***
>
> Vicki Cuff, senior assistant director for Inclusion, Learning and Achievement, Greenwich, London

Accountability policies directly encourage schools - that are supposed to be truly comprehensive - to behave selectively and thus exacerbating segregation. League tables reward schools for not admitting – or moving off the roll – children who are less likely to achieve in line with accountability measures. If the government is serious about raising school standards for all children and breaking the link between a child's background and their future success, it will need to intervene when the school system segregates those experiencing disadvantage.

RECOMMENDATION 2: SCHOOLS' COHORTS SHOULD REFLECT THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITY.

The Department for Education, local authorities and school trusts should take an active role in identifying and improving non-representative schools.

Research shows it is possible to identify schools and trusts that are unrepresentative (EPI 2024; Sutton Trust 2024b). The Department for Education's regional teams should examine the intake of schools in their regions and identify the least representative schools. These schools should be required to account for their admissions policies and practices. Should there be no satisfactory explanation and no action, this should be considered in school improvement measures, including decisions on trust expansion. The least representative schools and trusts should not be allowed to expand and should no longer be held up as exemplars of good practice.

This recommendation complements the proposals outlined in the children's wellbeing and schools bill[7] regarding local authorities' powers to direct admittance and the new duties for collaboration between schools and local authorities. The Department for Education will need to consider how selective and grammar schools are treated under this policy, as well as the implications for schools neighbouring non-selective schools.

> ***"We often treat selective schools, such as grammar schools, as though they're separate from the system when talking about representation. But it is crucial that selective and grammar schools truly represent the diversity of their local communities – because, as it stands, we are at risk of creating a two-tiered system."***
> Dan Moynihan, CEO, Harris Federation

The Department for Education should include a wide range of available indicators when evaluating a school's representativeness, and should include specific reference to those children and young people most likely to lose out on learning, such as those living in persistent poverty and those known to social services (Gill et al 2024).

Local authorities, trusts and schools do not need to wait for action from national government to make changes. Local authorities can already take steps to address this issue in their locality by adjusting their admissions code, just as Brighton and Hove has done (see case study 1). Schools and trusts must also examine their school populations and take action to improve both their admissions practices and their whole school inclusion approaches to ensure they are serving their entire communities.

CASE STUDY 1: POWER OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES TO REDUCE SEGREGATION

Brighton and Hove, like many areas in the country, has an unequal distribution of disadvantaged children and young people in its schools. The local community decided this had to change so that children from low-income backgrounds had a meaningful choice in the school they attend. This included the oversubscribed 'Good' schools in more affluent parts of the city, where housing costs are high.

A local campaign, Class Divide, worked with Brighton and Hove City Council to successfully change school admissions policy in the area to reduce segregation by affluence. The council and local schools agreed that intervention was essential to tackling persistent education inequalities. From September 2025, all community secondary schools will have at least the citywide average percentage of children eligible for free school meals in their year 7 intake.

Curriculum and assessment

England's accountability system leaves little space for schools to respond to their context. School leaders have told us that league table metrics are the root cause of many issues with the curriculum and assessment system.

Reforms to key stage 4 qualifications have led to "wholesale changes in the set of qualifications that schools offered to pupils" and this has primarily affected

7 See: https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3909

lower-attaining children (Burgess and Thomson 2019b). Meanwhile, although the introduction of Progress 8 prompted a welcome shift away from 'borderline' pupils, and towards all pupils' progress, some school leaders have reported that the metric has led to excessive curriculum narrowing (DfE 2017). This most impacts children with identified special educational needs. Ofsted has found that mainstream schools were more focussed on "meeting school accountability measures" than "providing a tailored curriculum" for children with special educational needs (CQC and Ofsted 2024).

High-stakes accountability can make adjustments to the curriculum feel more risky. One school told us they had hesitated to bring in new (potentially more diverse) GCSE texts and qualifications (such as the AQA History GCSE (AQA 2023) with a focus on migration, empires and the people) because they feared a 'dip' in attainment as teachers embedded new courses.

If children fall behind, the current system makes it challenging to catch up. The curriculum has been described as 'over-stuffed', with the volume of examined and prescribed content driving fast-paced delivery (OCR 2024; Social Market Foundation 2024). This can stand in the way of more 'mastery' based approaches to teaching, where pupils develop a secure understanding of key concepts before moving on. This impacts those with special educational needs, and those who have lost learning the most, as there is less time to revisit content.

CASE STUDY 2: MEETING THE NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN

Joe never fully engaged with education. He had always been in and out of school and had an attendance rate below 50 per cent. By the end of year 10, he was on the brink of permanent exclusion and was not predicted to achieve a single pass in his GCSEs.

While Joe's story may be familiar, his next chapter is less anticipated. At Brighton Aldridge Community Academy (BACA) every student completes a 'career plan' in year 11. Here, Joe shared his dream of owning a plumbing business. The team responded by enrolling him in a City & Guilds plumbing course at the school within a school – BACA's 'Construction Academy', staffed by experts in plumbing and carpentry.

The team built great relationships with Joe, not just as teachers but as trusted adult mentors. A new, motivated Joe worked hard for his English and Maths GCSEs, understanding that he needed these subjects to secure the apprenticeship he wanted.

"We're increasingly using Professor John Jerrim's model of engagement," says Jane Fletcher, CEO of Aldridge Education Trust, which BACA is part of. "We only get behaviour change regarding attendance and effort when there's a change in 'cognitive engagement' – when a child thinks about their agency and purpose of what they're doing – and in 'emotional engagement' through belonging. The right curriculum and relationships are key."

A year on, Joe was often found doing extra revision in school after classes. Having passed his Maths and English GCSEs and his plumbing course, Joe is now employed by a local heating company and about to enrol in his Level 3 Gas Apprenticeship.

"Stories like Joe's shouldn't be the national anomaly, but they are. His headteacher allowed him to access a course which meaningfully sets him up for his dream career, despite the risk that the school could take a hit in Progress 8. It has changed his life for the better."

The Department for Education has an opportunity to reshape how schools are held to account. With Progress 8 data disrupted until 2027 due to the pandemic, and the Francis Review of curriculum and assessment underway, now is the time for bold reform to the accountability system.

A fairer system that supports schools to hold high aspirations for all their pupils could include the following.

- **Moving to a multi-year average:** A three-year rolling average for headline measures, such as Progress 8 and Attainment 8, would encourage more sustainable approaches to school improvement, reduce the pressure of single-year results and reduce the consequences of a single struggling pupil.
- **Reviewing qualification weightings:** Ensuring a broad range of subjects are valued alongside the core basics of English and Maths - for example by adding 'arts and technology' to the core subject areas included in headline performance measures.
- **Considering longer-term child outcomes:** Including reference to employment and further education outcomes and even long-term data on earnings and incarceration.
- **Recognising student characteristics:** Alongside headline measures, additional metrics should be developed that recognise the extra lengths schools go to in order to help vulnerable pupils succeed.

The work done by schools serving high numbers of disadvantaged pupils and those with additional needs should be better reflected within the department's suite of accountability metrics. Recognising student characteristics in accountability metrics is, however, complex and mired in ideological debate. Previous government policies, including 'contextual value added' (CVA), considered factors such as disadvantage and special educational needs when assessing school performance. While this policy recognised the very real impact of contextual factors, some argue that it seemed to accept that these children would achieve less well than their peers. The policy may also have created perverse incentives to over-identify special educational needs to positively influence a school's metrics (Ofsted 2010). A return to CVA may not be the way forward, but failing to recognise the impact of circumstances can disincentivise schools from admitting children from poorer backgrounds, and teachers and leaders from working in these schools.

Moving to a three-year rolling average for headline measures – and away from the current single-year metric – would incentivise a more sustainable approach to school improvement. It would reduce the impact of a single pupil, or small number of pupils, on headline metrics, reducing the incentive to not admit – or exclude – disadvantaged children, or those with additional needs, and reinforcing the impact of other efforts to make schools more representative (see Recommendation 2). Alongside this, and as part of the Francis review of curriculum and assessment, the government should review which subjects count towards Progress 8 measures. This could involve widening which GCSEs count towards the humanities 'basket' within Progress 8, or introducing an 'Arts and Technology' slot (Menzies et al 2023). This would encourage secondary schools to offer a broad and balanced curriculum to all pupils whilst maintaining a strong focus on core English and Maths.

Approaches to introducing multi-year averages have been well described, including some of the technical trade-offs around how different years might be weighted, and approaches to dealing with gaps in the data during the Covid-19 years (Menzies and Jerrim 2020). This policy is effectively cost-free and could be introduced rapidly.

RECOMMENDATION 3: SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY SHOULD SUPPORT ALL CHILDREN.

The Department for Education should reform headline measures by introducing multi-year averages, and revisit which subjects are included in Progress 8 scores. Additional measures reflecting children's longer-term outcomes and schools' context should also be developed.

Increasing universal and targeted support

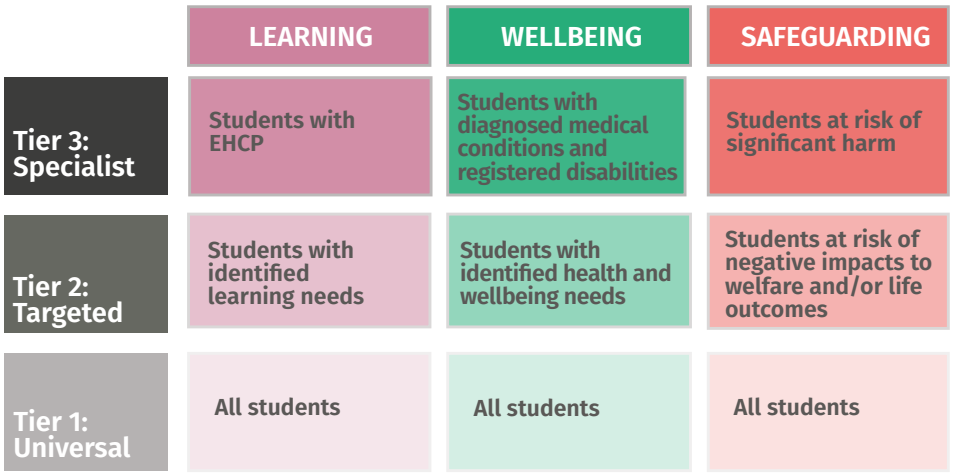
The education system is currently failing children who require additional support, including those with special educational needs.

Universal, targeted and specialist support all play crucial roles in supporting children (see figure 2.1). The current balance of provision, however, is too skewed towards slow, bureaucratic and overstretched specialist provision. This leaves too many children without the timely support they need and vulnerable to poor outcomes, including an increased risk of exploitation (Franklin et al 2024).

Universal support is what every child receives as standard and is ordinarily available from mainstream schools. It is the everyday interactions inside and outside the classroom, and is rooted in school culture and staff skills. Targeted support might include evidence-based interventions to meet more specific needs (but not necessarily tied to any formal diagnosis) and could be delivered by expert teaching assistants. Specialist support often involves meeting thresholds, such as EHCP assessments, or being known to social services.

FIGURE 2.1: THE DIFFERENCE'S INCLUSION FRAMEWORK

Whole school inclusion should be built from the universal up. This means designing policies and staff interactions to support all children's learning, wellbeing and safety needs so that the vast majority of children are supported through the everyday, inclusive activity of mainstream schools. Targeted and specialist support can then be built on top of this universal approach, to give extra help where needs are more complex. If this approach were supported nationally, a rebalanced system would improve schools' confidence in early and preventative work.



Source: The Difference

Funding for universal, preventative support has fallen. Local authorities' early intervention budgets have been slashed in half since 2010/11 (Children's Society 2023) and school funding has stagnated, while costs have spiralled (Drayton et al 2025). Meanwhile the cost of providing specialist support is soaring, without improving outcomes, parental satisfaction or school confidence in meeting needs (NAO 2024).

There has been a 140 per cent increase in the number of EHCPs since 2015, and high-needs funding has surged by 58 per cent to £10.7 billion (ibid). None of this investment goes directly to mainstream schools to support inclusion. Instead, funding is often directed to private special schools. One of the largest private providers of special educational provision – Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth fund-owned Witherslack Group – trebled its operating profits between 2019 and 2023, to £36 million (Foster et al 2025). Excessive profiteering from the public purse reduces the resources available to deliver whole school inclusion.

Where mainstream schools do receive high-needs funding, it is highly restrictive – with plans effectively acting as a series of individualised contracts that are often written without regard to the school environment. Typically, this is still tied to hours of teaching assistant support for a specific child (Isos Partnership 2024), which is not always effective in improving outcomes (EEF 2021c).

This creates a vicious cycle. More spending on specialist interventions means there is less funding available for whole school inclusion (DfE 2022a). The misaligned incentives described in the section on admissions and curriculum above, combined with a lack of resources for whole school inclusion, drives escalation into EHCPs along with placements in special and alternative provision schools. While some children will always require an in-depth assessment by education, health and social care services or the specialist support that special and alternative provision schools provide, more children could be supported more quickly through flexible universal and targeted support within their local mainstream school.

For families, accessing support often means focussing on their children's deficits, rather than focussing on how the school environment can adapt to meet their needs (Isos Partnership 2024; Newmark and Rees 2023). The result is that children's needs go unmet while they are dragged through bureaucratic assessments and await piecemeal support, leaving them unable to engage with school.

The lack of funding for inclusion impacts a large group of children who are vulnerable to lost learning, beyond those with identified special educational needs. We can see this in the soaring number of young people suffering with their mental health, with 1 in 5 children and young people likely having a mental health condition, up from 1 in 10 in 2017 (NHS England 2023, 2018) and mental health now topping the list in parental concerns about school (Ipsos 2023). Young carers are also missing more than a month of schooling each year and their needs may be hidden and fluctuate throughout their time at school (Carers Trust, 2024). We need a system that channels resources towards universal systems of support for all children. This is important because not all children's needs are known or visible, and not all families have the resources to fight their way through a complex system (Gill et al 2024). This leaves the school system riddled with gaps, through which too many children continue to fall.

> ***"Support will only get offered to you when you're really struggling, and then it will drop off. So, you have to get to breaking point before you can get help, and students fall through the gap before that."***
> Young person

A different future is possible. Whole school inclusion would ensure children receive timely support via the skills and expertise of their teachers, support

staff and local services. This requires a fundamental shift in how schools and local areas are resourced, so that support is no longer 'locked' behind slow, bureaucratic legislative thresholds.

RECOMMENDATION 4: THE VAST MAJORITY OF CHILDREN'S NEEDS SHOULD BE MET THROUGH A COMBINATION OF TIMELY UNIVERSAL AND TARGETED SUPPORT, RATHER THAN BEING LOCKED BEHIND LEGISLATIVE THRESHOLDS.

The Department for Education should provide £850 million of additional funding for whole school inclusion over the next five years.

Earlier intervention can prevent some special educational needs from escalating. New independent modelling conducted by Alma Economics exclusively for this report found that nearly 100,000 children per year could have their needs met more quickly by their local mainstream school if the Department for Education properly funded inclusion. If government takes action now, half a million children will have received quicker, more cost effective and dignified support by 2030. This could transform families' experiences by providing their children with the support they need without a slow, bureaucratic and deficit based assessment process.

The modelling suggests that investing in universal and targeted support would cost around £170 million a year, or £850 million over 5 years. This investment would pay for itself within 5 years by reducing the need for 35,000 EHCPs, because needs will have been met effectively already. And yet, £170 million of funding for inclusion each year represents just 1.6 per cent of the high needs budget.

We conducted this analysis for two of the most prevalent types of need, and for which evidence for the efficacy of early intervention is strongest: a) social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH), and b) speech, language and communication needs (SLC) (EEF 2024d; EEF 2021d; EIF 2020; EIF 2018). This means the benefits are likely to be an underestimate and that if inclusion services were broadened out to other types of need, the impact could be even greater.

Increasing the expertise of teaching assistants is one key lever at our disposal. £77 million of funding could train 90,000 teaching assistants to more effectively support children with SEMH and SLC needs. This would mean upskilling one in every five teaching assistants so they could directly provide expert support to the vulnerable children they work with, while also upskilling other school staff and providing advice on how to improve universal support to these children.

The £77 million includes not only evidence-based training for 90,0000 teaching assistants but also a £1,500 pay increase for each specialist teaching assistant to recognise the value of their expertise and raise the status of these important school support staff. Whilst the exact form of the universal and targeted support that makes up whole school inclusion would need to be designed collaboratively between parents, schools and local authorities, increasing the expertise of teaching assistants is one key lever at schools' disposal.

The fact that this upfront investment in mainstream school staff's expertise pays for itself in such a short period is just one example of how proper funding for whole school inclusion could better meet children's needs through a swifter and less fraught process, whilst delivering better value to the public purse.

While we await urgent government action on the special educational needs crisis, local authorities, schools and families should work together to design inclusion services that would enable mainstream schools to meet a wider range of predictable needs.

CASE STUDY 3: PROVIDING SUPPORT AT THE POINT OF NEED

Lister Community School

Head of the Student Support Centre David Dobbs and his team have developed a short-term, six-week provision in Lister Community School to support students who are struggling with the demands of mainstream and at risk of exclusion. The students are identified through a regular review of Behaviour Points, Internal Exclusions and Attendance concerns.

Sessions are designed to help staff understand students and help them understand themselves better. Key to sustained reintegration to mainstream classrooms is communicating these learnings to all the staff who support them in the wider school.

In Sheila's case, this provision proved essential to bolstering her engagement in schools. Sheila had a very rapid drop-off in attendance. Working in group sessions, she shared her mental health challenges about body image and the social anxiety this was creating. Sheila reported that she benefited from opportunities to reflect and focus on strengthening key relationships with peers, as well as offering support to other students. Without external mental health input, Sheila built up her return to lessons from Week 3 and she is now full-time in mainstream with over 90 per cent attendance.

Haringey Learning Partnership's multi-disciplinary team

Haringey Learning Partnership (HLP) is bucking national trends in alternative provision. While 4 per cent of children attending alternative provision achieve a pass in GCSE English and Maths, at HLP 40 per cent do. While many alternative provision schools struggle to reintegrate children into local secondary schools, at HLP 348 children have returned to mainstream since 2020. Alongside great teaching, Executive Headteacher Gerry Robinson attributes much of this success to specialist support that children can access as soon as they need it.

The school has a team of targeted support staff including a mentor from Cape Mentors, counsellor, social worker, educational psychologist, and speech and language therapist (partly funded by the Department for Education's 'Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce'). Having this team on-site means that children in desperate need of support don't face agonising wait times.

One Year 10 student, who had previously experienced a managed move followed by a permanent exclusion, struggled with communication challenges that impacted their ability to engage in a mainstream setting. With the support of a Speech and Language Therapist and Cape Mentors, key areas of need were identified, staff in the mainstream school were then equipped with tailored strategies that paved the way for effective reintegration. This comprehensive approach - combining targeted in-school interventions with external mentoring - ensured the student was able to return to mainstream education successfully after two terms at HLP.

With an average of 87 pupils per year reintegrated into mainstream at HLP since September 2020, this has saved taxpayers over £1million per year per pupil.[8] Yet the work is under threat, at the time of publication the school reports that funding will be extended for another year but that only 50 per cent of the funding will remain.

8 Calculation based on the average cost of mainstream and alternative provision in 2017/18, see IFS 2024 and DfE 2018.

PRINCIPLE 2: INCLUSION IS A CULTURE THAT IS LED FROM THE TOP

> ***"Expertise in inclusion should be non-negotiable for a headteacher. If the principles and values aren't coming from the top, and you don't have complete buy-in from the leadership of the school, I don't believe it will work."***
>
> Vicki Cuff, senior assistant director for Inclusion, Learning and Achievement, Greenwich, London

It is the daily interactions between children and adults in schools that determine belonging, achievement and whether children thrive. Professional development equips adults with the skills they need to shape these interactions.

While there has been a concerted focus on developing teaching expertise in schools over the past two decades, expertise in inclusion for staff in schools is harder to come by. One in three teachers do not feel equipped to identify and support children who have mental health needs (DfE 2024g) and nine out of 10 teachers say they need more help supporting pupils with special educational needs (Teacher Tapp 2024).

Addressing this expertise gap is key to ensuring we have high standards for all children rather than a select few. It is key to changing children's day to day, and to increasing their sense of belonging and engagement at school, ultimately leading to improved inclusion. Research shows that the majority of teachers believe they can 'tell' which children are likely to be excluded based on a pattern of behaviour, with 97 per cent reporting that they could see exclusion coming months away and nearly half believing that earlier support in school could have prevented it (Burtonshaw et al 2024).

Leadership can be a barrier or enabler to delivering effective inclusion (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2020). Heavy teacher workloads can also stand in the way of accessing professional development to address a wider range of needs as standard (Ofsted 2024).

This section focusses on two key levers to improve leadership and practice on inclusion. First, by improving professional development offers so that schools are supported to lead inclusion from the top, involving all staff and teams in preventative whole school work. Second, by increasing the resources available to the most underserved schools so that they can recruit and retain the best teachers and give them time to develop their skills.

Expertise on whole school inclusion

There is a wealth of expertise in schools, with special educational needs coordinators (SENCos), Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and mental health leads completing additional training. But this expertise is often strategic whole school approach and develop and equip staff accordingly.

However, professional development for leaders on inclusion has not kept pace with other domains of professional development. In recent years, evidence-based approaches have been embedded via the 'golden thread' of professional development (DfE 2022b) and new national professional qualifications have been established on leading teaching, teacher development, literacy and maths (DfE 2020). This professional development has been reinforced by the accountability system, which rewards expertise in curriculum delivery. Inclusive practice now needs the same focus.

Schools, trusts and local authorities should prioritise professional development which leads to measurable improvements in inclusion, increased belonging and reduced lost learning (see Principle 4). The Department for Education's review of its professional development offer for teachers and support staff should include a

strong focus on inclusion, including evidence on child development, trusted adult relationships, and improving social, emotional, and speech and language skills.

CASE STUDY 4: LEADING INCLUSION FROM THE TOP

"The year before last, suspensions were high, attendance was below national average and we were worried about internal truancy." Deb Elsdon, headteacher at Heritage High School, shares.

"When I was building my senior team, I knew people bring different perceptions to what inclusion is. I wanted everyone to understand – it's not about lowering expectations, or an add-on. Inclusion is core, and it happens in the classroom." In the past two years, Deb's deputy and assistant heads have all completed The Difference's Inclusive Leadership Course.

"Now, we're all on exactly the same page. Inclusion is a thread which runs through our decisions." Heritage High has since had a year of rapid school improvement: suspensions have halved, persistent absence has fallen by 4 per cent and attendance risen by 1.75 per cent. "We've focussed a lot on what every child gets as standard, in universal experiences like 'family lunch' so no child eats alone, focussing on the routines which bring psychological safety."

Deb's school is one of nine in the Two Counties Trust, where the central leadership team are making inclusion a priority. CEO Wes Davies has invested in leaders across each school to strengthen their shared strategy for a universal and measurable approach to inclusion.

18 months in, the green shoots of trust-wide impact are showing in the data. While all students' attendance is rising, students who are eligible for pupil premium have seen the biggest gains. At the same time, the percentage of students receiving a suspension is falling particularly for pupil premium students.

RECOMMENDATION 5: EVERY SCHOOL NEEDS LEADERS WITH INCLUSION EXPERTISE TO SET THE CULTURE.

Trusts, local authorities and the Department for Education should support this in their professional development offers.

Recruitment and retention

There is a well-documented teacher recruitment and retention crisis (McLean et al 2024), which hits the schools in the most disadvantaged communities (Allen et al 2016; EEF 2023) and alternative providers hardest (EEF 2024b). It is currently more difficult to recruit teachers to the schools facing the most challenges. This is partly driven by the accountability incentives set out above (see Priority 1). As a result, the pupils who most stand to benefit from the relationships, personalised care and trust that come from 'continuity of care' are in fact those who experience the highest levels of churn (Menzies et al 2023).

The need for the best teachers to be teaching in the most underserved communities is growing. The disadvantage gap continues to widen (EPI 2024). Children who are 'persistently disadvantaged' are even further behind, at a record two years behind their peers when sitting their GCSE exams (Andrews and Cruikshanks 2024). Given that high-quality teaching is the most important

tool for improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils (EEF 2021a), attracting and retaining teachers in the most underserved schools should be a key priority when addressing the teacher recruitment and retention crisis. We welcome the government's pledge to recruit 6,500 new teachers, but this commitment must be to the benefit of the schools and pupils most in need.

DEFINING 'DISADVANTAGE GAP' AND 'PERSISTENTLY DISADVANTAGED'

Disadvantage gap: The difference between achievement of children eligible for free school meals in the past six years and their non-disadvantaged peers.

Persistently disadvantaged: Being eligible for free school meals for at least 80 per cent of a child's time in school.

Funding is a key incentive to direct the best teachers to priority areas (EEF 2023b). This is why South Korea, one of the world's highest-performing school systems, incentivises its best teachers to work in the most challenging schools through extra pay, smaller class sizes, extra planning time and additional opportunities for promotion (Jerrim et al 2018).

In theory, the National Funding Formula and Pupil Premium should have baked in a growing trend in the late 1990s and early 2000s, whereby it was in the schools serving the most disadvantaged pupils that per-pupil funding rose fastest. However, the targeting of school funding has been systematically eroded over the past ten years (Farquharson et al 2022). It is now time to reverse that trend.

Modelling from the Educational Policy Institute shows that reversing real terms cuts to pupil premium and introducing a new 'persistently disadvantaged' premium would cost £640 million a year, which is less than the expected saving of £750 million a year from falling pupil numbers in schools (EPI 2024). Redistributing school funding in this way would give schools in the most challenging circumstances the opportunity to invest in the skilled teaching professionals they need.

To illustrate the potential impact of this funding, if the £640 million was spent on additional teacher capacity, this could look like:

- two additional teachers in the 25 per cent most deprived primary schools, and four additional teachers in the 25 per cent most deprived secondary schools, offering additional capacity and flexibility in the most underserved schools.

Tilting funding towards the most underserved communities would also assist in recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce. Black teachers are more likely to teach in disadvantaged schools (Tereschchenko et al 2020), leave the profession at higher rates, and on average earn less than their white colleagues (NEU 2024). By tilting funding towards the most disadvantaged schools, government would also be working towards recruiting and retaining a more diverse workforce.

This is also a key lever through which to tackle the disproportionate lost learning experienced by children from minority ethnic backgrounds, with research finding that ethnic minority pupils taught by ethnic minority teachers are less likely to be excluded (Lindsay & Hart 2017) or absent from school (Gottfried et al 2022) compared to those taught by non-minority teachers.

RECOMMENDATION 6: THE MOST UNDERSERVED SCHOOLS SHOULD BE ABLE TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN THE BEST TEACHERS.

The Department for Education should further tilt funding towards underserved schools and encourage spending on incentives for teacher recruitment and retention.

PRINCIPLE 3: INCLUSION IS COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

> ***"School is any young person's first encounter with an institution and it is incumbent upon us to make that experience positive. The same applies to parents, with the same level of welcome for any parent to school events, parents' evenings or in conversations at the school gate. Pupils and parents should feel we are one community, that the school is theirs."***
>
> Jonny Uttley, CEO, The Education Alliance

Schools have the extraordinary power to uplift and empower their local communities. Alongside their main purpose to educate children and young people, schools and trusts can make a significant contribution to the social good in their area by prioritising support for the most disadvantaged and marginalised (Townsend et al 2022). This involves actively building positive relationships with families and communities, and evidence suggests that this can improve educational outcomes (Allen et al 2011).

There is an increasing number of schools providing food banks to mitigate the disastrous impact of child poverty. One-third of all primary schools have a food bank and 40 per cent of school staff are providing direct support out of their own pockets (Schmuecker and Bestwick 2024). While schools providing foodbanks is not a long-term solution – and underlines wider public service failings – it does illustrate schools' capacity to facilitate community action, given that they are often the first point of call for children and families who are struggling (University of Leeds 2024).

CASE STUDY 5: FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING

Homelessness is widespread among families at Harris Primary Academy Peckham Park. "We're quite surprised when we find a family who aren't experiencing really difficult situations now," says Head of Academy Layla Mahlojian. In a school survey, most families described themselves as living in temporary accommodation. In Spring 2024 the school established a Community Hub funded entirely by donations, where families can access essentials such as food, bedding, cleaning supplies and shoes.

The Harris Federation is now rolling out community hubs like this across its trust. "Being safe, warm and fed are prerequisites for children to learn and achieve," says CEO Sir Dan Moynihan. But providing this support costs around £170,000 per school each year and receives no government funding.

Layla attributes the school's higher than average attendance to the sense of belonging that children and families feel. As parents are greeted warmly by Layla and the team, choosing the items they need and chatting about their children, it's clear the feeling of belonging is part of why they love coming to school.

Over half (55 per cent) of teachers have never received any training on how to communicate with parents (Teacher Tapp 2024). This is despite the 2020 Headteachers' Standards specifying that headteachers should forge constructive relationships beyond the school, working in partnership with parents, carers and the local community.

Schools cannot create community-wide change alone; they need local government, the NHS, and the voluntary and community sector to come alongside them in pursuit of the government's *Opportunity Mission* (Prime Minister's Office 2024). Only then will schools be able to truly shift the dial in ensuring every child has the best start in life.

This section outlines how the Department for Education can improve schools' knowledge and skills on working with families and communities, and how government can provide structure and oversight to align the goals of wider public services.

Positive relationships between schools and families

The evidence is clear that building a holistic picture of children and their families is central to improving behaviour and attendance, and meaningfully supporting special educational needs (EEF 2024a, 2021c, 2021e). Positive relationships between families and schools also promote better educational outcomes (Allen et al 2011). Only once schools have embraced the full reality of their students' lives – their struggles, their aspirations, their strengths – will they be able to remove the barriers to participation and learning for all children.

Relationships between schools and families have been "fractured" (Ofsted 2023), with two-thirds of school leaders reporting a rise in complaints (Browne Jacobson 2024) and research suggesting that the pandemic has reduced parental support for full-time schooling (Burtonshaw 2023). During the pandemic, schools delivered unprecedented support beyond the school gates, delivering food and carrying out home visits. We've heard from school leaders that this changed expectations as to what schools can sustainably deliver going forward.

The current approach to attendance is also further fracturing the relationship between schools and families. The use of penalty notices is increasing, with nearly 400,000 fines issued to parents in 2022/23 (DfE 2023). Parents report being threatened with fines and prosecution when their children are facing substantial challenges, sometimes due to special educational needs that schools are struggling to respond to (Epstein et al 2019). There is insufficient evidence-led practice around improving attendance. Fines or prosecutions have no compelling evidence of positive impact, while there is some evidence that punitive measures decrease attendance (Bernard 2014).

Parents want to work in partnerships with schools and be seen as experts in their children. Greater clarity on the robust universal support systems that schools should be putting in place and a decrease in the reliance on fines and prosecutions would be an excellent first step to restoring trust between parents and schools, where 'support first' is truly embedded into the system.

CASE STUDY 6: IDENTIFYING AND MOBILISING THE ASSETS OF COMMUNITIES

Co-op Academies Trust

"We realised that we didn't know enough about our families," shares trust behaviour and attendance leader Pippa Sadgrove. "Roma families have faced exclusion throughout history, and we knew if we wanted to

change outcomes we had to really understand their experience in Leeds and Bradford. What followed was a four-month listening campaign, which radically challenged the assumptions held about aspirations in the Roma community and began to address lost learning for young people.

"We reached out to people across the country, such as The Difference's Mohamed Abdallah on the asset-based approach and hired liaison officers from the Roma community," explains Pippa. Parents expressed their desire for support with behaviour, better education and working conditions for their children. Families raised feelings of not belonging, and experience of prejudice. Key assets were also uncovered: pride in artistry, music and dancing, the importance of family and religion.

Practical responses to drive up belonging ran through curricular and extracurricular offers – a boxing club with a Roma coach, a local Roma cooking group catering at school events, history and English curricula revised for bias and to cover Roma identity – alongside staff training on Roma awareness and inclusion. Listening to students, staff uncovered racist comments going under the radar driving low attendance, and were better able to tackle this.

Pippa is clear that this is an ongoing journey. In year 2 of the project, deputy heads – not just liaison officers – are trained in a school-based community organising, and multi-agency services are being brought into school to provide accessible early interventions. And there are measurable impacts: one school has achieved a 9 per cent increase in attendance for children of Roma heritage. Across the trust, suspensions of Roma pupils are down 5 per cent on the same time last year, and attendance up 2 per cent.

The x100 Programmes: Contextual leadership

Since 2021, the Reach Foundation has been supporting regional leadership development in school trusts around the country: the x100 Programmes. Each programme gives aspiring headteachers leadership and community development skills to devise context-sensitive solutions to their school's challenges. Leaders describe tasks – such as mapping their communities' assets – as transformational, and the input as different to anything they have found in other professional qualifications.

"What helped me improve outcomes for my disadvantaged pupils was doing the asset mapping task and gaining a deeper understanding of what actually is my school community. By building my skill set on relationships and communication I've been able to start removing some of the barriers between us. I've learned that the real impact comes from understanding the context and making a real effort to engage with families and support them as needed."

Many school and community leaders, like the Co-op Academies, are exercising agency and taking innovative and locally rooted action. They have pieced together their own professional development and begun to roll out training for deputy headteachers of inclusion and their teams. But this expertise is not yet widespread enough.

As a first step to properly valuing and resourcing this work, the government needs to tackle this lack of confidence and professionalise work with families and communities by including this area of practice in its suite of professional qualifications. Professional development should take advantage of the strong

and growing evidence base on supporting vulnerable children and families via relational and asset-based practice (EIF 2023, NICE 2019).

RECOMMENDATION 7: WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES SHOULD BE SEEN AS A DOMAIN OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS.

The Department for Education should make sure this is reflected in its suite of professional qualifications, and trusts and local authorities should prioritise professional development in this area.

Improving multi-agency working

Despite the crucial role of multi-agency support in delivering whole school inclusion, there is a crisis in access to these services.

40,000 children are waiting over two years for mental health support (NHS England 2024), 6,000 children are waiting longer than a year for speech and language therapy (RCSLT 2024), early intervention services have been slashed by half since 2010 (Children's Society 2023), and the number of school nurses has dropped by a third since 2009 (The Queen's Nursing Institute 2023).

Improving support for children requires both dedicated resources and a sustained commitment across services. Renewed investment in these services will be essential if the government is serious about meeting its opportunity mission goal, for 75 per cent of children to reach a good level of development by the age of five.

Alongside investment, it is crucial that all services supporting children share collective responsibility for children and young people's outcomes. Too often, children's services are working to different goals, incentives and funding structures, which hinder their effectiveness and mean services work in silos (Children's Commissioner 2022a; CSPRP 2021; Hoddinott et al 2024). Families want support to be – and to *feel* – joined up. Individuals and their families want to be treated as family units, rather than as individual bundles of 'need' (Children's Commissioner 2022a).

Schools have immense power to transform children's lives, yet their full potential remains untapped due to a fragmented and underfunded system (Centre for Young Lives 2024). Past initiatives such as Sure Start demonstrated the improved outcomes that can be achieved through integrated services (IFS 2024). This work was guided by the Every Child Matters Framework, which unified health, education and family support. Although some local efforts – such as Reach Academy's Family Hub – and some elements of the children's wellbeing and schools bill embody these principles, a comprehensive national strategy is needed.

The government should radically transform its offer to children and young people. A Shared Outcomes Framework should sit at the heart of this renewed commitment, covering health, local government and education. An inter-ministerial group (IMG), chaired by the secretary of state for education, should monitor progress. This framework should be grounded in the Children's Commissioner's existing work, which emphasises child safety, health, happiness, learning and community engagement (Children's Commissioner 2022b). Crucially, the IMG needs to urgently address the critical waitlists for children's mental health and speech and language support, with a concrete plan for reduction by the end of 2025.

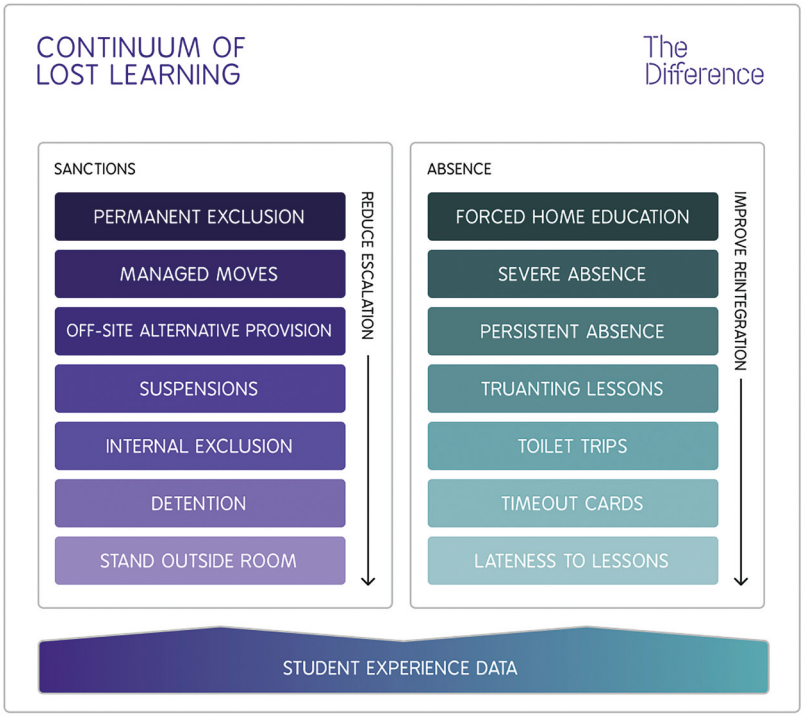
RECOMMENDATION 8: GOVERNMENT MUST ADDRESS THE FRAGMENTATION OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, BEGINNING WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SHARED OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A GOVERNANCE STRATEGY TO MONITOR PROGRESS.

As a first step, the government should publish a plan to radically improve access to children's mental health and speech and language support.

PRINCIPLE 4: INCLUSION IS MEASURABLE

Whole school inclusion is measurable. By systematically tracking data on exclusions across the continuum of lost learning – including managed moves, absence, internal exclusion, suspensions, permanent exclusions – schools can track patterns and identify areas for improvement, using student experience data to help them do so (Gill et al 2024). Children cannot benefit from an excellent education if they are not in school and participating.

FIGURE 2.2: CONTINUUM OF LOST LEARNING



Source: The Difference

Just as with teaching and learning, inclusion is not an area of a school's work that can ever be 'finished'. Both the needs and populations of children, and staff's expertise and confidence in supporting them, are in constant flux (DfE 2024h, 2024i). Inclusion must be seen as a journey, not as a destination. Measuring inclusion should not lead to additional high-stakes accountability, but should instead involve schools monitoring and improving engagement and belonging – because these are the first warning signs of a risk of lost learning.

This section discusses how better data on inclusion can provide a strong foundation for school improvement and how greater oversight of pupil movements around the school system can identify and reduce non-inclusive practices, which can leave the country's most vulnerable invisible and at risk.

Improving data on inclusion

Like all forms of school improvement, effectively implementing an approach to improving inclusion requires systematic use of data (EEF 2024c). This is particularly important when thinking about attendance, as evidence suggests that knowing and understanding the specific challenges facing children and their families can help remove barriers to attendance (EEF 2024a). However, schools, trusts and government currently only collect limited and patchy data on inclusion. Too often they are flying blind and relying on permanent exclusions and suspension metrics that hide the full story. School leaders told us low suspension and exclusion rates can give a misleading picture of inclusion. This is because less visible practices – such as off-site direction, managed moves or internal isolation – are not in published data.

Schools and trusts should improve their data across the continuum of lost learning to get a full picture of the scale of challenges faced by their pupils and identify the windows for early intervention before needs escalate. This should include utilising student experience data, such as data on children's sense of wellbeing, belonging and safety. Making sure pupils feel seen, understood and safe is a vital starting point for supporting attendance, especially for more vulnerable students who may have fewer protective factors than others (EEF 2024a). Collecting data on students' experiences, including their sense of wellbeing, safety and belonging, would support better decision-making and guide targeted support for children who are struggling (Franklin, Prothero and Sykes 2024). It is often the first insight into rising needs and provides an early opportunity for school staff to intervene before a child loses significant learning.

Schools are already taking the lead in charting the way forward by routinely collecting data on student experience and lost learning, and are using it to identify and address barriers to learning and participation. Organisations like #BeeWell, The Difference, Arbor and ImpactED have been working to develop the tools and surveys required to support this practice. This demonstrates that we can make progress, while we await action on a national child wellbeing programme.

CASE STUDY 7: DRIVING WHOLE SCHOOL INCLUSION WITH DATA DASHBOARDS

Over the past year, the Ted Wragg Trust has developed a centralised dashboard, which brings together live data from the trusts' schools. Its dashboard presents data from across the exclusions continuum. It is shared with school leaders weekly, so that data on lost learning can be more meaningful and visible to all staff.

At the trust level, the dashboards show headline measures like suspension and persistent absence, helping to allocate resources and support where they are most needed. At a school level, the dashboards also present the outcomes which 'feed' these headline measures, such as recent absence, lesson removal and focussing in on specific cohorts of pupils including special educational needs and disabilities.

In schools, this dashboard data is supporting leaders to proactively identify patterns and develop the strategy for the term ahead, as well as measuring the impacts of key interventions and professional development.

"When we understand our communities better, we can help foster a true sense of belonging – one that inspires more children to engage with their education, feel connected to their school, and thrive within it."

Jon Lunn, director of performance, Ted Wragg Trust

The majority of schools, however, do not have the necessary systems or skills to effectively evaluate their children's learning, wellbeing and safety needs. ProBono Economics estimates that in 2022 only 16 per cent of schools reported having fully embedded pupil mental health and wellbeing measurements to inform school practices (Franklin, Prothero and Sykes 2024). Most schools are reliant on a narrow set of attainment measures and published data on attendance, permanent exclusions and suspensions to inform their strategic planning.

To support the use of inclusion data to drive school improvement, as part of its new judgement on inclusion, Ofsted should focus on how schools use data to identify and respond to pupils' needs, particularly those most at risk of losing learning. This would enable inspectors to engage in a supportive dialogue with schools on how they assess the belonging, safety and wellbeing of their student population; how they respond to escalations across the continuum of lost learning; trends and issues they have identified and the steps they have taken to address these issues. This would lead to a reduction in lost learning.

RECOMMENDATION 9: EVERY SCHOOL SHOULD USE DATA ON STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND LOST LEARNING ACROSS THE CONTINUUM TO DEVELOP A STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO ALL CHILDREN'S NEEDS.

Ofsted should increase its focus on the strategic use of student experience data and lost learning data in school improvement.

Improving oversight of pupil moves off-site and off-roll

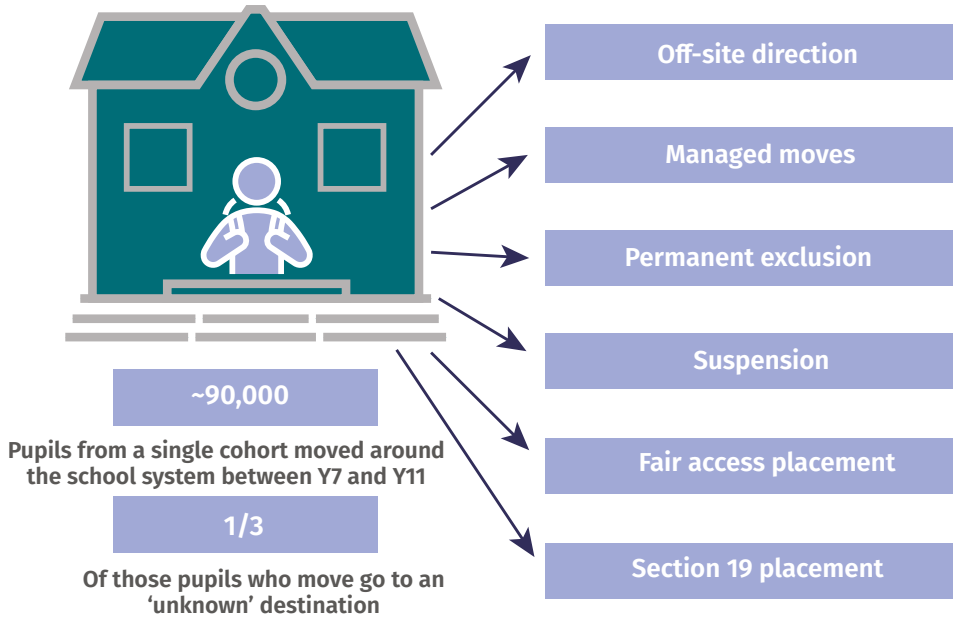
"It is absolutely not good enough that we don't already have oversight of pupil movements across the sector. We all know that students are bounced around schools, and sometimes within trusts, and then eventually just stop coming to school. We urgently need a mechanism in place so we can monitor this."

Elroy Aidouni-Cahill, Head of Portfolio and Partnerships, Lift Schools

It is currently not possible to assess which schools are inclusive on a national basis using official published data. Data on suspensions, exclusions and absences tells only part of the story. Hidden beneath these statistics are numerous unseen ways children are moved around the system. For every child that is permanently excluded, 10 other children are moved around the school system by other means.[9] This can lead to a revolving door of managed moves, with schools moving children off site and off roll rather than taking responsibility for meeting their needs.

9 In 2018/19 there were 7,894 permanent exclusions, in the same year 86,695 children moved around the system by another means. We are using the latest available DfE on pupil movements and the corresponding year's exclusion data (see DfE 2022c).

FIGURE 2.3: LAWFUL PUPIL MOVEMENTS



Source: The Difference

When responsibility for a child changes hands, this creates gaps in oversight and safeguarding, which can have serious consequences for vulnerable children. One review of serious youth violence found that repeated movements between schools, or off the school roll, increased children's vulnerability and "sense of dislocation, isolation and separation from community" (Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Board 2022).

There are at least six different lawful ways to move a child between settings,[10] as well as the unlawful practice of off-rolling. Permanent exclusion and suspensions of more than five days are the only types of pupil movement that come with a right to appeal.[11] There is no national data collection on managed moves, for example, which means these pupil movements are largely invisible.

Pupil movements disproportionately impact the most vulnerable children, with those living in poverty, identified with special educational needs, and those known to social services being more likely to move than their peers. Black children were also found to be at increased risk of experiencing an unexplained school transfer (Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson 2024).

We know that most school leaders only move a child as a last resort. We have also heard how hard schools work to welcome children who need a fresh start, or who are ready to be reintegrated from alternative provision. When done thoughtfully, lawfully and in the best interest of the child, pupil movements can play an important role in getting children and young people the support they need.

The data also shows us that the accountability system has an impact on decision-making. Only children on the roll of a school at the January census point are

10 Department for Education guidance sets out the following duties/powers to move a pupil off-site or off roll: 1) Off-site direction, 2) Suspensions lasting six days or longer, 3) Permanent exclusion, 4) Managed moves, 5) Fair Access Placements, 6) LA-arranged placements under the section 19 duty.

11 We define 'pupil movements' as any movement of a child off a school site or school roll. This includes permanent exclusion, suspension, off-site direction, managed moves, arranging suitable education for children who would otherwise not receive one (section 19 duty), and fair access placements.

counted in Progress 8 and Attainment 8 school performance measures. This creates a perverse incentive to move children who, for whatever reason, are unlikely to achieve well in these measures. It is therefore no surprise that there is a spike in children moving off mainstream schools' rolls before the January census in year 11 (Centre for Social Justice 2024). While the vast majority of schools do not engage in this practice, the impact it has on the children who are affected is very real.

> ***"Low or high exclusion rates do not tell the whole story as there are many ways that pupils move between school rolls, including different mechanisms by which pupils are admitted into alternative provision."***
> Tom Rees, chief executive officer, Ormiston Academies Trust

In 2019, the Timpson Review of School Exclusions said it was crucial local authorities "know how and when children move around our school system … and why a decision has been made to move them" (DfE 2019). Since then, many schools and local authorities have made progress in increasing oversight of pupil movements, including in Darlington where they have introduced a 'Vulnerable Pupil Panel Protocol' which expands the Fair Access Protocol to ensure moves are made in the child's best interest.[12] To embed this practice in all local areas, schools and local authorities need clear direction from government on how decisions on pupil movements should be made, what oversight is proportionate, and what accountability is necessary to ensure decisions are always made in the child's best interest.

The Department for Education is taking positive steps in the children's wellbeing and schools bill to address this challenge by granting local authorities' power to direct academies to admit pupils following a request for a placement, for example via the fair access protocol. The government should go further yet in the bill by introducing an amendment that requires oversight of all pupil movements off site and off roll.

RECOMMENDATION 10: ALL PUPIL MOVEMENTS SHOULD BE EQUALLY VISIBLE AND ACCOUNTABLE.

The Department for Education should introduce legislation that provides oversight of pupil movements off site and off roll.

12 See: https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/12457/vpp-protocol-2024-25.pdf

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