

# SUSPENDING REALITY

Part 1: The crisis of school exclusions  
and what to do about it

January 2024



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# About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grass-roots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2024 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

# Foreword

As Chair of the APPG on School Exclusions and Alternative Provision, and as a constituency MP, I regularly engage with schools and families about the challenges and opportunities facing our children and our education system.

One of the biggest challenges in recent years is the increasing number of pupils disengaging from mainstream education. The ramifications of this alarming trend are far-reaching, with untold damage on children's attainment, wellbeing and future life chances.

Amidst the rising number of school exclusions and crisis levels of school absence – with the pandemic further exacerbating pre-existing challenges in the education system – the need for a genuinely inclusive agenda has never been more urgent. Policy makers and educators alike must work to ensure that every child is able to fully access and engage with their education.

This report delves into the heart of the matter, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges that contribute to the rising tide of pupils falling out of mainstream education. It is incumbent upon us all, as stewards of the education system, to confront these issues head-on and devise strategies that foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, where every child can engage, learn and thrive.

It is imperative we embrace a comprehensive approach that considers the social, emotional, and behavioural well-being and educational needs and outcomes of every pupil. A crucial part of this is implementing school-based interventions to address the root causes of exclusions. Interventions that identify and support at-risk students early on can prevent the cascade into formal and informal exclusions, including absence and managed moves.

As the SEND and AP improvement plan rightfully considers, the alternative provision sector has a key role to play in equipping mainstream schools to offer this. The alternative provision sector has a wealth of knowledge and experience in supporting and educating some of the most vulnerable pupils. In facilitating alternative provisions and mainstream schools to work more closely together, we can build a system that identifies early the needs of every child and puts the right support in place in a timely manner.

By investing in proactive measures within the school setting, we can disrupt the cycle of exclusion and empower educators to provide tailored support to students who can be facing a multitude of challenges.

As we navigate the complexities outlined in this report, it should be recognised that an inclusive ethos not only benefits those at risk of exclusion, but contributes to a positive and enriching educational experience for all.

It benefits the wider community and economy too. Excluded children have far higher rates of involvement with the criminal justice system and are far more likely to be economically inactive age 25. By acknowledging the challenges and embracing a move towards a system that meets the needs of every child – with a focus on early support – we can forge a path toward a more equitable and successful educational landscape that will benefit the whole of society.

I urge all stakeholders, from policymakers to practitioners, to engage with the findings of the Centre for Social Justice’s report and work collaboratively to create an education system that leaves no child behind. The future of our young people depends on the actions we take today.



**Andy Carter MP**

Chair of the APPG on School Exclusions and Alternative Provision

# Executive Summary

As exclusion numbers soar and absence rates rocket, the risk of falling out of mainstream education is rising year on year for vulnerable young people. With mainstream classrooms failing to accommodate increasing numbers of pupils, this poses uncomfortable questions about how inclusive England's schools really are.

The first chapter of this report analyses the national picture when it comes both to formal and informal exclusions. Since the publication of the Timpson review in 2019, the exclusions landscape has deteriorated. The fall in exclusion rates as schools closed during lockdown only temporarily masked the long-term trend which spells worsening prospects for vulnerable pupils.

Alarming, just 1 per cent of excluded young people go on to achieve five good GCSEs including English and Maths.<sup>1</sup> Excluded pupils are also far more likely to be economically inactive aged 25 and have far higher rates of involvement with the criminal justice system.<sup>2,3</sup>

The second chapter considers the pressures on schools and teachers arising from issues beyond the school gates and considers how these can act as barriers to inclusive learning. Poverty is central to the question of inclusion. The CSJ has learned of disadvantaged pupils frequently encountering additional barriers to their education, leaving them more at risk of disengagement. Issues such as lack of access to food, appropriate clothing, books, and even suitable bedding create a barrage of obstacles to their learning. These are not issues it is reasonable to expect teachers to resolve.

A steady increase in the level of SEND over the last decade has presented a formidable challenge for mainstream schools.<sup>4</sup> Parents of home educated pupils, of pupils with behavioural issues, and of those with poor school attendance, often cite inadequate SEN provision as the key factor affecting their child's ability to continue with mainstream education.<sup>5,6</sup>

These risk factors already set vulnerable pupils at a disadvantage, and the school closures during the pandemic magnified these inequalities. The risk of vulnerable pupil groups falling through the cracks of mainstream education is growing.

The impact is played out in national statistics. Last academic year, over a million days were lost to suspensions. The suspension rate has surged in the wake of the pandemic, reaching the highest level on record.<sup>7</sup> Permanent exclusions mirror these trends, returning to their pre-pandemic highs, with no sign of abating.<sup>8</sup>

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1 IPPR, Making the Difference, 2017

2 Joan E. Madia, Long-term labour market and economic consequences of school exclusions in England: Evidence from two counterfactual approaches, 2022

3 Timpson, Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 2019

4 Department for Education, SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time, 2022

5 Centre for Social Justice, Out of sight and out of mind, 2022

6 Centre for Social Justice, School Absence Tracker, October 2023

7 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

8 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

This report also examines challenges that extend beyond formal exclusions. We explore informal means of exclusion that official data collections fail to capture. Recent analysis indicates that 59 per cent of pupils in alternative provision have never been permanently excluded, but arrived through other routes.<sup>9</sup> Off-rolling and managed moves may account for some of these transitions to alternative provision, but the lack of transparency surrounding these types of pupil movements has resulted in their being termed ‘unexplained exits’ by the Education Policy Unit.<sup>10</sup>

Most pupils who leave mainstream education are enrolled in alternative provision – but this is not always the case. Home education numbers have surged since the pandemic, raising questions about the confidence parents have in the ability of formal settings to meet their children’s needs.<sup>11,12</sup> Skyrocketing absence rates, meanwhile, mean nearly 1.5 million pupils are getting a partial education at best.<sup>13</sup>

The common factor across mainstream exits is the profile of the young people affected. Vulnerable pupils are markedly overrepresented in these statistics. Pupils with special educational needs, eligible for free school meals, or known to social services are leaving mainstream classrooms at significantly higher rates than their peers.<sup>14</sup>

Concerningly, the divide between vulnerable pupils and their peers is widening. Historically, pupils eligible for free school meals have been four times as likely to face permanent exclusion. Last year, this grew to five times as likely.<sup>15</sup> The stark reality is that those facing additional challenges are increasingly likely to find themselves outside the mainstream education system.

This report examines these trends and interrogates the effectiveness of the current school system through the lens of vulnerable pupils. At the heart of the issue, as explored in chapter three, is an accountability system that inadvertently disincentivises inclusive schooling.

In recent years, educators and academics have raised growing concerns over school performance pressures cultivating a culture which perversely incentivises the removal of lower-performing pupils.<sup>16</sup> A striking illustration of this exclusionary practice is the annual spike in pupil referral unit enrolments in Year 11 which occurs shortly before January.<sup>17</sup> Only the exam results of those pupils who are enrolled in a school at the January census date in Year 11 contribute to the performance data, and therefore league table standings, of that school. This strongly supports evidence we have heard from educators and charities working with excluded children that some schools remove pupils with lower attainment before the census date, to boost average performance.

Maintaining a sharp focus on academic performance is crucial for improving children’s life chances.<sup>18</sup> However, this emphasis should not come at the expense of the most vulnerable pupil groups. The existing accountability framework needs recalibrating if it is to deliver positive outcomes for all pupils, including the most vulnerable.

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9 FFT Education Datalab, Who are alternative provision schools for, 2023

10 Education Policy Institute, Unexplained pupil moves, 2019

11 Department for Education, Pupil absence in schools in England, 2023

12 ACDS, Elective Home Education Survey 2021, 2021 and Department for Education, Elective Home Education, 2023

13 Centre for Social Justice, School Absence Tracker, October 2023

14 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

15 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

16 Royal Society of Arts, Pinball kids, 2020

17 CSJ analysis of FOI data returned by the Department for Education

18 Jeffrey S. Zax, Daniel I. Rees, IQ, Academic Performance, Environment, and Earnings, 2002

This report also reflects on the link between school performance and disadvantage, and the questions this raises about the suitability of the inspection framework more broadly. In schools judged 'Inadequate' on average 33 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals. In 'Outstanding' schools, this figure falls to 18 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

These figures indicate that the education system is failing disadvantaged pupils. Yet the accountability framework does little to acknowledge or address these challenges. Ofsted should focus on developing a more collaborative relationship with schools which recognises the added challenges of serving more disadvantaged pupils, and seek to support them to overcome these barriers.

The fourth chapter examines how the approach taken internally by schools can play a pivotal role in fostering an inclusive culture across education. Despite the mounting contextual challenges and lack of incentivisation within the accountability framework, many schools make sustained and concerted efforts to foster inclusion. This often means assuming responsibility for addressing additional needs themselves, or enlisting the help of frontline, third sector organisations to do so. The CSJ found examples of schools providing transportation, offering free breakfasts, and assisting parents with benefit applications and mental health support. As a result, schools have been lauded as the 'fourth emergency service' by the Association of School and College Leaders.<sup>20,21</sup>

However, the increasing reliance on schools to tackle these challenges is unsustainable. Not every school has the capacity to offer the additional support needed to help children and young people with higher needs engage with their education. As barriers tied to special educational needs, mental health, and poverty persist, delivering appropriate support becomes an increasingly daunting task for schools.

Nevertheless, the examples of best practice that the CSJ unearthed can serve as a blueprint for an inclusive and effective education system. School-based interventions to promote inclusion were centred on three key areas:

- **Curriculum** – the curriculum stands as a potent vehicle for maximising pupil engagement. Enrichment activities, specifically in sports and arts, have demonstrated significant impact on engaging young people at risk of exclusion.<sup>22,23</sup>
- **Behaviour policies** – research institutes and educators have highlighted the value of school culture in supporting inclusion.<sup>24</sup> A school ethos that seeks to understand the reasons behind poor behaviour and tackle pupil issues at their root, rather than solely penalising transgressions without consideration of pupil circumstance, can help to break the cycle of misbehaviour and disengagement.
- **Pastoral care** – interventions which seek to support the social, emotional, and mental development of young people, are central to the inclusive approach of every school. The cornerstone of pastoral support is strong relationships, both between pupils and adults in the school, but also, crucially, between parents and schools.

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19 Cross referenced data from: GIAS, 2023; Department for Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics, 2023; and Department for Education, Special educational needs in England, 2023

20 University of Bristol, Schools and food charity in England, 2023

21 Sky News, Schools have become fourth emergency service due to poor mental health and social care for young people, 2023

22 Education Endowment Foundation, Extending school time, 2021

23 Centre for Social Justice, Game changer: a plan to transform young lives through sport, 2023

24 Education Endowment Foundation, Improving behaviour in schools, 2021



A truly effective and inclusive school system is one that implements and incentivises inclusive practice. The final chapter outlines the CSJ's plan for reform, including the following recommendations:

**Inclusion should be added as a fifth key judgement in Ofsted inspections.** Inclusion should carry significant weighting in Ofsted School inspection guidance and this weighting should be reflected in inspections.

**Launch a consultation on proposals to replace one-word judgements with a report card.** The Department for Education should launch a consultation on how to reform the school accountability framework, to ensure that it considers all aspects of the school.

**The three-tier system for SEND and AP should be implemented.** As detailed in the SEND and AP improvement plan, this system should focus on targeted early support in mainstream settings.

**The Department for Education should introduce a national inclusion framework for schools and academy trusts.** The framework should set out a clear definition of inclusion, as well as guidance to help school and MAT leaders better support pupils to overcome any additional vulnerabilities that may prevent them from engaging in education in mainstream classrooms.

**More comprehensive training on supporting pupils with additional needs should be included in teacher training.** The review of teacher training, as outlined in the SEND and AP improvement plan, should be conducted and expanded to include a review into CPD.

**School League Tables should be reweighted** to take all pupils into account, proportionate to the amount of time that they spend enrolled at the school. This removes the incentive to exclude before an arbitrary 'cut off'.

**The Department for Education should create a National Parental Participation Strategy** which should create a new duty for schools and MATs to focus on parental participation and publish parental participation plans.

**Attendance mentors should be rolled out nationwide,** enabling more families to benefit from keyworker support to remove the underlying barriers to school attendance.

**An 'enrichment guarantee' should be introduced,** ensuring schools have the appropriate resources to deliver five hours of extra-curricular activities alongside the existing curriculum. The introduction of a 'Right to Sport' would guarantee that a minimum of two of these five hours would be devoted to sports activities.

**The Children Not in School Register should be implemented without delay.** This register would place a duty on local authorities to maintain a register of children who are not in school.

# State of the nation

## Defining inclusion

### *What is inclusion?*

A 2018 study defined inclusive education as pupils being taught with their peers in a mainstream classroom for the majority of their day.<sup>25</sup>

The term 'inclusive education' is synonymous with education for children with disabilities. However, inclusive practice is far broader than this and should seek to engage children from different backgrounds and of different abilities. This means being cognisant of characteristics such as language and socio-economic status which may affect a child's ability to engage.<sup>26</sup>

This is the definition of inclusion that this paper will employ throughout.

### *Why is inclusion important?*

Educating all pupils within mainstream classrooms has demonstrated positive effects on student achievement and social wellbeing for all children – both those with and without special educational or other additional needs.<sup>27,28</sup>

Pupils that complete their education in a mainstream school are more likely to progress to higher education, to have better employment opportunities, and to engage more with their community.<sup>29</sup> Inclusive education is therefore linked with better life outcomes and higher levels of social inclusion which can help to combat poverty.<sup>30,31</sup>

Conversely, the cost of exclusion is significant. Exclusion is associated with numerous negative, short- and long-term consequences for both the individual pupil and society as a whole.

Exclusion has a well-established impact on educational attainment. Only 7 per cent of children who are permanently excluded and 18 per cent of children who receive multiple suspensions go on to achieve good passes in their English and Maths GCSEs,<sup>32</sup> while only 1 per cent of excluded young people achieve five good GCSEs including English and Maths.<sup>33</sup>

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25 Schuelka, M.J., Implementing inclusive education. K4D Helpdesk Report, 2018

26 Schuelka, M.J., Implementing inclusive education. K4D Helpdesk Report, 2018

27 Schuelka, M.J., Implementing inclusive education. K4D Helpdesk Report, 2018

28 Hehir, T., Grindal, T., Freeman, B., Lamoreau, R., Borquaye, Y. & Burke, S., A summary of the evidence on inclusive education, 2017

29 EASNIE, Evidence of the link between inclusive education and social inclusion: A review of the literature, 2018

30 Schuelka, M.J., Implementing inclusive education. K4D Helpdesk Report, 2018

31 Florian, L., Black-Hawkins, K. & Rouse, M., Achievement and inclusion in schools (2nd ed.), 2017

32 Timpson, Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 2019

33 IPPR, Making the Difference, 2017

Exclusion also affects children's prospects later in life. At age 19, pupils who have been suspended or permanently excluded are more likely to be 'not in education, employment, or training' (NEET). They are also more likely to remain NEET and to be economically inactive or unemployed at aged 25. If they do secure employment, they are more likely to have lower wages or work in more unstable jobs.<sup>34</sup>

There is a clear correlation between crime and exclusions. The Timpson review highlighted in 2019 that 63 per cent of prisoners had been suspended while at school, while 42 per cent had been permanently excluded,<sup>35</sup> although the review conceded that a causal relationship was difficult to prove. The National Crime Agency, the Children's Society, National Police Chief's Council, the Home Office, and the NSPCC have all acknowledged permanent exclusion or placement in alternative provision (AP) as a factor that will increase a young person's risk of child criminal exploitation.<sup>36</sup> In 2023, an analysis of national data found that receiving a permanent exclusion increases the probability of a custodial sentence by 33 percentage points, and that among all youth who were serving a custodial sentence and aged 15–17 years old, almost 50 per cent had been excluded from school at least once.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond the individual cost of exclusion, the economic cost to society is substantial. The adverse life outcomes for excluded pupils leads to an increased burden on statutory services in supporting these individuals. Research conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research in 2017 estimated that each excluded young person generates at least "£370,000 in lifetime education, benefits, and healthcare costs."<sup>38</sup>

### *Inclusion and exclusion*

The primary objectives of an inclusive school system are to mitigate risk factors contributing to preventable exclusions, deliver school policies and procedures that reduce these risks, and create a system incentivising schools to adopt an inclusive approach that enables more children to engage in mainstream education.

However, achieving inclusion does not mean eliminating exclusions altogether. Exclusions can be necessary as a last resort, particularly as a way of ensuring the safety of staff and pupils.

Furthermore, while the goal is to reduce preventable school exclusions as much as possible, artificially achieving this goal – without implementing policies that ensure children can fully engage in their education – could have adverse implications. High exclusion rates are a symptom of a deeper issue of pupils facing barriers to their learning. Simply removing recourse to exclusion would not address the root causes of exclusion or re-engage pupils with their education. It would also open the door to other, informal, means of exclusion, leaving the core issue of disengagement unresolved.

### *How inclusive is the school system in England?*

Measuring inclusion requires recognition of the fact that exclusionary practice takes various forms. Within this report, exclusion has been taken to mean any instance of removal from the mainstream classroom. Therefore, understanding how inclusive the school system is in England requires an understanding of the various pathways through which students become removed from mainstream education.

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34 Joan E. Madia, Long-term labour market and economic consequences of school exclusions in England: Evidence from two counterfactual approaches, 2022

35 Timpson, Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 2019

36 Just for Kids Law, Excluded, exploited, forgotten: Childhood criminal exploitation and school exclusions, 2020

37 The Behavioural Insights Team, School exclusions and youth custody, 2023

38 IPPR, Making the Difference, 2017

## Formal exclusion

Formal exclusions include suspensions (previously known as fixed-term exclusions) and permanent exclusions.

A suspension is time limited. A pupil who experiences a suspension is temporarily removed from school for a set period, which can total no more than 45 days in one school year. If a pupil is suspended, the school is required to set work for the first five school days and from the sixth day, to arrange suitable alternative full-time education.<sup>39</sup>

A permanent exclusion is not time limited. When a pupil is permanently excluded, their name is removed from the school's register and the local authority must arrange suitable alternative full-time education from the sixth day following the permanent exclusion.<sup>40</sup>

The rate of permanent exclusions in England increased year-on-year for five of the six years preceding the COVID pandemic. Due to school closures during lockdown, 2019/20 saw a significant reversal of this trend. However, two years on from the first school closures, permanent exclusion rates are on the rise again and nearly at pre-pandemic levels. The 2021/22 academic year recorded the single biggest year-on-year increase since records began, with 6,495 students experiencing permanent exclusion in 2021/22.<sup>41</sup> In Autumn term 2022, 3,104 pupils were permanently excluded, only 63 shy of the number recorded in the Autumn term pre-pandemic.<sup>42</sup>

The picture is very similar concerning suspensions. The rate of suspensions also increased year-on-year for five of the six years preceding 2019/20. Rates declined markedly due school closures during the pandemic, marking the first decrease in the annual suspension rate since 2013/14. However, the suspension rate has rocketed since, reaching an all-time high in the 2021/22 academic year and again in Autumn term 2022/23. In total, in 2021/22, 252,463 pupils received a combined total of 578,280 suspensions.<sup>43</sup>

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39 Department for Education, Suspension and permanent exclusion guidance September 2023, 2023

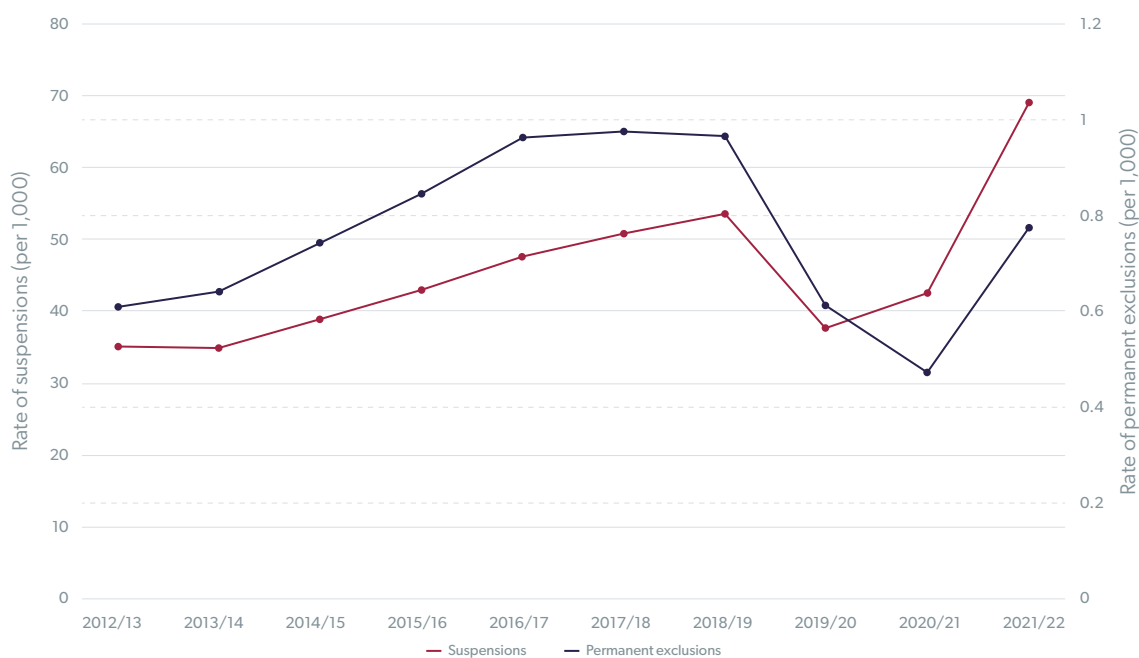
40 Department for Education, Suspension and permanent exclusion guidance September 2023, 2023

41 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

42 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Autumn term 2023/23, 2023

43 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

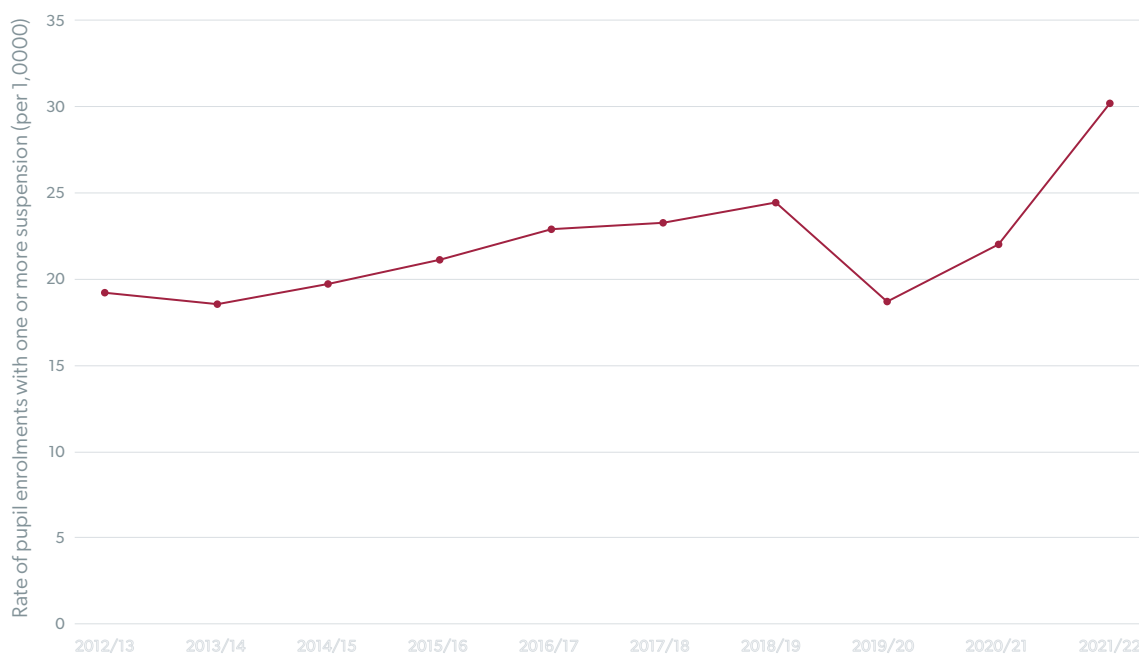
Figure 1: Suspension and permanent exclusion rates over time



Source: Department for Education, 2023. "Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22"

The increase in the suspension rate has been matched by a significant increase in the rate of pupils with multiple suspensions.<sup>44</sup> Considering that repeated suspensions indicate that a child is at risk of permanent exclusion, this suggests that the permanent exclusion rate is likely to continue increasing.<sup>45</sup>

Figure 2: Rate of pupil enrolments with multiple suspensions over time



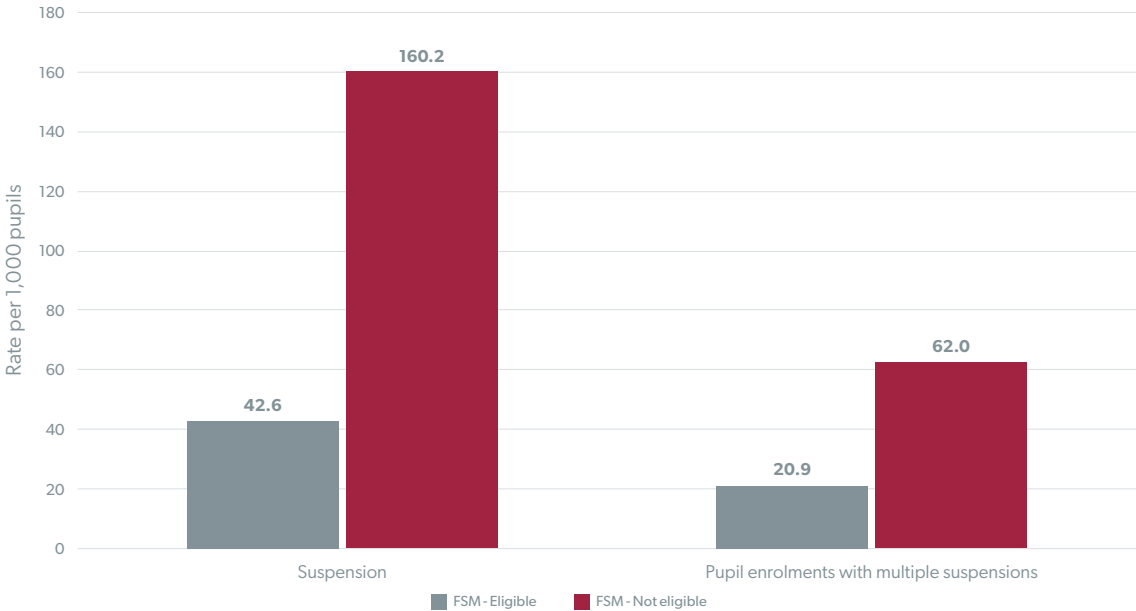
Source: Department for Education, 2023. "Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22"

44 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

45 Social Finance, Who's at risk of exclusion, 2020

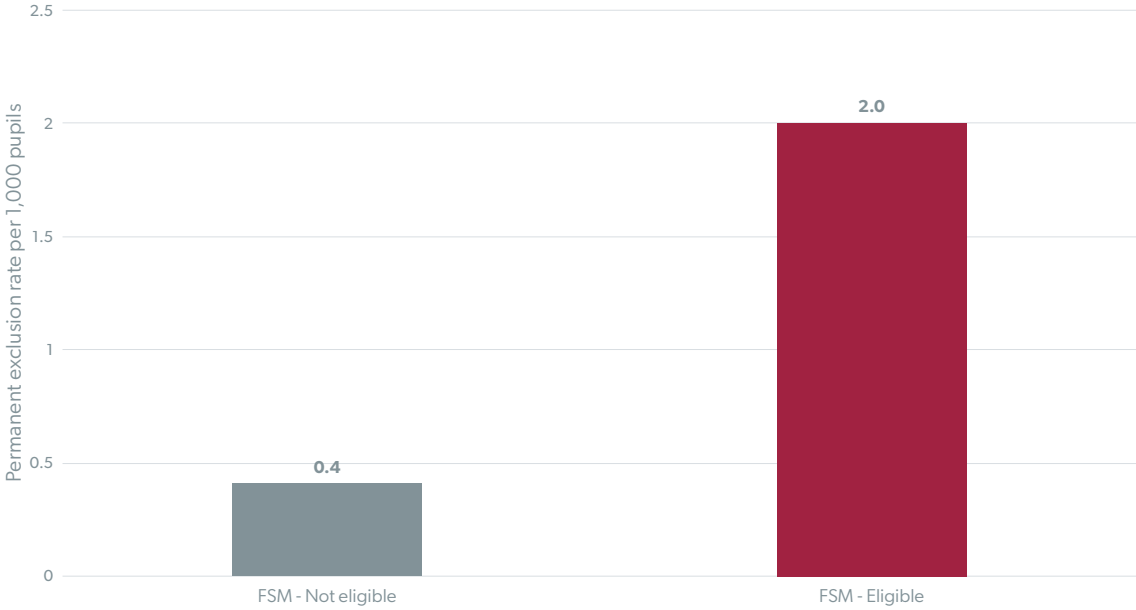
Certain factors increase the likelihood of pupils facing formal exclusion. Excluded pupils are more prone to having additional vulnerabilities, such as special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or socio-economic disadvantages. Of the permanently excluded group, 59 percent were eligible for free school meals, and 47 percent were receiving some form of SEN support.<sup>46</sup>

Figure 3: 2021/22 Suspension and multiple suspension rates by free school meal eligibility



Source: Department for Education, 2023. "Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22"

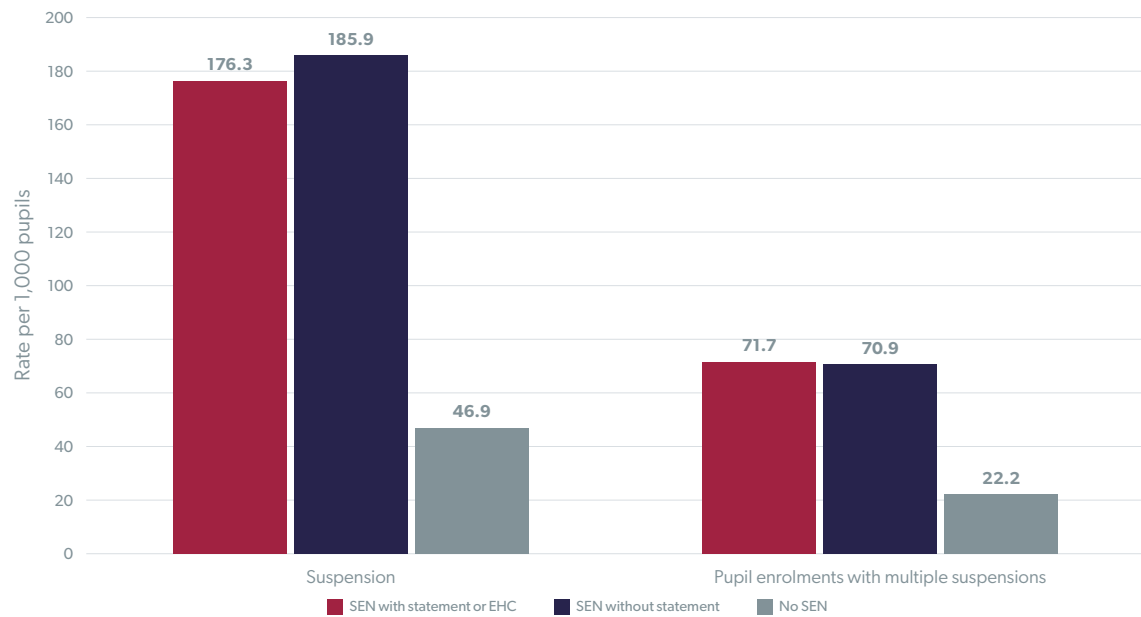
Figure 4: 2021/22 permanent exclusion rate by free school meal eligibility



Source: Department for Education, 2023. "Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22"

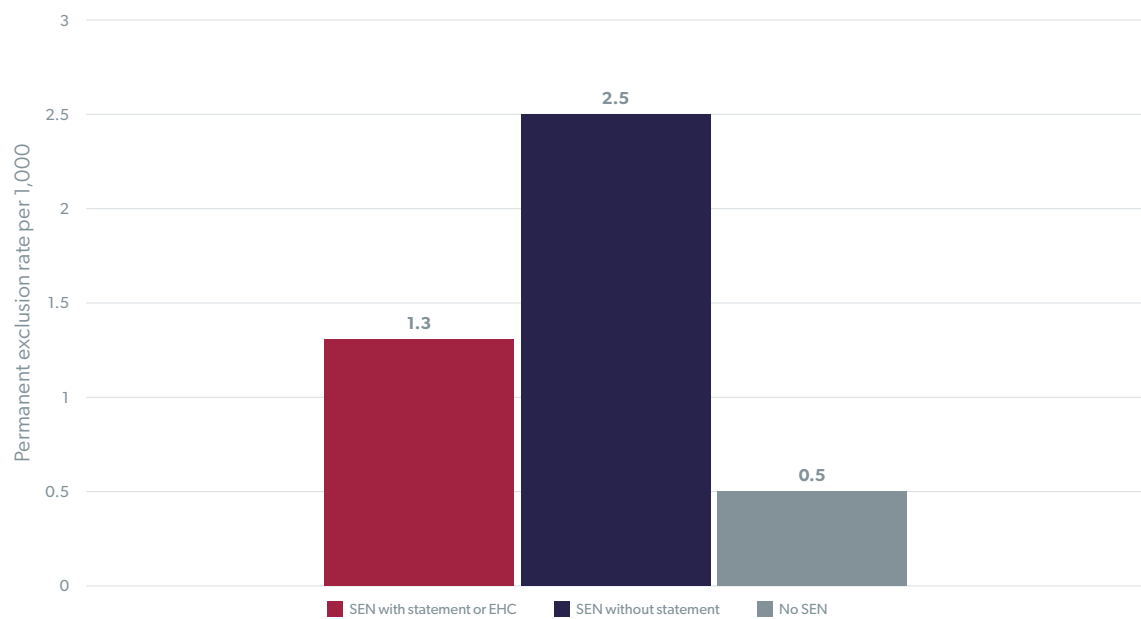
46 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

Figure 5: 2021/22 suspension and multiple suspension rates by special educational need status



Source: Department for Education, 2023. "Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22"

Figure 6: 2021/22 permanent exclusion rate by special educational need status

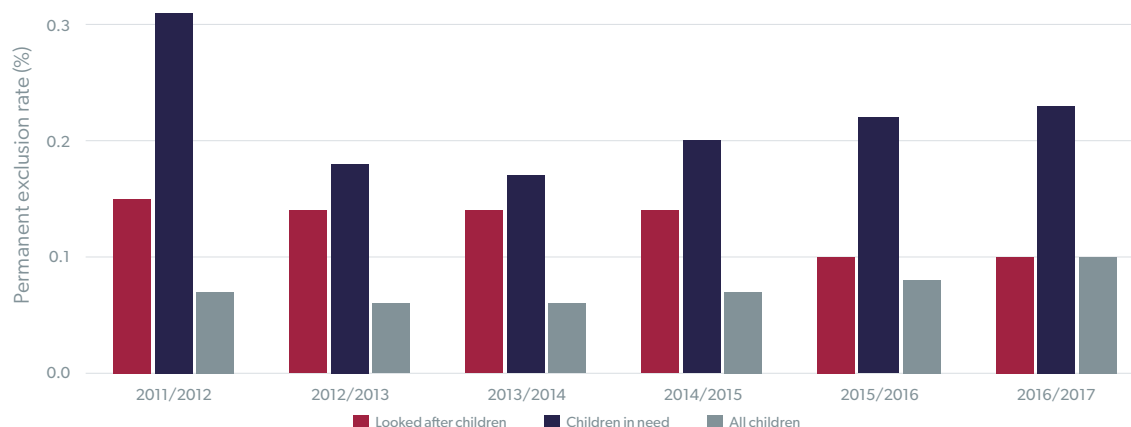


Source: Department for Education, 2023. "Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22"

In addition, the Timpson review of School Exclusions established that looked after children and those with children in need plans are disproportionately represented in exclusion statistics.<sup>47</sup>

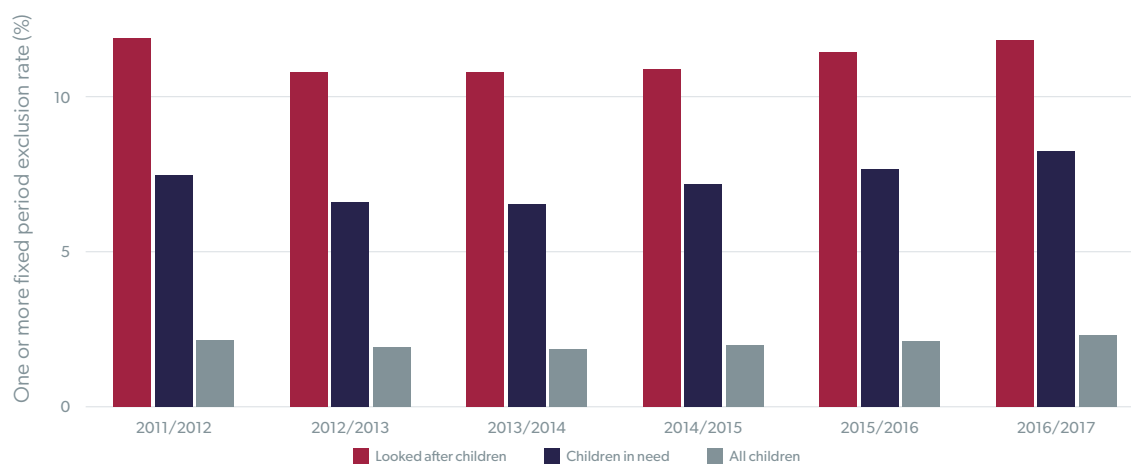
47 Timpson, Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 2019

Figure 7: The permanent exclusion rate by looked after status over time



Source: Timpson, *Timpson Review of School Exclusion*, 2019

Figure 8: The suspension and multiple suspension rate by looked after status over time



Source: Timpson, *Timpson Review of School Exclusion*, 2019

The overrepresentation of vulnerable pupils in exclusion statistics indicates that inclusive practice is falling short and suggests a failure to fully accommodate pupils with additional vulnerabilities in mainstream education.

The high volume of exits from mainstream schooling has put pressure on the rest of the education system. Demand for specialist interventions for pupils with complex behavioural needs has increased, and consequently the capacity of special schools and alternative provision has reduced.<sup>48</sup> As pressure on these alternative education settings increases, schools and local authorities have resorted to other options, such as unregistered education providers. Research indicates that in January 2023, some 20,000 pupils were attending unregistered alternative provision.<sup>49</sup> Research has also shown that increasing demand has strained PRU capacity, with an estimated 29 per cent of local authorities that have PRUs reporting enrolment figures that match or exceed capacity.<sup>50</sup>

48 Department for Education, *SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time*, 2022

49 Centre for Social Justice, *Out in the Open*, 2023

50 IntegratED, *IntegratED 2023 Annual Report*, 2023



## Informal exclusion

Informal (or unofficial) exclusions are those that are not recorded as exclusions in the official data.<sup>51</sup> Informal exclusions are an important part of inclusion discussions because they represent alternative routes by which pupils are removed from the classroom. Many of these routes are not formally recorded, meaning data is patchy.

Research conducted by Education Policy Institute (EPI) has previously categorised many of these informal exclusions as “unexplained exits” given the lack of clarity on how or why pupils left mainstream education.<sup>52</sup>

Table 1: Types of informal exclusion

	INFORMAL EXCLUSION TYPE	DEFINITION
Off-roll movement	Managed moves	Voluntary agreements between schools, parents/carers and a pupil, for that pupil to change school or educational programme under controlled circumstances. <sup>53</sup>
	Moves to home education	The decision by parents to provide education for their children at home – or at home and in some other way which they choose – instead of sending them to school full-time. <sup>54</sup>
On-roll movement	Dual registration	Arrangements where pupils attend a second school either part-time or full-time to receive education that is complimentary to the education they receive at their main school. <sup>55</sup> In attendance collection it is denoted by ‘Code D’.
	B-codes	Attending an off-site educational activity that has been approved by the school and supervised by someone authorised by the school. <sup>56</sup> In attendance collection it is denoted by ‘Code B’.
	Moves to internal alternative provision	An internal exclusion where a pupil remains in school but is removed from their normal classes. <sup>57</sup>
	Persistent/ Severe absence	A pupil is classified as persistently absent if they miss 10 per cent or more of their own possible sessions in school. A pupil is severely absent if they miss 50 per cent or more of possible sessions. <sup>58</sup>

51 IPPR, Making the Difference, 2017

52 Education Policy Institute, Unexplained exits, 2019

53 Education Policy Institute, Unexplained exits, 2019

54 Department for Education, Elective home education Departmental guidance for local authorities, 2019

55 IntegratED, Annual Report 2021, 2022

56 Department for Education, Working together to improve school attendance, 2022

57 EPI, Variation in pupil inclusion practices across schools: findings from the second wave of the DEEP survey, 2023

58 Department for Education, Pupil absence statistics: methodology, 2023

## Managed moves

These arrangements between schools, or between schools and APs, are often used in efforts to avoid permanently excluding pupils. It is illegal to arrange a managed move without parental consent,<sup>59</sup> however research has indicated that many parents are coerced with the threat of permanent exclusion should they object to the move.<sup>60</sup> For this reason, Ofsted has stated that an inappropriate use of managed moves constitutes illegal off-rolling.<sup>61</sup>

It is hard to quantify managed moves because the data is not collected at a national level. In 2021, the Department for Education held a consultation on managed moves, in an effort to understand how frequently they are used, but no official figures have been published.<sup>62</sup>

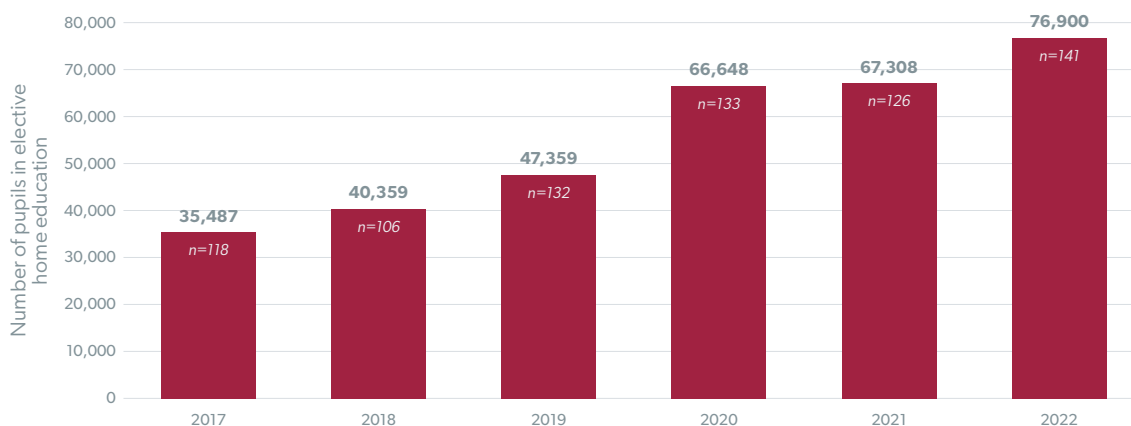
Using dual registration figures for placements between mainstream schools, EPI has estimated the number of managed moves, recording an estimated 4,682 managed moves in 2014, rising to 8,874 in 2018.<sup>63</sup>

## Moves to home education

In most instances, the decision to home educate is made freely, driven by parental philosophy regarding education. However, in some cases parents are dissatisfied with the school's capacity to meet their child's educational needs, leading them to remove their child from the school roll. Particularly alarming is the link between off-rolling and home education. In recent years, research has exposed instances of vulnerable and/or lower performing pupils who are coerced into moves to home education following the threat of exclusion from school.<sup>64</sup>

Data on home education is not comprehensive, although research suggests that numbers have been increasing since at least 2011/12.<sup>65</sup> In recent years collection methods have improved, although until the government implement a Register of Children Not In School, gaps in the data will remain.<sup>66</sup>

Figure 9: Numbers of pupils in home education in the Autumn term, by number of reporting local authorities (n=number of reporting local authorities)



Source: ACDS, 2021 and DfE statistics, 2023.<sup>67</sup>

59 Child Law Advice, Managed Moves

60 Education Policy Institute, Unexplained exits, 2019

61 Tes, Ofsted admits it failed to flag off-rolling, 2021

62 Department for Education, Behaviour management strategies, in-school units and managed moves: call for evidence, 2021

63 Education Policy Institute, Unexplained exits, 2019

64 Centre for Social Justice, Out of Sight and Out of Mind, 2022

65 IPPR, Making the Difference, 2017

66 Centre for Social Justice, Out of Sight and Out of Mind, 2022

67 ACDS, Elective Home Education Survey 2021, 2021 and Department for Education, Elective Home Education, 2023

The most reliable estimates for home education figures are derived from the partial collections made by local authorities. The latest data estimates 97,600 children were in elective home education at the census date in Summer term 2023. This includes adjustments made for non-response and is based on a figure of 94,100 reported by 97% of local authorities.<sup>68</sup>

### *Dual registration*

Pupils may be dual registered at an alternative provider for a short period of time as part of a wider programme of support. However, in some instances, dual registration is used long-term and pupils can be attending their subsidiary school exclusively for several years while remaining on the roll of their parent school.

At the Spring census day in 2023, 11,987 pupils were dual registered in state-maintained AP.<sup>69</sup> Not all of these pupils will be out of the mainstream classroom full-time, however market analysis has previously indicated that at least 75 per cent of AP placements are full-time.<sup>70</sup>

As with excluded pupils, dual-registered pupils are disproportionately vulnerable. In January 2023, 57.3 per cent of pupils in school-arranged dual-registration were in receipt of free school meals, compared to 23.8 per cent of the total school population.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, 9 per cent had an education and health care plan (EHCP) and a further 47 per cent were in receipt of SEN support,<sup>72</sup> compared to 4.3 per cent and 13.0 per cent respectively among the total school population.<sup>73</sup>

### *B-coding*

Similar to dual registered pupils, pupils on B-codes receive part or most of their education outside of the mainstream setting. While in many cases this will be for a short-term educational activity, some pupils are B-coded long-term while they attend alternative provision.<sup>74</sup>

There are no national statistics produced on the number of pupils who experience a B code throughout the academic year, however research conducted by FFT Education Datalab has provided some insight into the scale of B coding. It was estimated that in the Autumn 2022 term 33,000 pupils were regularly educated off-site (for 4 weeks or more), accounting for 0.47 per cent of the school population.<sup>75</sup>

As with exclusions, the rate of B-codes peaks in Years 10 and 11, and pupils with EHCPs are more likely to experience B-coding.<sup>76</sup>

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68 Department for Education, Elective Home Education, 2023

69 CSJ analysis of FOI data from the Department for Education

70 ISOS Partnership, Alternative provision market analysis, 2018

71 IntegratED, Annual Report 2023, 2023

72 IntegratED, Annual Report 2023, 2023

73 Department for Education, Special educational needs in England, 2023

74 IntegratED, Annual Report 2023, 2023

75 FFT Education Datalab, Attendance code b not absent but not present at school, 2023

76 FFT Education Datalab, Attendance code b not absent but not present at school, 2023

*Moves to internal alternative provision*

Transitions to internal alternative provision represent a form of informal exclusion where pupils stay on-site but are nonetheless removed from mainstream classrooms. There is no formal guidance on the use of internal alternative provision.<sup>77</sup> Given the lack of a formal definition, internal AP may be also be referred to by different names, for example as isolation rooms or internal inclusion units.

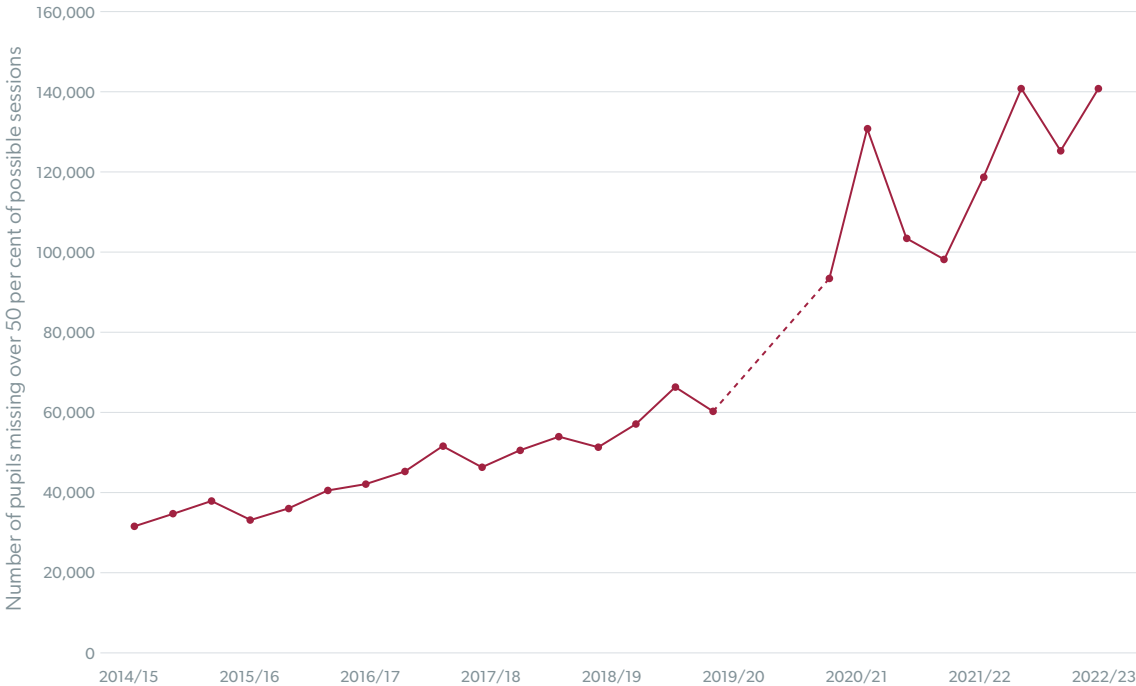
No data is recorded at a national level on the numbers of pupils sent to internal AP, or on the number of schools using internal AP. However, survey data suggests that 97.4 per cent of secondary schools conduct some form of internal exclusion, and that 24 per cent of placements remain there for over a year before returning to normal classroom lessons.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, the CSJ has heard anecdotally from education practitioners that the use of internal AP has grown particularly sharply since the pandemic.<sup>79</sup>

*Persistent and Severe absence*

Absence, unlike other forms of exclusion listed so far, is not imposed by schools, though schools do of course have an important role in preventing it. However, the impact of persistent absence on a pupil's education is similar to informal exclusions, as absent pupils fail to access their education. This is particularly true of severely absent pupils, who miss at least half of their school time. Furthermore, deteriorating attendance points to a heightened risk of exclusion.<sup>80</sup>

School absence rates have increased significantly post-pandemic. In the 2023 Spring term, just under one and a half million pupils were persistently absent, and of these over 140,000 were severely absent.<sup>81</sup>

Figure 10: Severe absence termly figures over time



Source: Department for Education, Pupil absence in schools in England, 2023

77 EPI, Variation in pupil inclusion practices across schools: findings from the second wave of the DEEP survey, 2023

78 IFF research, School and College Panel – June 2023, 2023

79 EPI, Variation in pupil inclusion practices across schools: findings from the second wave of the DEEP survey, 2023

80 Social Finance, Who's at risk of exclusion, 2020

81 Department for Education, Pupil absence in schools in England, 2023

Research by the CSJ has identified that the drivers behind the recent increases in absence include heightened anxiety and mental health concerns, unmet special educational needs, disrupted home environments, and disadvantage.<sup>82</sup> Added to this are changes in parental attitudes post-pandemic, as 28 per cent of parents agree that the pandemic has shown it is not essential for children to attend school every day.<sup>83</sup> These factors often overlap to create conditions which make it very difficult for pupils to engage fully with their education.<sup>84</sup>

Pupils eligible for free school meals, pupils with special educational needs and pupils who live in disadvantaged areas are more likely to be persistently and severely absent their peers.<sup>85</sup>

## The case for change

The increasing volume of vulnerable pupils being excluded from mainstream schools - whether formally or informally - in recent years, signals that mainstream education is not adequately meeting a rising proportion of pupils' needs. Informal and formal exclusion figures are up year-on-year, pupils with additional vulnerabilities are disproportionately excluded, and capacity in alternative education settings is diminishing. These trends are unsustainable.

The rest of this report delves into three key drivers of formal and informal exclusions and provides the basis for effective change. The next chapter looks at the mounting pressures on mainstream schools, assessing how issues originating beyond the school gates are creating a challenging climate for inclusion. The third chapter scrutinises the accountability framework, analysing how perverse incentives contribute to increased exclusionary practice. The final chapter explores the strategies and interventions that schools implement within mainstream settings to foster more inclusive practice. Finally, this report outlines our plan for change, to bring about an inclusive school system that enables children to thrive.

This report is a product of interviews and discussions with school leaders, education practitioners, local authorities, and charities supporting pupils at risk of exclusion.

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82 Centre for Social Justice, *Lost and not found*, 2022

83 Centre for Social Justice, *The Missing Link*, 2024

84 Anna Freud, *Addressing emotionally based school avoidance*, 2023

85 Centre for Social Justice, *School Absence Tracker*, 2023

# Pressure on schools

Our research highlighted three key themes which participants identified as barriers to inclusion in school.

One recurring theme, when discussing inclusion with education practitioners, is the increasing pressures arising from issues beyond the school gates. The cost-of-living crisis, high numbers of children with diagnosed and undiagnosed SEND, and successive COVID lockdowns have all contributed to an environment that is stretching schools' resources. Pupils are facing challenges which put them at greater risk of exclusion, while schools have reduced capacity to deliver an inclusive approach. The lack of capacity among external agencies to support both school-age and pre-school pupils exacerbates the challenge.

This tidal wave of need is culminating in a creaking system that is reaching breaking point. Increasingly, schools struggle to deliver early intervention and are only able to react once pupils hit crisis point.

## The cost-of-living crisis

The link between poverty and inclusion is well-established.<sup>86, 87</sup> Pupils from low-income families face additional barriers to engaging in education, and consequently this group is overrepresented in formal exclusion and absence statistics, as well as among alternative provision and home education populations.<sup>88, 89, 90, 91</sup>

The CSJ heard how some disadvantaged families cannot access basics such as food, toiletries or clothes. In some instances, pupils even lack a bed to sleep in. Practitioners also relayed instances of pupils with no books or internet access at home – with some lacking any kind of stimuli whatsoever. Without any means to study outside of school, pupils disengage with the curriculum and fall behind in lessons.

The cost-of-living crisis is exacerbating these challenges. Education practitioners reported that more pupils are experiencing barriers to education stemming from poverty, and that these barriers are increasingly difficult to overcome. National economic hardship has squeezed the poorest families the hardest, as inflationary pressures have forced low-income households to cut their non-essential spending by the largest margin.<sup>92</sup> As a result, there is increased pressure on schools to support this cohort.

Evidence indicates that the poorest pupils are disengaging from education at unprecedented rates. The annual permanent exclusion rate for pupils on free school meals is now five times higher than that of their more affluent peers – marking the first time it has reached this level.<sup>93</sup> A similar trend can be seen among severely absent pupils, with children on free school meals over 3 times as likely to be severely absent than their classmates.<sup>94</sup>

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86 Institute for Public Policy Research, Making the Difference, 2017

87 Royal Society of Arts, Pinball Kids: preventing school exclusions, 2020

88 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

89 Department for Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics, 2023

90 Department for Education, Pupil absence in schools in England, 2023

91 Centre for Social Justice, Out of sight and out of mind, 2022

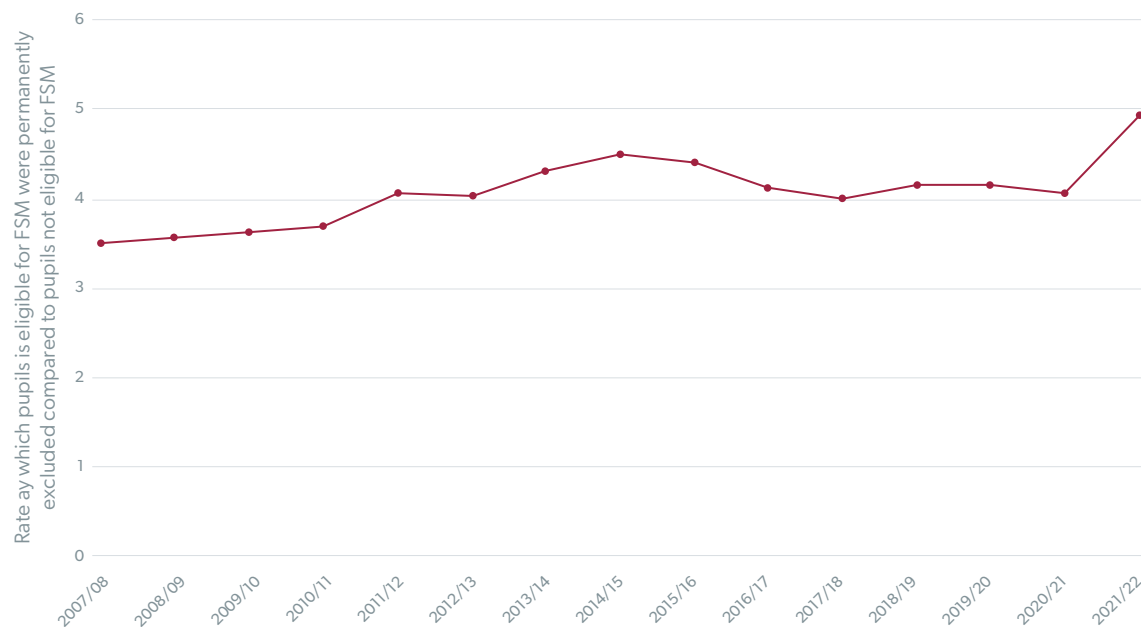
92 Centre for Social Justice, On Target Protecting vulnerable households from the inflation crisis, 2022

93 IntegratED, Annual Report 2023, 2023

94 Centre for Social Justice, School Absence Tracker, 2023

These patterns indicate a strengthening of the relationship between socio-economic status and education outcomes, posing a risk that the most disadvantaged pupils are left behind. Reflecting these worrying developments, the key stage 4 education attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers has reached its highest level in over a decade.<sup>95</sup>

Figure 11: Permanent exclusion rates by free school meal eligibility over time



Source: CSJ analysis of Department for Education exclusion statistics<sup>96</sup>

Figure 12: Autumn term severe absence rates by free school meal eligibility



Source: Department for Education, Pupil absence in schools in England, 2023<sup>97</sup>

95 Department for Education, Key stage 4 Performance, 2023

96 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

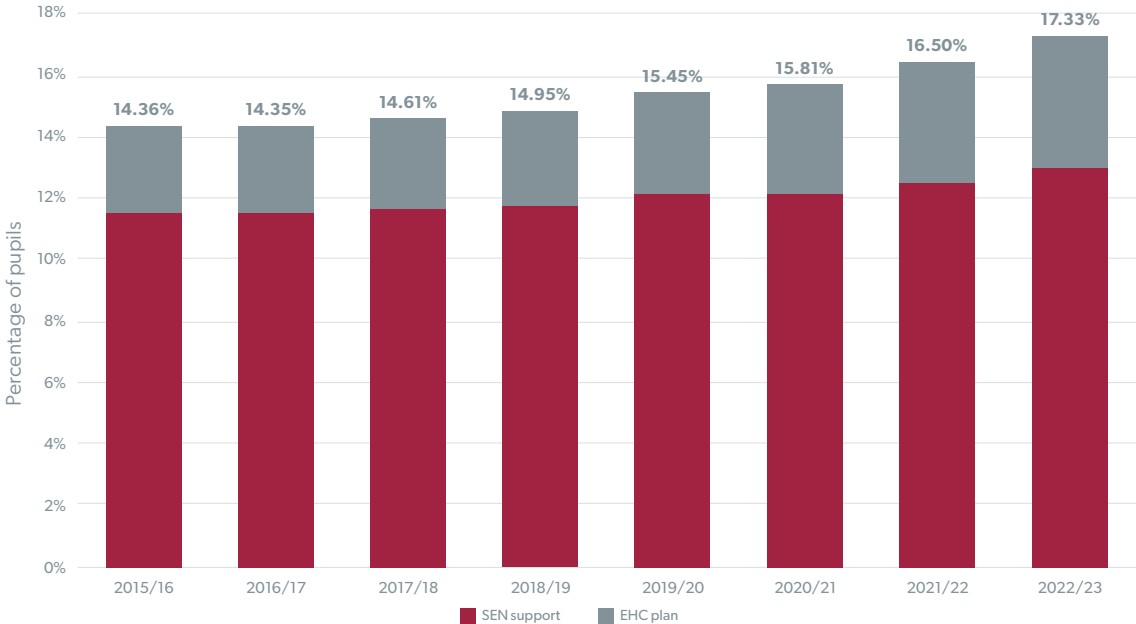
97 Department for Education, Pupil absence in schools in England, 2023

As the cost-of-living crisis persists and the relationship between disadvantage and exclusion strengthens, the risk of children living in poverty falling through cracks in the education system increases. With these challenges becoming more widespread, the pressure on schools to support the poorest pupils intensifies.

## The SEND crisis

The rate of pupils receiving Special Educational Need (SEN) support, with or without an Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP), has grown steadily in recent years. This presents a serious challenge for inclusion, as pupils with SEN are at higher risk of exclusion, absence, home education, and attending alternative provision.<sup>98, 99, 100, 101</sup>

Figure 13: Proportion of the pupil cohort with special educational needs over time



Source: Department for Education, Special educational needs in England, 2023

98 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

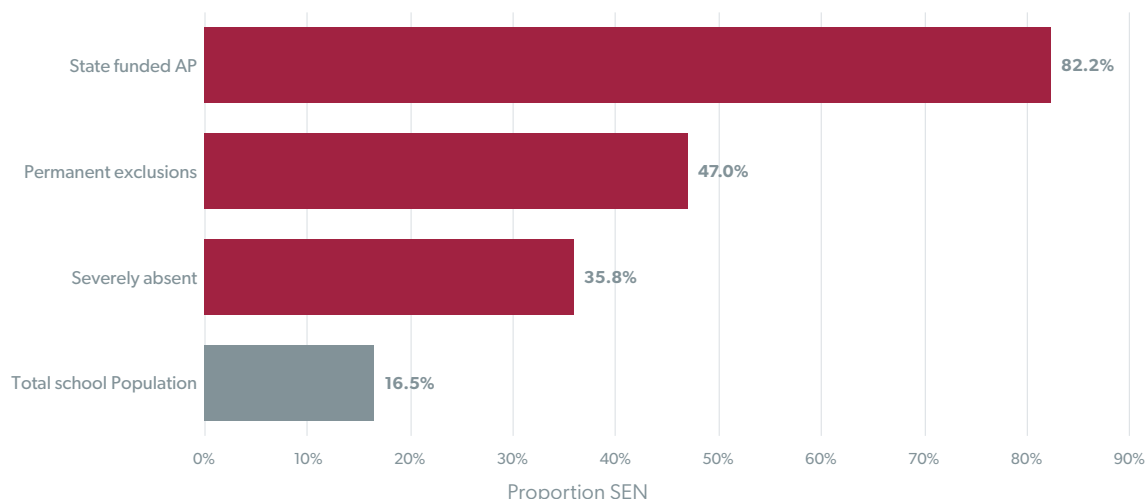
99 Department for Education, Pupil absence in schools in England, 2023

100 Centre for Social Justice, Out of sight and out of mind, 2022

101 Department for Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics: Academic year 2022/23, 2023



Figure 14: Proportion of pupils with SEN in different pupil cohorts 2021/22



Source: CSJ analysis of Department for Education statistics<sup>102</sup>

In 2021, the Department for Education documented the inability of the education system to cope with the level of SEN in the sector.<sup>103</sup> The SEND Review found that pupils with SEN are increasingly failing to access appropriate interventions in a timely way, leaving large numbers of pupils in the education system with unmet need.<sup>104</sup>

The CSJ heard that schools are ill-equipped to meet the level of need they are facing, and that a lack of capacity in external agencies was contributing to this issue. Children and young people struggle to get the diagnoses needed for EHCPs as there are lengthy delays in the assessment process due to GP and local authority capacity constraints. Pupils waiting for an assessment cannot access appropriate support which can result in needs becoming more complex.

The deepening SEN crisis has significant implications for inclusion. As pupil need intensifies and remains unmet or even undiagnosed, young people struggle to engage in school. Those who find it challenging to participate in lessons are more prone to disruptive behaviour, which can lead to exclusion. Often alternative provision is used to help meet demand for specialist interventions, as pupils that cannot access appropriate support mainstream settings are placed in AP while they wait to secure an EHCP assessment.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, parental concerns about unaddressed and unmet needs contribute to recent increases in pupils being withdrawn from school for home education.<sup>106</sup>

Stakeholders stressed the importance of early identification and intervention in addressing these issues, reiterating the conclusions of the DfE's SEND and AP Improvement Plan.<sup>107</sup> However, the CSJ learned that lack of capacity among external agencies is hindering the ability of education practitioners to intervene early. These concerns are reinforced by the 2023 National Behaviour Survey report, which found that only 38 per cent of School leaders and teachers believe that external specialist support services are "at least somewhat timely" and 41 per cent believe they are "not timely at all".<sup>108</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Department for Education, Pupil absence in schools in England, 2023; Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023; Department for Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics: Academic year 2022/23, 2023

<sup>103</sup> Department for Education, SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time, 2022

<sup>104</sup> Department for Education, SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time, 2022

<sup>105</sup> Department for Education, SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time, 2022

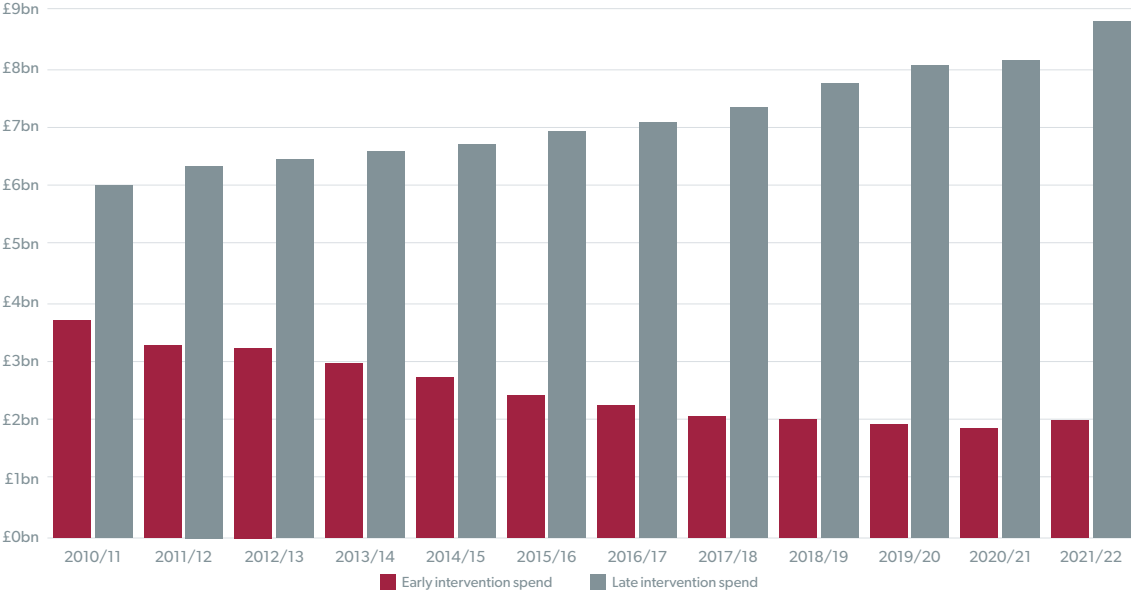
<sup>106</sup> Centre for Social Justice, Out of sight and out of mind, 2022

<sup>107</sup> Department for Education, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan, 2023

<sup>108</sup> Department for Education, National Behaviour Survey Report, 2023

Without early intervention, pupil needs go unmet and become more complex, compounding the issue and putting pupils at a higher risk of exclusion. However, increasing need combined with pressures on resources has resulted in local authorities increasingly resorting to late-stage intervention strategies to address children’s needs at crisis point.<sup>109</sup> This approach not only fails the individual, but is highly inefficient, costing more in the long-term.

Figure 15: Early and late intervention spending by local authorities on children’s services over time



Source: Pro bono economics<sup>110</sup>

As the SEN crisis deepens, unless action is taken to improve inclusion in schools, the pupil cohort is increasingly at risk of informal or formal exclusion.

## The COVID-19 pandemic

COVID lockdowns have had a drastic effect on school inclusion. Since the pandemic, persistent and severe absence has increased, suspensions have reached their highest ever level, and permanent exclusions have rocketed.<sup>111, 112</sup>

Education practitioners relayed the challenges that school closures presented for children and young people. Mental health conditions have become more widespread and more complex – particularly anxiety – with some pupils too anxious to attend school, contributing to soaring rates of persistent and severe absence.<sup>113</sup> Tackling these issues is complicated by lengthy backlogs restricting access to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The threshold for accessing immediate support is incredibly high. Often pupils who have a complex array of different needs do not meet this threshold in any one field, so are left on waiting-lists of two years or more.

109 Pro Bono Economics, Children’s services spending 2010-11 to 2021-22, 2023  
 110 Pro bono economics, The well-worn path Children’s services spending 2010-11 to 2021-22, 2023  
 111 Centre for Social Justice, School Absence Tracker, October 2023  
 112 Department for Education, Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023  
 113 Centre for Social Justice, Lost and not found, 2022

The mental health of parents has also suffered. This can present a further barrier to attendance, with research uncovering cases of pupils staying at home to support parents with mental health challenges, and cases of poor parental mental health exacerbating issues with children’s mental health.<sup>114</sup>

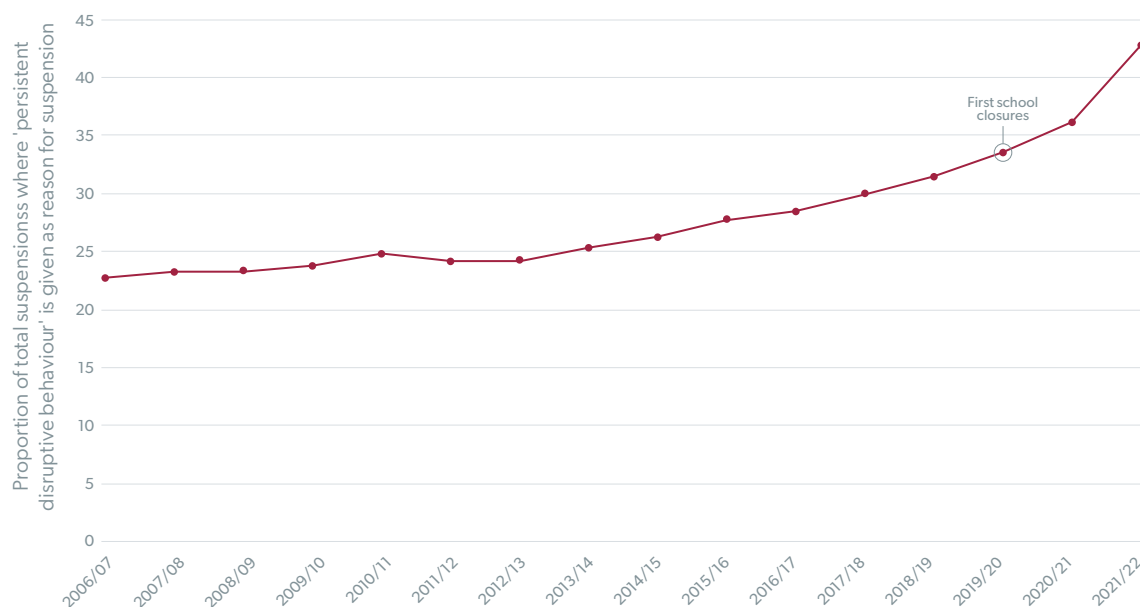
The link between parental attitudes and attendance speaks to a shift in parents’ perception of school over COVID.<sup>115</sup> Recent polling commissioned by the CSJ found that school closures weakened the social contract around the importance of daily school attendance, with over one in four parents agreeing that the pandemic had shown daily school attendance was not essential.<sup>116</sup>

In some cases, the relationship between parents and schools has totally broken down. Practitioners reported cases of parents acting aggressively towards schools – attacking them on social media and through letters. Where grievances occur, they often relate to the inability of schools – whether real or perceived – to meet their child’s needs, which can be a frustration for schools who are themselves constrained by the delays in SEN assessments.

Fractured relationships between schools and families pose challenges for inclusion. This is evident in the fact that a breakdown in parent-school relationship is often cited as a contributing factor in a parent’s decision to home educate their child.<sup>117</sup> Conversely, healthy parent-school relationships are a force for good and as this report will go on to detail, school-based interventions which leverage a strong parent-school relationship have been proven to effectively combat pupil disengagement.<sup>118</sup>

School closures are also linked to an increase in pupil behaviour issues. Education practitioners report that behavioural challenges leading to exclusion are increasingly common. This is reflected in national data trends, which show that the share of total suspensions caused by ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’ has increased steadily in recent years, and surged in the wake of school closures.

Figure 16: ‘Persistent disruptive behaviour’ is increasingly a reason given for suspensions



Source: CSJ analysis of DfE exclusion statistics<sup>119</sup>

114 Centre for Social Justice, Lost and not found, 2022

115 Public First, Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis, 2023

116 Centre for Social Justice, The Missing Link, 2024

117 Centre for Social Justice, Out of sight and out of mind, 2022

118 Ford, T.J., Paget, A., Parker, C et al., Which children and young people are excluded from school? Findings from a large British birth cohort study, the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), 2017

119 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

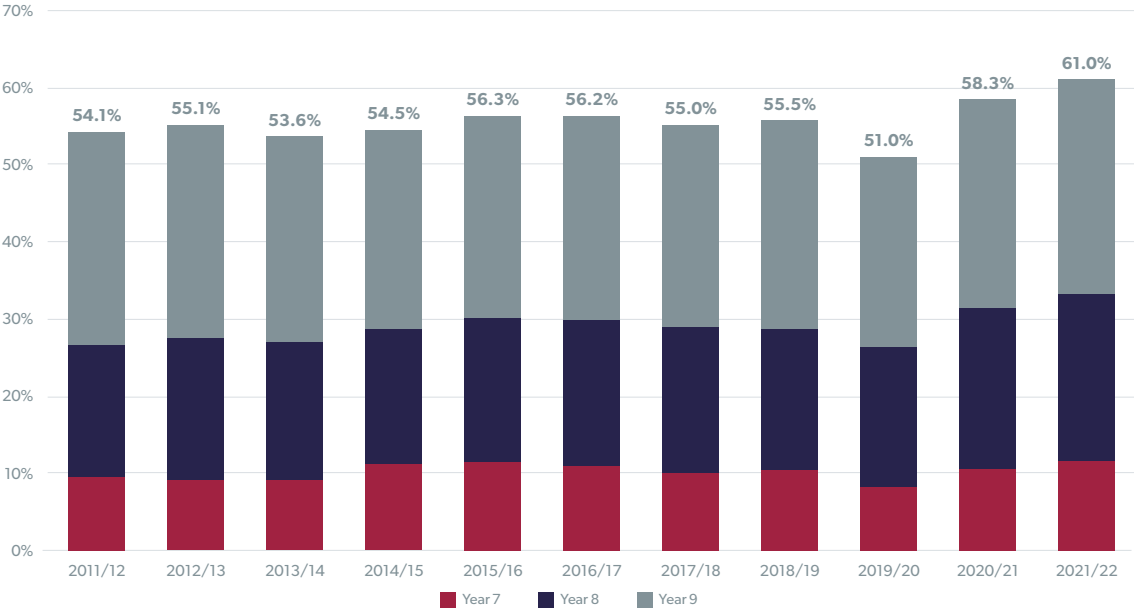
Many stakeholders suggested that the surge in persistent disruptive behaviour is, in part, a result of increased disengagement with school. Elevated rates of persistent and severe absence were identified as exacerbating factors, as when pupils with low attendance do attend school, they have often fallen behind, making it harder to engage in lessons.

The CSJ heard that the increase in persistent disruptive behaviour is also a consequence of the lack of socialisation that many pupils suffered from during the pandemic. Pupils were unable to develop key social skills during formative years, which has resulted in complex behavioural issues.

The impact on pupil’s social development is illustrated by the exclusion trends among pupils in the primary-secondary transition years. Education practitioners noted that pupils in transition years (Years 5, 6, and 7 in the 2019/20 school year) at the point of school closures felt the impact of the pandemic most keenly, as the lack of the socialisation was intensified by the pressure of the transition to secondary school. The CSJ heard how this cohort, who were in Years 7, 8, and 9 during the 2021/22 academic year, struggle to ‘get along’ with their peers and present behavioural issues more frequently.

This is reflected in national exclusions data, which demonstrates that in 2021/22 Years 7-9 constituted 61.0 per cent of total secondary school permanent exclusions, the highest share among Years 7-9 on record.

Figure 17: Years 7-9 permanent exclusions as a proportion of total secondary school age exclusions



Source: CSJ analysis of DfE exclusion statistics<sup>120</sup>

120 Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

### **Case study: Power2 – Power2 Progress**

Power2 supports vulnerable children and young people to improve their wellbeing so they can thrive and reach their full potential. It does this by helping them identify their strengths, address their challenges and develop their skills. The charity's wide evidence-based early intervention programmes provide intensive engagement to build positive relationships and effect change before long-term negative outcomes become inevitable.

One of Power2's interventions, known as 'Power2 Progress', aims to support pupils to transition from primary to secondary through a programme of peer mentoring. Power2 trains a Year 8 pupil to mentor a Year 6 pupil, both of whom are facing additional challenges. The 13-week programme builds on the overarching Power2 principle that through helping others, young people experience life-changing benefits in school and in their personal lives.

The peer mentoring model has mutual benefit for the pupils. It is designed to help Year 6 pupils to make positive transitions into secondary school life, but at the same time, Year 8 pupils benefit from the experience of mentoring and inspiring a younger pupil.

Of the young people supported in the pilot programme:

- 94 per cent of Year 8s increased their self-confidence
- 86 per cent of Year 8s reported improved communication skills
- 71 per cent of Year 6s reported feeling more ready for secondary school

# Accountability measures

Exclusions are necessary in some instances, for example where a pupil poses a risk to the safety of pupils and staff. However, the CSJ has learned that the school accountability system disincentivises an inclusive approach, meaning some pupils face exclusion before alternatives have been exhausted.

School quality is predicated on academic attainment, which is critical to the long-term prospects of pupils. Indeed, academic attainment is a strong indicator of future earnings<sup>121</sup> and so rightly central to the assessment of a school's quality.

However, measuring and encouraging high academic performance should not inadvertently create conditions which disincentivise inclusive practice and adversely affect vulnerable pupil groups, widening educational inequalities. The pressure to perform should not be so great as to incentive offloading pupils who do not perform strongly academically.

## Performance data

Academic performance data is a key measure of school quality which schools are held accountable for. Measures of key stage 4 (KS4) academic performance are perceived as particularly important indicators of school quality.

Whilst it is vitally important for schools to be held to account for academic progress, education practitioners warned that, under pressure to raise attainment scores, some schools intentionally exclude and off-roll lower-performing pupils (often with additional vulnerabilities) in order to lift average grades. These behaviours have been previously highlighted in national pupil enrolment statistics, which suggest schools move pupils off-roll to avoid being adversely impacted by lower exam scores.<sup>122</sup>

CSJ analysis indicates that such tactics have persisted in recent years. If a pupil is on the school roll at the January census date, then their subsequent KS4 results are attributed to that school.<sup>123</sup> In the 2022/23 academic year there was a spike in pupil referral unit enrolments in Year 11 which occurred shortly before January. This pattern suggests schools are removing pupils with lower attainment, who could compromise the school's overall performance data, before the date at which their results would continue to be attributed to the school.

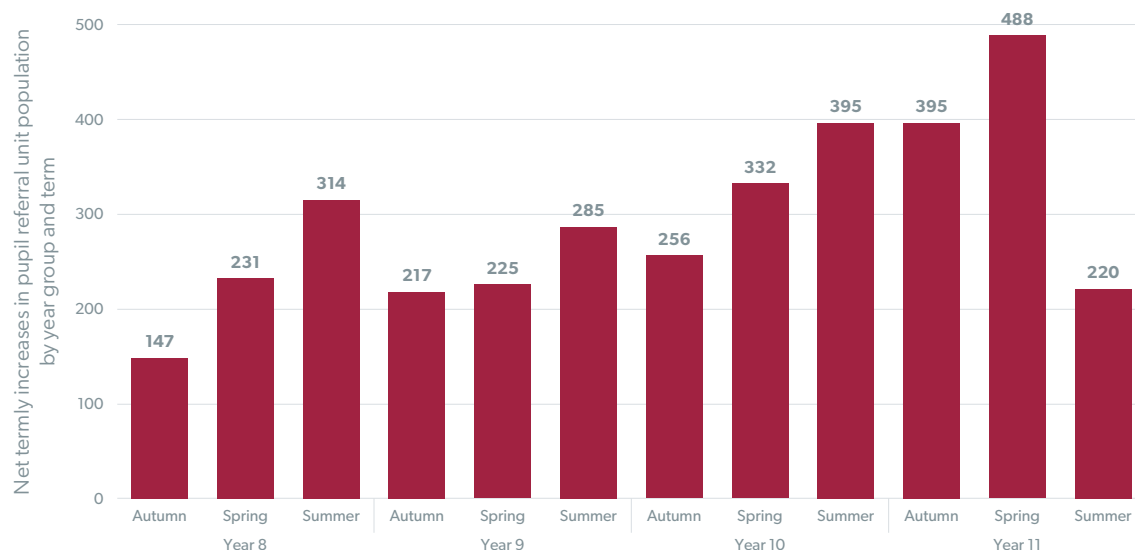
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121 Jeffrey S. Zax, Daniel I. Rees, IQ, Academic Performance, Environment, and Earnings, 2002

122 Royal Society of Arts, Pinball kids, 2020

123 FFT Education Datalab, Who's Left 2018, part four: Our methodology, 2018

Figure 18: Net termly increases in single and main registered pupil referral unit population by year group and term in 2022/23



Source: CSJ analysis of FOI data returned by the Department for Education

In each year group, successive terms record larger net increases in the pupil referral unit population, with the increase peaking by the final census date of the academic year in June. The exception to this is Year 11, where the largest net increase is seen by the Spring (rather than Summer) term census data. As detailed above, this indicates a surge in pupil referral unit admissions before the January census date.

One pillar of the KS4 performance metrics is Progress 8. This measure was introduced in 2015 to act as a fairer judgement of school quality, by taking into account the different starting points of pupils.<sup>124</sup> Schools that serve disadvantaged pupil cohorts explained to the CSJ that this measure works more effectively than looking at attainment data in isolation, because it acknowledges the progress that pupils have made.

However, while Progress 8 scores are important, many stakeholders told us that pressure to maintain good Progress 8 scores can nonetheless disincentivise inclusive practice. One school explained that its inclusive approach directly undermines its Progress 8 scores. The school takes on relatively large numbers of in-year transfers<sup>125</sup> and SEND pupils in an effort to ensure these pupils have access to education. These pupils perform less well academically, adversely impacting their Progress 8 scores.

The experience of this school is reflected in the data. FFT Datalab analysis has previously highlighted that an inclusive approach to in-year admissions can damage a school's Progress 8 scores,<sup>126</sup> while other analysis has shown that excluding pupils can improve it.<sup>127</sup> FFT Datalab's research uncovered that reweighting Progress 8 data for MATs, to hold them responsible for student outcomes in proportion to the amount of time a pupil spent on the school's roll, could result in a decrease in the gap between those with the highest scores and those in the middle.<sup>128,129</sup>

124 Royal Society of Arts, Pinball kids, 2020

125 London Councils, Seeking school places: Addressing the challenges of in-year admissions in London, 2023

126 FFT Education Datalab, Progress 8: What if we started at the beginning?, 2018

127 FFT Education Datalab, Who's Left 2018, part four: Our methodology, 2018

128 FFT Education Datalab, Who's Left 2018, part four: Our methodology, 2018

129 FFT Education Datalab, Who's Left 2018, part two: What impact would reweighting school league tables have for multi-academy trusts?, 2018

Progress 8 is an important measure of school quality, and certainly does better than previous measures given it contextualises the academic performance of pupils. The issue is the lack of balance, as accountability incentives gear schools towards raising academic performance, while the value of inclusive measures - such as taking in-year transfers - is largely ignored. A high-performing school should be defined as one that does both. Accountability frameworks must drive academic achievement while also recognising and valuing inclusive practice.

## Ofsted

### *Inspections do not value inclusion sufficiently*

Ofsted ratings serve as a crucial gauge of school quality. However, according to a 2023 study, 90 per cent of teachers have a negative view of Ofsted.<sup>130</sup>

Numerous education professionals and stakeholders argue that Ofsted inspections lack sufficient focus on inclusion. They suggested that schools are capable of excelling in Ofsted evaluations while neglecting inclusion, which discourages the allocation of school resources to such practice.

School leaders who do take an inclusive approach voiced frustration that inspectors often overlook their efforts to support vulnerable students. Despite these schools presenting comprehensive pastoral initiatives such as family support and in-school counselling services, inspectors seldom demonstrate much interest in these measures.

By neglecting to acknowledge the significance of measures taken by schools to deliver an inclusive education, Ofsted misses an opportunity to promote and incentivise inclusive practice across the system. Schools committed to an inclusive approach emphasise that their commitment stems from the value placed on it by senior leadership teams, rather than adhering to performance framework expectations. This dynamic leads to a school system dependent on individual school leaders for fostering inclusion, rather than establishing a structured foundation that promotes inclusivity.

The absence of incentives is a key reason many schools do not provide a comprehensive support programme. In the midst of challenges such as increasing numbers of children with SEN and the cost-of-living crisis, the response is too often to opt for the easier route of removing students struggling to engage with their education, rather than implementing interventions that better cater to their needs in the long term.

It should be noted that in 2019 Ofsted made efforts to elevate the status of inclusion in the inspection framework in response to concerns that inspections focused too heavily on academic attainment. The guidance now states that schools should have an inclusive culture which identifies pupils with additional needs early, meets these needs, and helps all pupils to engage with the curriculum and achieve positive outcomes.<sup>131</sup> Schools should have a strategy to address low-attendance and off-rolling, and from 2019 onwards no school can be awarded a good or outstanding judgement without showing that children and young people with SEND achieve good outcomes.<sup>132</sup>

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130 YouGov, YouGov Teacher Track - Ofsted favourability, 2023

131 Ofsted, School Inspection Handbook, 2023

132 Department for Education, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan, 2023

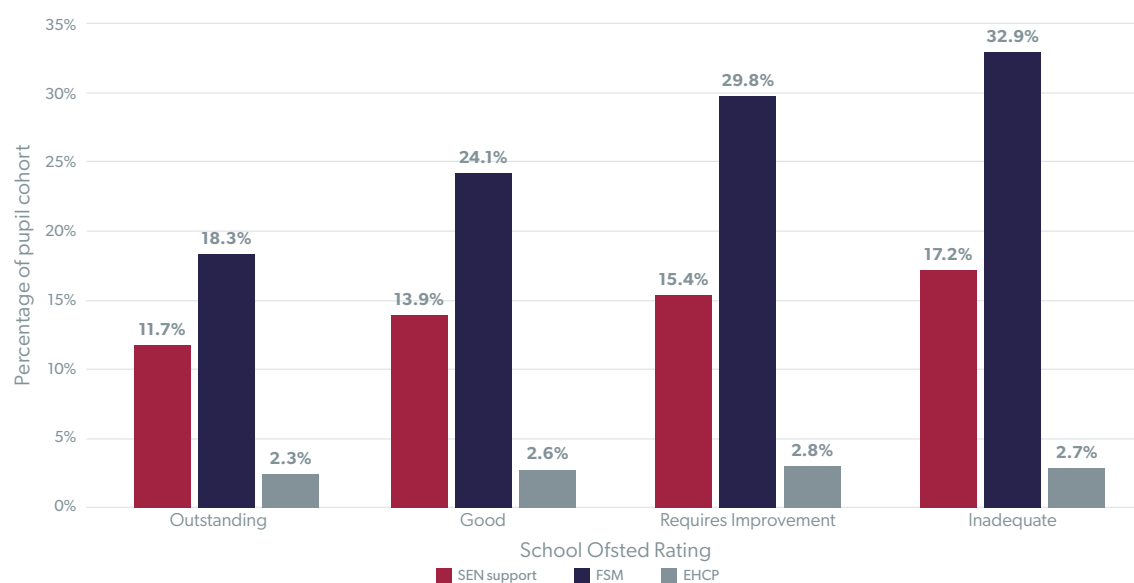


Education practitioners acknowledged these positive steps in the right direction. Nonetheless, despite the guidance underlining the importance of these issues, the inspection framework lacks sufficient emphasis on the significance of inclusive practices, and adjustments to the guidance do not consistently translate to inspection priorities. A particular school noted a misalignment between the guidance content and the aspects inspectors focused on during the actual inspection day. Evidence given to the Education Select Committee’s inquiry into Ofsted reflected this, describing that while Ofsted had changed the framework to include off-rolling, in practice there has been little attention paid to this.<sup>133</sup>

Stakeholders asserted that to adequately emphasise the value of inclusion and instigate a shift in practice proportionate to the scale of need, a dedicated section for inclusion should be incorporated into the school inspection guidance. Presently, the assessment of a school’s approach to inclusion and off-rolling is incorporated within the leadership and management section of graded inspections, while separate sections address exclusions and low attendance.<sup>134</sup> Spreading these key performance indicators across the guidance dilutes the focus on inclusion, deprioritising it in the minds of inspectors and school leaders alike.

The purpose of an effective accountability framework should be to foster school improvement. However, the CSJ heard that Ofsted inspections do not have enough emphasis on facilitating positive change. An analysis of Ofsted inspection outcomes demonstrates that schools with higher proportions of vulnerable pupils are more likely to receive poor judgements,<sup>135</sup> indicating that the education system is too often failing disadvantaged pupils. Beyond simply identifying these issues, Ofsted should play a more active and constructive role in helping schools address them, including through an accountability framework that recognises the value of inclusive practice, particularly in challenging schools.

Figure 19: The rate of additional vulnerabilities in pupil cohorts by the Ofsted rating of the school



Source: Department for Education statistics<sup>136</sup>

133 Education Select Committee, Oral evidence: Ofsted’s work with schools, HC 1507, 2023

134 Ofsted, School Inspection Handbook, 2023

135 Cross referenced data from: GIAS, 2023; Department for Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics, 2023; and Department for Education, Special educational needs in England, 2023

136 Cross referenced data from: GIAS, 2023; Department for Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics, 2023; and Department for Education, Special educational needs in England, 2023

Negative judgements, if not coupled with appropriate recommendations and a plan for improvement, do little to improve school quality and pupil outcomes. The National Audit Office found in 2018 that Ofsted does not know whether its school inspections are having their intended impact to raise the standards of education and improve the quality of children's and young people's lives.<sup>137</sup> Going forward, Ofsted must work more collaboratively with schools in order to improve pupil outcomes.

### *High stakes inspections undermine inclusion*

In 2019, 84 per cent of teachers agreed that Ofsted adds an unacceptable level of burden in the school system.<sup>138</sup> Coupled with this, the CSJ heard from education stakeholders that the high stakes nature of inspections must be tackled to promote inclusion. The 'one word judgement' is central to the perception of a school's quality for teachers and parents alike, yet one-word does encapsulate all the nuance that is needed to demonstrate school quality. The Education Select Committee heard recently that one-word judgements can be "reductionist" and "potentially misleading".<sup>139</sup>

The combination of an assessment framework that does not adequately weight inclusion, and high-stakes, one-word judgements, discourages many schools taking inclusion seriously. Investing time and money in delivering an inclusive education is often not the most efficient way of securing a positive judgement.

Stakeholders explained that replacing single word judgements with report cards would provide a more nuanced judgement of a school's quality that better reflects different elements of performance, including in relation to inclusion.<sup>140</sup>

England's accountability framework is not the only method of judging school quality. Indeed, the Department for Education has recognised that school improvement systems across high performing countries can look very different.<sup>141</sup>

Germany was identified as a useful model for comparison with the UK for school improvement, given it has achieved high-performing status whilst also using inspection-led systems to identify and support low-performing schools. In contrast to England, Germany operates a low-stakes system, with inspection results not generally published and the emphasis of inspection being placed on school quality process criteria rather than outcomes.<sup>142</sup>

Consequently, even schools with good outcomes can be – and often are – identified as underperforming. This means that unlike in England, schools in socially privileged areas that tend to perform well in terms of outcomes are identified as needing improvement.

While there is no evidence which demonstrates a direct link between these approaches and the German system's high-performing status, the case of Germany illustrates that the lower stakes accountability systems and high performance are compatible.

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137 National Audit Office, *Ofsted's inspection of schools*, 2018

138 YouGov, *Teachers' awareness and perceptions of Ofsted - Teacher Attitude Survey 2019 report*, 2019

139 Education Select Committee, *Oral evidence: Ofsted's work with schools*, HC 1507, 2023

140 Education Select Committee, *Oral evidence: Ofsted's work with schools*, HC 1507, 2023

141 Department for Education, *School improvement systems in high performing countries*, 2019

142 Department for Education, *School improvement systems in high performing countries*, 2019

# School approach

The approach taken by schools, day in, day out, is the fundamental determinant of the inclusivity of the education system. Irrespective of the system pressures and incentives already discussed, many schools are going above and beyond to meet the needs of all their pupils. Educational professionals stressed the impact of targeted interventions in maximising pupil engagement and mitigating the risk of exclusion. The success of these interventions provides a valuable insight into how school approaches can facilitate an inclusive ethos.

## Curriculum

Education charities and school leaders underlined the importance of an engaging curriculum as a vehicle for promoting inclusion. School lessons should be both challenging and accessible.

Enrichment activities – such as sports and the arts – have proven impact in facilitating a more inclusive school environment and making the curriculum more accessible. Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) research indicates that integrating enrichment into the school curriculum has tangible benefits, particularly when targeted at disadvantaged pupils.<sup>143</sup> Enrichment programmes support the development of personal and social skills, have a positive impact on engagement and attendance, and are associated with higher attainment.<sup>144</sup>

The CSJ's recent 'Game Changer' report highlights the role of sport in reengaging pupils that may otherwise feel marginalised at school.<sup>145</sup> Non-academic activities represent an opportunity for pupils to engage without the pressure of academic performance. Success allows pupils – particularly those who struggle academically – to continue to have positive associations with school and stay engaged with their education, as well as develop soft skills such as leadership and determination which are so crucial to development.<sup>146</sup>

Stakeholders also emphasised the link between the curriculum and attendance. We heard that pupils are motivated to attend on days with lessons they enjoy, and anecdotal accounts suggest that persistently absent pupils were more inclined to attend on days with sports lessons.

Alongside sport, the arts provide a valuable hook into learning for pupils. Arts participation has been linked to more positive attitudes towards learning and increased well-being, as well as improved academic outcomes in core subjects.<sup>147</sup>

The Education Select Committee has recognised the value of enrichment, recommending the introduction of an enrichment guarantee to combat persistent absence among disadvantaged pupils.<sup>148</sup>

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143 Education Endowment Foundation, Extending school time, 2021

144 Education Endowment Foundation, Extending school time, 2021

145 Centre for Social Justice, Game changer: a plan to transform young lives through sport, 2023

146 Centre for Social Justice, Game changer: a plan to transform young lives through sport, 2023

147 Education Endowment Foundation, Arts participation, 2021

148 House of Commons Education Committee, Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils Seventh Report of Session 2022–23, 2023

### Case study: Inspiring futures – Hive Youth Zone

This six-week programme supports secondary school pupils who are at risk of becoming disengaged from education.

Enrichment activities are central to this programme. The facilities at the Hive Youth Zone include a climbing wall, boxing gym, music suite, art room, and rooftop football pitch. These activities support young people to build confidence, self-esteem, and social skills – breaking down barriers to their education. The relationships they develop with the practitioners also allow pupils to overcome individual challenges, which supports efforts to reintegrate into education.

Right to Succeed have assessed the impact of the Inspiring futures programme by tracking pupil attendance data. Their research shows that the intervention has a marked improvement on school attendance rates. A total of 23 pupils across completed the programme, 19 of whom improved attendance post-intervention. For these young people the average percentage point increase in attendance was 16 per cent. Importantly, the programme proved particularly successful with pupils whose attendance data had a low starting point. Severely absent pupils recorded an average increase in their attendance rates of 20 per cent after the six-week programme, and three pupils improved attendance by 45 per cent or more.

Despite the proven benefits of enrichment, stakeholders noted how league table data focuses closely on core academic subjects, with a particular emphasis on English and Maths.<sup>149</sup> The data tracks pupil uptake and attainment in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects (English, Maths, the Sciences, History or Geography, and a language), as well as the proportion of pupils awarded Grade 5 or above in English and Maths. Technical, vocational, and creative qualifications are given some consideration in Progress 8 and Attainment 8 statistics, but even within these measures English and Maths are given more weighting.<sup>150</sup>

The EBacc was introduced with the intention of supporting social mobility, by ensuring that all pupils benefit from an academic curriculum that was too often restricted to more privileged pupils.<sup>151</sup> The initiative aimed to increase the rate of disadvantaged pupils attending university. However, since its introduction there have been negligible changes in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils attending high quality universities.<sup>152</sup> The proportion of disadvantaged pupils attending any university has increased over time, however this is consistent with trends seen in the wider population and it is unlikely that the EBacc has contributed materially to this shift.<sup>153</sup>

Due to the focus on EBacc subjects, education practitioners have reported a gradual narrowing of the curriculum. Schools are under pressure to perform (exacerbated by the external pressures discussed above), meaning few are willing to divert resources away from the core subjects. With fewer opportunities to undertake creative subjects, the inclusive benefits of enrichment are diminished.

149 Department for Education, Secondary accountability measures Guide for maintained secondary schools, academies and free schools, 2023

150 Department for Education, Secondary accountability measures Guide for maintained secondary schools, academies and free schools, 2023

151 Social Market Foundation, Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister for School Standards, delivers speech on knowledge-rich curriculum to the Social Market Foundation [Transcript], 2021

152 Lloyd and Matthews, Stepping Stone: the future of the EBacc and student progression, 2022

153 Lloyd and Matthews, Stepping Stone: the future of the EBacc and student progression, 2022

Many stakeholders would like to see enrichment play a greater role in the school curriculum. Currently it is often third sector organisations that are plugging this gap by offering programmes alongside the lessons pupils receive in school. It is hugely encouraging that some young people have access to these programmes, however without a mandatory requirement on schools to offer enrichment many pupils will miss out. Previous calls for an enrichment guarantee have proposed an extension of the school day, allowing for 5 hours a week of extra-curricular activities alongside the existing national curriculum.<sup>154</sup>

## Behaviour

School leaders stressed the importance of an orderly learning environment. Disruptive behaviour is not conducive to good learning for the individual or their classmates, and setting clear boundaries in school helps to prepare pupils for working life. Schools in disadvantaged areas particularly emphasised the importance of this approach, asserting that those pupils with turbulent home lives benefit from learning boundaries they may not experience at home.

### *Reasonable consideration*

While the importance of setting boundaries and expectations is clear, discussion with education practitioners revealed that an approach to behaviour which does not consider pupil circumstance undermines inclusion.

Vulnerable pupils are more at risk of behaviour infringements as a result of circumstances outside of their control. The CSJ learned about students being suspended due to wearing non-regulation school skirts, trousers, or shoes, for example, solely because their families couldn't afford the school-issued uniform. An inflexible approach to behaviour that penalises disadvantage in this way further entrenches disparities between pupils, making it harder for pupils with additional needs to access education.

A common theme in discussions was that pupils' underlying issues – whether a disrupted home life, an unmet SEN need or a mental health condition – often present as challenging behaviour that leaves them more vulnerable to exclusion. In 2019/20, 'persistent disruptive behaviour' was responsible for 36 per cent of permanent exclusions for pupils eligible for free school meals, compared to 33 per cent for those not eligible. It was also responsible for 39 per cent of permanent exclusions for pupils on SEN support, compared to 32 per cent of those with no SEN provision.<sup>155</sup>

Education practitioners voiced concern that too many schools fail to recognise the impact a pupil's personal circumstance can have on their behaviour. Practitioners emphasised that poor behaviour can often signal unmet needs, and that these pupils need additional support, with early identification of pupil needs key to effective behaviour management. In the best performing schools, staff support students by proactively identifying and supporting pupils with the greatest needs, rather than waiting for their difficulties to manifest themselves and reach crisis point.<sup>156</sup>

It is crucial to acknowledge that there are limits to what schools can reasonably be expected to do to meet a child's needs. Certain needs may be better addressed outside of mainstream provision.

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<sup>154</sup> Centre for Social Justice, A level playing field, 2021

<sup>155</sup> IntegratEd, Annual report 2021, 2022

<sup>156</sup> Tom Bennett, Creating a Culture: How school leaders can optimise behaviour, 2017

However, transitioning a pupil out of mainstream schooling should be considered a last resort. Early identification and intervention play a vital role in ensuring that pupils have the best chance of resolving issues within the mainstream setting.

While individual schools may already be adopting this approach, there is clearly work still to be done across the wider system. DfE survey data found that in 2023 only 67 per cent of teachers believe that their school has a clear system for responding when a pupil is identified as needing additional support for behaviour.<sup>157</sup>

### *Collaborative*

Practitioners also emphasised that an effective behaviour strategy relies on clear and consistent communication between teachers and pupils. Stakeholders stressed that high standards for behaviour are important, but that pupils must understand the reasoning behind such expectations. When a punishment is administered, it must be clear to the pupil what their transgression was.

Additionally, an effective behaviour strategy involves not simply punishing poor behaviour, but rewarding good conduct. Research has shown that rewarding good behaviour is an effective route to maintaining high behaviour standards, and in some cases, far more effective than an exclusively punitive approach.<sup>158</sup>

### *Missed learning time*

Practitioners also emphasised that a school's behaviour strategy should consider the impact on pupil learning. Repeated suspensions have the potential to expedite a pupil's disengagement from school, as they miss more and more lesson time and struggle to catch up, making subject material increasingly inaccessible. This, in turn, could cause a pupil to engage in disruptive behaviours, potentially leading to permanent exclusion.

In the 2021/22 academic year, the surge in suspensions resulted in over a million days of lost learning.<sup>159</sup> As little is known about how suspended pupils spend their time away from school, we cannot be confident it was spent focused on their studies.

Throughout our research charitable organisations voiced frustration about suspended pupils being unable to access support networks within school during their suspension. One organisation delivers targeted interventions proven to reengage pupils at risk of exclusion, but as the programme is delivered in school, suspended pupils were no longer able to access highly relevant support.

School leaders recognised the damage that repeated suspensions have on pupil learning. Some schools ensure that when pupils are sanctioned with a suspension, they serve the suspension in school, in internal alternative provision. Therefore, the school can be assured that they are continuing to focus on the same subject material as their classmates. This approach means pupils can receive support and continue their education during their suspension, facilitating smoother reintegration following the suspension.

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<sup>157</sup> Department for Education, National Behaviour Survey Report, 2023

<sup>158</sup> Education Endowment Foundation, Improving behaviour in schools, 2021

<sup>159</sup> Department for Education, Statistics: Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: Academic year 2021/22, 2023

## Pastoral

Pupils are in need of pastoral care more than ever. Mental health and SEN crises are spiralling, and the cost-of-living crisis presents added pressure given the intersection between poverty and educational outcomes. In 2023 only 30 per cent of pupils said they felt they belong at school everyday.<sup>160</sup> Schools that do prioritise pastoral care lamented the lack of recognition the accountability framework afforded their efforts, with such approaches instead reliant on the inclusive ethos of individual school leaders.

Pastoral support mitigates the risk of preventable exclusion. Pastoral support includes emotional, relational, and social support for pupils, that allows them to address underlying vulnerabilities and needs, while helping them develop resilience so they are able to positively respond to adverse circumstances in future.

### *Relationships with school*

Education practitioners stressed that a strong relationship with at least one trusted adult was the most crucial part of any strategy for preventing exclusion and ensuring pupils remain engaged in their education. Practitioners emphasised that relationship building with pupils allows you to address underlying issues and overcome barriers to education.

There is a strong link between positive teacher-pupil relationships and inclusion. Teachers are better able to reduce disruptive behaviour when they have a good relationship with pupils,<sup>161,162</sup> mitigating the risk of exclusion.<sup>163</sup> A positive relationship does not mean being 'friends'; it is more important that the authority figure is trusted, even if the teacher is strict.

Skills training for teachers which allows them to develop constructive relationships with pupils has been cited as the most effective school-based intervention for reducing exclusions,<sup>164</sup> and strategies which foster trusting teacher-pupil relationships are often as important to pupil engagement and learning as sound teacher pedagogy.<sup>165</sup>

The CSJ heard that the trusted adult does not necessarily have to be a teacher. School leaders emphasised the importance of teaching assistants (TAs), and the value they brought to building relationships with pupils and supporting engagement. One school Head that puts inclusion at the forefront of their school ethos said that they would sooner increase class sizes than reduce TA numbers, such was the value of their role. The relational support that TAs provide has proven impact for engaging pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, when used as a targeted intervention to address identified needs.<sup>166</sup> For example, EEF research has found when teaching assistants are deployed correctly, this equates to an average of 5 months progress for pupils.<sup>167</sup>

For many pupils at risk of exclusion, their most transformative relationship was with a third sector worker. Having a neutral advocate not associated with school is a highly effective approach to

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160 Department for Education, National Behaviour Survey Report, 2023

161 Pamela Sammons, Ariel Mariah Lindorff, Lorena Ortega, Alison Kington, 'Inspiring teaching: learning from exemplary practitioners', Journal of Professional Capital and Community, Vol. 1 Issue: 2, pp.124-144, 2016

162 Education Endowment Foundation, Improving behaviour in schools, 2021

163 Royal Society of Arts, Pinball kids, 2020

164 Valdebenito, S., Eisner, M., Farrington, D.P., Tfofi, M.M. and Sutherland, A., School-based interventions for reducing disciplinary school exclusion: a systematic review., 2018

165 Emma Simpson, Canary in the mine: what white working-class underachievement reveals about processes of marginalisation in English secondary education, 2023

166 Education Endowment Foundation, Making best use of teaching assistants, 2021

167 Education Endowment Foundation, Teaching Assistant Interventions, 2021

delivering successful interventions, particularly when mental health is the barrier to pupil learning.<sup>168</sup> Mistrust of the school system can be pervasive and involving external agencies to bridge that gap is important. Any negative association the pupil may have with their school experience is easier to overcome when speaking with an adult who does not represent the school. Some schools recognise this themselves, commissioning external charities to build relationships with pupils with a view to addressing barriers to their learning.

### Case study: Place2Be

Place2Be provides in-school mental health support to children and young people. Support may take the form of one-to-one counselling, group work, or work with parents, families and carers with children together. Sessions are designed to develop pupil coping mechanisms and resilience. The service is available to any pupil in the school who may benefit from it, but is also particularly beneficial for young people from lower socioeconomic or marginalised backgrounds who are more likely to struggle with their mental health; for example, pupils accessing Place2Be services are disproportionately eligible for free school meals, or have special educational needs.

While counsellors are embedded within schools, they are not school staff. This distinction prevents pupils from associating Place2Be counsellors with any negative perceptions that may have developed towards the school. They bridge the gap between the young person and the school, by acting as the pupil's neutral advocate. Building a trusting relationship with the pupil and utilising a therapeutic approach enables the counsellors to help pupils to understand and manage their emotional wellbeing and to overcome barriers to their education.

This approach has proven successful at mitigating the risk of exclusion. Children and young people who experienced school exclusion prior to counselling demonstrated a significant reduction in school exclusion in the academic year that the counselling took place. 74 per cent of the students who had a fixed period exclusion before counselling (326 of 440 students) had fewer reported exclusions in the year they attended counselling, while more than half (56 per cent) did not have any further subsequent exclusions.

However, practitioners reported obstacles to pupils benefiting from these relationships in schools. Teachers in secondary schools told us that pastoral care is often deprioritised, particularly when capacity and resources are scarce. Teaching assistants, while valuable to pupil welfare, have been reduced in number as a go-to cost-saving measure.<sup>169</sup> The high turnover of teaching staff also prevents pupils from establishing lasting and trusting relationships with adults in school.<sup>170</sup>

<sup>168</sup> Toth, K., Cross, L., Golden, S. and Ford, T., From a child who IS a problem to a child who HAS a problem: fixed period school exclusions and mental health outcomes from routine outcome monitoring among children and young people attending school counselling., 2023

<sup>169</sup> Department for Education, 'School Workforce in England: November 2018', 2019

<sup>170</sup> Royal Society of Arts, Pinball kids, 2020



In addition, the training teachers need to develop appropriate skills is not always available. Continual professional development (CPD) for teachers in areas such as special education or mental health is proven to prevent exclusions<sup>171</sup> and the DfE has reported that, for the highest performing schools, the majority of school improvements related to building the technical skills of teachers.<sup>172</sup> However, practitioners argued that its use is not sufficiently widespread. The DfE found that in 2019, only 41 per cent of teachers reported that there is appropriate training in place for all teachers in supporting pupils receiving SEN support.<sup>173</sup> At a time of increasing pressure on resources, many schools struggle to allocate staff time or funds to CPD training to facilitate inclusion.

### *Relationships with families*

The parent-school relationship is one that education practitioners were keen to champion. They found that connecting with parents, so that they were more engaged in their child's education, has positive outcomes for pupils at risk of exclusion.

First, parental engagement with their child's education is associated with higher pupil achievement and outcomes.<sup>174</sup> Such engagement is not only correlated with higher academic attainment but also higher school attendance, and a lower risk of exclusion.<sup>175,176</sup> The positive outcomes are seen across all socio-economic groups, particularly disadvantaged pupils,<sup>177</sup> which allows this strategy to act as an effective vehicle for mitigating the impact of disadvantage on a pupil's education.

Second, an understanding of a pupil's familial context acts as a protective factor against pupil disengagement, because educators can mitigate challenges that originate at home.<sup>178</sup> Education practitioners described establishing a relationship with parents that allowed them to identify and respond to pupil needs early, intervening before they presented a significant barrier to their education.

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171 Orly Crispel & Ronen Kasperski, The impact of teacher training in special education on the implementation of inclusion in mainstream classrooms, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25:9, 1079-1090, 2021

172 Department for Education, *School improvement systems in high performing countries*, 2019

173 Department for Education, *SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time*, 2022

174 Goodall, J., & Vorhaus, J., *Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement*, 2011

175 Ford, T.J., Paget, A., Parker, C et al., Which children and young people are excluded from school? Findings from a large British birth cohort study, the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), 2017

176 Education Endowment Foundation, *How can schools support parents' engagement in their children's learning? Evidence from research and practice*, 2019

177 Goodall, J., & Vorhaus, J., *Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement*, 2011

178 Royal Society of Arts, *Pinball kids*, 2020

### Case study: School-Home support

School-Home Support works with families to address the underlying barriers to good school attendance. Practitioners build an open and trusting relationship with parents, strengthening the bridge between the home and school, and allowing families to be provided with support in a timely fashion.

The programme of support is co-produced with families to suit their need. Practitioners recognise that each families' circumstances are different, and that interventions should be flexible and not time-limited to reflect this. Wider reach support is often delivered to various family members including siblings, parents, or carers, to take a whole family approach.

This model has achieved significant impact for pupils. In 2022/23, 73 per cent of persistently absent pupils and 86 per cent of severely absent pupils in mainstream schools improved their attendance. For persistently absent pupils, average attendance improvement equated to an extra 20 days in school, while for severely absent pupils, average attendance improvement equated to an extra 40 days.

In our discussions, schools that serve highly disadvantaged communities noted the value of parental engagement to their pastoral support offer. Inclusion officers hold phone calls with parents and conduct home visits as part of the parental engagement strategy. Building the relationship allows the school to identify pupils with challenging home situations and respond accordingly. One school serves a highly disadvantaged community and has non-teaching heads of years specifically focused on building relationships with parents – such is the value that they believe can be drawn from this relationship. Others have dedicated in-house family workers aimed at stabilising the relationship between parents and schools. The experience of school leaders is reinforced by EEF evidence that suggests sending texts or letters home has a positive impact on pupil attendance.<sup>179</sup>

However, the approach of these schools appears to be the exception, rather than the norm. Despite the benefits of parental engagement, research indicates that the parent-school relationship is undervalued in the school system.<sup>180</sup> In 2023, only 1 in 3 teachers agree that their school have a clear and coherent parental participation strategy, with a similar proportion disagreeing.<sup>181</sup> Teachers in disadvantaged areas are particularly likely to disagree that their school has a clear parental engagement strategy, with 38 per cent of teachers disagreeing, compared to 31 per cent of teachers from more affluent areas.<sup>182</sup>

Recent polling commissioned by the CSJ echoed the improvements that need to be made in reaffirming the relationship between schools and parents. Just a quarter of parents (26 per cent) feel their child's school communicates with them 'very well', with 38 per cent saying the school does not communicate with them well enough. Furthermore, over a third of parents said that they are worried about their child's performance and would like more support from their child's school, rising to 42 per cent among low-income households.<sup>183</sup>

179 Education Endowment Foundation, Sending personalised letters or texts to parents can help improve attendance, but wider evidence on how to reduce absenteeism is weak, 2022

180 Centre for Social Justice, Cracks in our foundations, 2023

181 Centre for Social Justice, Cracks in our foundations, 2023

182 Centre for Social Justice, Cracks in our foundations, 2023

183 Centre for Social Justice, The missing link, 2024

# A plan for change

An inclusive education system would significantly reduce preventable school exclusions, re-engage pupils with their education and boost student attainment.

As this report uncovers, while many individual schools and communities are playing their part in promoting an inclusive culture, wider reform is needed to ensure this is consistent across the whole of the education system.

The CSJ has a plan for change that will equip, enable and incentivise the education sector to deliver a more inclusive culture, ultimately ensuring pupils are able to access the education they need to thrive.

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## **Recommendation: Inclusion should be added as a fifth key judgement in Ofsted inspections**

While some aspects of inclusion fall under other key judgements, this dilutes the importance of inclusion. Therefore, inclusion should be added as a fifth key judgement. Inclusion should carry significant weighting in Ofsted School inspection guidance and this weighting should be reflected in inspections. A school should not be judged as overall 'Good' unless it performs at least 'Good' on the proposed new 'inclusion' key judgement.

The additional judgement could consider:

- How inclusive the school is?
- How does the school accommodate pupils with additional vulnerabilities?
- How well does the school ensure that all pupils have positive outcomes?
- What processes does the school deploy to combat persistent absenteeism?
- Does the culture of the school allow gaming or off-rolling?

Inclusion could be measured considering metrics such as:

- Academic monitoring that is contextualised – taking into account pupils starting points
- Yearly audits on: off-rolling, persistent/severe absence, internal AP use, managed moves
- Pupil wellbeing measures
- NICE guidelines

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**Recommendation: Launch a consultation on proposals to replace one-word judgements with a report card**

The Department for Education should launch a consultation on how to reform the school accountability framework, to ensure that it considers all aspects of the school. This should include seeking views on proposals to replace one-word judgements with a report card.

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**Recommendation: The three-tier system for SEND and AP should be implemented.**

The Department for Education should implement the move towards a three-tier system for SEND and AP, as outlined in the SEND and AP plan, as soon as possible. As detailed in the SEND and AP improvement plan, this system should focus on targeted early support in mainstream settings.

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**Recommendation: The Department for Education should introduce a national inclusion framework for schools and academy trusts.**

As part of the introduction of new national standards for the SEND and AP system and the implementation of local inclusion plans, the Department for Education should create a national inclusion framework.

The framework should include a clear definition of inclusion, as well as guidance for school and MAT leaders on how to support pupils to overcome any additional vulnerabilities that may prevent them from engaging in education in mainstream classrooms.

The framework should include guidance on:

- Identification of additional vulnerabilities that may present barriers to learning. These will include: free school meals eligibility; special educational need status; social service involvement; and any record of child criminal/sexual exploitation
- Curriculum innovation and its role in inclusive education
- Special educational needs early identification and intervention measures
- Accessing specialised initial teacher training and CPD
- Developing and implementing inclusive approaches to behaviour, such as relational teaching approaches and trauma informed practice
- Appropriate use of managed moves and alternative provision – both internally and externally.

The framework should be designed in consultation with schools, MATs, families, and other relevant experts and community groups.

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**Recommendation: More comprehensive training on supporting pupils with additional needs should be included in teacher training.**

The review of teacher training, as outlined in the SEND and AP improvement plan, should be conducted, expanded to include a review into CPD and any subsequent recommendations implemented without delay.

The review must consider how more comprehensive training in how to identify early and support pupils with mental health and additional needs could be incorporated into initial teacher training and CPD. Existing to incorporate requirements to get first-hand experience of working with children with SEND and SEMH in initial teacher training should also be incorporated.

The review should also consider how AP specialists and third sector experts can be commissioned to help deliver ITT and CPD training on this.

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**Recommendation: School League Tables should be reweighted**

School league tables should be reweighted to take all pupils into account, proportionate to the amount of time that they spend enrolled at the school.

This will make schools accountable for the outcomes of pupils that have left school before Year 11, to reduce the risk of schools off-rolling low-attaining pupils.

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**Recommendation: The Department for Education should create a National Parental Participation Strategy**

The Department for Education should create a National Parental Participation Strategy, which should create a new duty for schools and MATs to focus on parental participation and publish parental participation plans. Trusts and schools should design these plans in consultation with parents and guardians to reflect the needs of local families. The Department for Education should also set out a structure for parental engagement that targets support towards those who need it most and make clear the responsibilities of other local agencies in achieving this vision.

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**Recommendation: Attendance mentors should be rolled out nationwide**

The Department for Education should roll out a national programme of 2,000 attendance mentors. These mentors would work with families to understand and remove the underlying barriers to school attendance. A national programme would cost an estimated £80 million per year.

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**Recommendation: An ‘enrichment guarantee’ should be introduced.**

The government should introduce an ‘enrichment guarantee’ in schools, ensuring schools have the appropriate resources to support this. All secondary pupils would be required to do at least 5 hours of extra-curricular enrichment every school week (excluding weekends), with the third sector leveraged to deliver the sessions which extend the school day. Pupils who already engage in extra-curricular activities on school days would be able to offset the relevant hours against the core requirement.

As part of this, the Government should also announce a new Right to Sport for all secondary school pupils. Of the five hours of extracurricular activity, the Right to Sport would see all pupils participate in a minimum of two hours of extracurricular sport per week, on top of PE time already scheduled on the curriculum.

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**Recommendation: The Children Not in School Register should be implemented without delay**

The ‘Children not in school’ register should be implemented. This register would place a duty on local authorities to maintain a register of children who are not in school. This should act as an additional referral mechanism to the local authority to unearth pupils that do not appear on school rolls, but receive part or all of their education from home or from unregistered providers.

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