

# EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS:

## Shaping a system that works for everyone





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# FOREWORD

In turbulent times, stability matters. Today, England's education system feels adrift, like a kite dancing in a hurricane. Buffeted by rising needs, budget pressures, fractured structures and social inequality, it faces challenges not entirely of its own making. Yet it is still expected to fly higher.



There's no shortage of good people in education and never has been. But too often, they are asked to make a complex system work, rather than be supported to improve it. As one leader put it: "We are expected to solve tomorrow's problems with yesterday's tools - and without time to even sharpen them."

This is not a failure of effort. It is a legacy of structural inertia and under-investment, shared by successive governments over decades. Across the country, there are schools, trusts and local partnerships already showing what is possible. But the system overall remains held back by short-termism and fragmented infrastructure.

**FED stakeholders overwhelmingly agree that, despite promising steps by government and the green shoots of change appearing, the pace and ambition of change must accelerate.**

This urgency is why the Foundation for Education Development was established: to help build the conditions for long-term improvement. As an independent, neutral space, FED brings together voices from across education to build consensus and continuity, not to criticise, but to support leaders in delivering the change the system urgently needs.

Our next phase of work – FED Futures – is an ongoing programme of consultation and research, that continues this mission by offering insight, evidence and practical proposals to help shape a more coherent and sustainable education system.

## This report identifies three urgent, interconnected priorities:

- **Inclusion:** What does it take to build a system that works for all learners, not just those who fit its current mould?
- **The Education Workforce:** How do we support and empower the professionals at the heart of education, not just train and retain them?
- **MAT, Schools and Partnerships:** How do we move from isolated institutional performance to genuine system-wide collaboration?

We've heard much talk recently about the need for "a decisive, mission-driven government... focused on a long-term plan"<sup>1</sup> to secure the country's future. That ambition cannot be achieved without bold, system-wide action in education. But boldness does not mean recklessness; it means recognising that to stand still is to fall behind.

FED Futures is a contribution to national strategy: not a manifesto or a verdict, but a platform to support the government and the sector to act. It connects what we know, what we need and what we must deliver.

The goal is clear: to spark a national movement that embeds long-term planning at the heart of education policy and drives sustained improvement. It is not too late for this to be a turning point. But without urgent focus, there is a real risk that today's challenges will become entrenched.

To policymakers, system leaders, educators, and partners: this is the moment to lead. Long-term planning is not optional; it is the foundation of excellence and equity. Let us ensure today's learners and educators are part of shaping a system fit for tomorrow.

**The time to act together is now.**

**CARL WARD**

Chair of the Foundation for Education Development

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National  
Education  
Futures  
2025



<sup>1</sup> Keir Starmer speech at Labour Party Conference 2024 – The Labour Party

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Meeting the moment – a long-term mission for education

Education is the foundation of a fairer, more prosperous and cohesive society. It shapes individual life chances, supports community well-being, underpins national resilience, and drives long-term economic growth. Yet today, England's education system sits at a pivotal moment. Amid growing complexity – rising pupil need, widening inequality, workforce pressures and fragmented partnerships – schools, colleges and universities continue to deliver for many. But the system, shaped over decades by short-term incentives, fragmented reforms and reactive policy, was never designed to meet the scale or complexity of today's challenges.

Despite notable progress and strong local practice in some areas, a strategic shift is needed: from isolated interventions to

system-wide, coordinated, long-term improvement.

The Foundation for Education Development (FED) was created to address these challenges by unifying the system around a shared, long-term vision for education. This first FED Futures report offers a focused, practical vision for what comes next.

Drawing on the most wide-ranging national consultation of its kind, it sets out a blueprint for long-term system renewal, shaped by the voices of educators, leaders, young people, parents, businesses and communities.

At its heart is a belief in possibility. Across the country, we see powerful examples of inclusive, resilient, and forward-looking practice. The task ahead is to move from pockets of promise to shared system-wide purpose.

**While successive governments have acknowledged these issues and initiated some policy solutions, the pace and scale of change do not match the urgency or complexity of the challenge. For many in the profession, the result is a growing appetite for something deeper than single-issue solutions or reactive policies.**

## Recognising the strain; reframing the future

The results this year from FED's annual National Education Survey<sup>2</sup> highlight widespread recognition that, while the education system continues to deliver for many, it requires a different approach to meet today's complex challenges.

# 99%

of education stakeholders we surveyed feel their voice should be listened to when decisions are made about the education system...

YET ONLY  
**10%**  
FEEL IT ACTUALLY IS

### FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS

78% feel that **funding** for schools, colleges and other education services has **worsened** in the past year, and 88% **do not feel confident** effective action will be taken in the next year to address this key issue.

78%

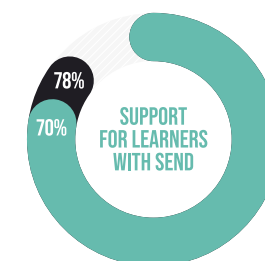
88%

### RECRUITING AND RETAINING TEACHERS

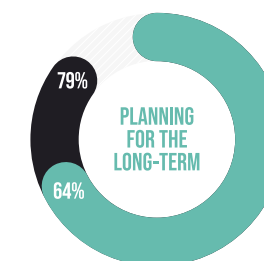
78% feel that **recruiting and retaining teachers** and other education staff has **worsened** in the past year, and 85% **do not feel confident** effective action will be taken in the next year to address it.

78%

85%



70% feel that **support for learners with SEND is getting worse**, with 78% **not confident** this issue will be tackled effectively in the next year.



64% feel that **planning for the long-term** future of the education system has **worsened**, with 79% **not confident** it will be addressed in the next year.

The message from stakeholders is clear: while most agree that key issues in education have worsened over the past year and remain sceptical about near-term solutions, many are still travelling hopefully, and ready to shape a more coherent, inclusive and future-fit system – if they are given the tools, trust and time to do so.

#### KEY:

● Worsened ● Not confident

## Three strategic priorities for a more inclusive, sustainable system

This report sets out three strategic priorities, developed through cross-sector engagement, that must underpin long-term education strategy: **Inclusion, the Education Workforce, and MAT, School and Partnerships.**

To support implementation, the recommendations in this report are broadly grouped by timeframe: short-term (1-2 years), medium-term (3-5 years) and longer-term (up to 10 years). While some changes can and should be actioned

immediately, many of the longer-term ambitions – particularly those requiring structural or cultural shifts – will only be realised if work begins now. The pathway to a more inclusive, resilient and collaborative system demands both immediate action and sustained commitment.

These are not isolated challenges. Together, they form the foundation of a stronger, fairer and more responsive system capable of evolving with learners, not just reacting to pressures.

<sup>2</sup> The FED National Education Survey took place between 7th April and 6th May 2025 with 1,178 respondents



# 1.

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## Inclusion – ensuring pathways for every learner to thrive

Today's education system does not consistently reflect the diversity of learners' needs, identities, or aspirations. Too often, inclusion is treated as a bolt-on, with children expected to adapt to systems not designed for them.

Structural barriers – rigid assessments, overstretched services, narrow definitions of success – continue to marginalise many. As one member of FED's Learners Council shared, "I was placed in a completely separate building for SEND students, which made it very obvious who we were. It felt isolating. There are pros and cons, but being physically separated and labelled like that really raised issues at school."

The evidence is clear: Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) have risen by 140% since 2015, but only half are processed on time<sup>3</sup> and over 40% of local authorities face financial crisis due to SEND-related deficits.<sup>4</sup> 305,000 children are currently missing from education, a 41% increase in six years<sup>5</sup>. Exclusion rates for Black Caribbean girls have tripled, while Gypsy and Traveller children remain among the most excluded<sup>6</sup>. Poverty remains a powerful barrier to educational participation and achievement, with over 4.3 million children living in relative poverty, with more than

one million in destitution<sup>7</sup>.

And while over 80% of teachers believe the curriculum should better reflect Britain's diverse cultures and communities, fewer than 1% of GCSE English Literature students study a book by a Black author.<sup>9</sup>

Yet across the country, inclusive practice is showing what's possible. At Empower Trust, standardised person-centred plans and early interventions have secured over £1.2m in new funding and improved outcomes for vulnerable learners. At Surrey Square School, sensory-informed classrooms and identity-rich curricula help every child feel seen, safe and supported.

Examples like these aren't isolated success stories; they offer a blueprint for a system that works for all learners by design, not exception. A system where inclusion is not bolted on, but built in from the start.

As Ofsted Chief Inspector **Sir Martyn Oliver** has said,

“If you get it right for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, you get it right for everyone.”<sup>10</sup>

**Inclusion remains uneven across schools and settings. Only 59% of parents of SEND learners in mainstream schools say their child is well supported, compared to 90% in special schools.<sup>8</sup>**



To embed inclusion by design, FED Futures recommends:

**A National Inclusion Framework** – an Inclusive Education Guarantee – setting consistent, enforceable expectations for inclusive practice across all schools, colleges and settings in England.

**Broaden curriculum and assessment models** – to reflect diverse histories, identities and learner abilities.

**Strengthening the education workforce for inclusive practice** – to deliver system-wide inclusion, teacher training must move from a deficit-based model to one that is strength-based and responsive to learner diversity.

Inclusion must move from being a reactive accommodation to a proactive foundation – ensuring that no learner is left navigating a system that wasn't built for them.



Yet inclusion cannot be realised without the people who make it happen. The next generation of teachers, leaders and support staff will shape what inclusive education looks like in practice.

<sup>3</sup> SEND: Schools lack incentives to be inclusive, warns NAQ – Tes

<sup>4</sup> MPs say fix SEND system or face 'lost generation' – BBC News

<sup>5</sup> MPs say fix SEND system or face 'lost generation' – BBC News

<sup>6</sup> Written off: Black Caribbean schoolgirls' exclusions triple in last year – The Independent

<sup>7</sup> Child poverty: Statistics, causes and the UK's policy response – House of Lords Library

<sup>8</sup> SEND Review – right support, right place, right time

<sup>9</sup> Lit In Colour: Diversity in Literature in English Schools – Runnymede Trust

<sup>10</sup> Martyn Oliver at the SEND and Inclusion Conference: getting it right for everyone – GOV.UK



# 2.

## fed Education Workforce

### The Education Workforce – building a valued, inclusive and supported profession

The education workforce is under growing pressure. In 2024, more than a third of teachers considered leaving the state system over the next 12 months for reasons other than retirement.<sup>11</sup> Leadership remains unrepresentative – 96% of headteachers are white, compared to 83% of the general population.<sup>12</sup>

A number of pressures – rising workload, limited flexibility, declining morale, behaviour challenges and poor representation – are driving committed professionals out of roles they care deeply about. Schools now spend over £1.2 billion on supply teaching, much of it to private agencies.<sup>13</sup> Students report instability, underqualified staff and

too few role models who reflect their identities – all of which contribute to disengagement.

There are, however, emerging signs that targeted policy changes and wider economic factors may be beginning to ease pressure in some areas. Recent data on Initial Teacher Training (ITT) applications shows early signs of recovery, with notable growth in hard-to-fill secondary subjects such as computing and physics.<sup>14</sup> However, this recovery remains fragile and uneven across subjects and regions, reinforcing the need for sustained investment and system-wide action to secure a strong, stable pipeline of future teachers.

**The profession is clear: the system must do more than recruit. It must support, develop and empower. Learners want skilled, motivated teachers who have the time to build connection and trust.**

#### FED Futures proposes a national strategy focused on three core enablers:

- **Making education careers more inclusive and appealing:** Reposition the role of education across society to rebuild trust in the system and profession. Further promote the breadth of education careers, showcase successful models of inclusive recruitment and expand access for underrepresented groups.
- **Prioritising professional development:** Guarantee protected time for high-quality Continuing Professional Development (CPD) aligned with individual growth and system goals. Empower educators to co-design development pathways that reflect choice, agency and the evolving needs of leadership.
- **Increasing flexibility in the profession:** Embed flexibility as a key principle in workforce planning and support leaders to integrate flexible options in their settings without compromising stability or standards. Partner with learners and educators to reimagine future learning environments.

Across FED's consultation, one message came through clearly: the future of education depends on a workforce that is not only skilled and supported, but valued, energised and proud to stay in the profession. As one practitioner put it:

**“ We need a profession based on trust, where staff wellbeing is central... and one that is respected in the media, valued by parents, and backed by investment in CPD.”**

When educators are equipped to thrive, they don't just serve the present. They inspire the next generation to lead, teach and shape the future of education.

Even the best-resourced workforce cannot work in isolation. The third pillar of sustainable reform is a system that enables collaboration across schools, colleges, universities, services and communities.

<sup>11</sup> Working lives of teachers and leaders: wave 3 – GOV.UK

<sup>12</sup> School workforce in England, Reporting year 2023 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK

<sup>13</sup> England's teacher retention crisis costs taxpayers £1bn a year – The Telegraph

<sup>14</sup> Initial teacher training application statistics for courses starting in the 2025 to 2026 academic year – Apply for teacher training – GOV.UK



# 3.

## MAT, School and Education Partnerships – building a more collaborative and coherent system

### fed MAT, School & Education Partnerships<sup>2</sup>

Too often, partnerships in education are treated as a by-product of reform, rather than a strategic lever for equity and improvement. Yet the complexity of today's challenges – from inclusion to early intervention, careers to mental health – demands joined-up solutions. No single organisation can meet these needs alone. Lasting progress depends on shared endeavour, not isolated effort.

Over 17,000 schools now operate within a mix of governance models – from local authority-maintained schools to single academies and large Multi Academy Trusts (MATs). While no structure guarantees better outcomes on its own, this diversity has contributed to a fragmented system, with siloed delivery and uneven progress. The shift from 152 local authorities to hundreds of academy trusts and eight Regional Schools Commissioners has hollowed out the local middle tier of oversight.

**Too many partnerships are informal, short-term, or overly reliant on individual relationships rather than shared accountability and systemic support.**

Schools and colleges must often engage with health, welfare, and policing services to support young people, but disconnected government systems hinder this. Poor interdepartmental coordination in initiatives like Opportunity Areas and Levelling Up has limited long-term learning and impact.<sup>15 16</sup>

And yet where partnership is embedded, it works. In Bolton, long-term collaboration between schools, colleges and community services is improving outcomes for over 19,000 learners. In Greater Manchester, the Relational Inclusion Project reduced exclusions and improved attendance through shared trauma-informed practice. Nationally, the Church of England and Catholic Education Service have overcome previous isolation and are investing in diocesan leadership to support pupil wellbeing, inclusion and community engagement under the banner of human flourishing.

**To embed collaboration as core infrastructure, FED Futures proposes a national strategy focused on three priorities:**

- **Clarifying purpose:** Introduce a shared national framework to define the civic role of school/college partnerships – focused on improving outcomes for all learners across a place. Clear purpose shifting collaboration beyond compliance and competition to impactful outcomes
- **Investing in infrastructure:** Invest in the local capacity, systems and skilled partnership brokers (or 'community weavers') needed to facilitate shared planning, trust-building and leadership across institutional boundaries
- **Reforming accountability:** Develop new metrics to recognise and reward collaborative impact, including measures of system stewardship, relationship strength and equitable local outcomes

This must be supported by:

- Clearer alignment between MAT strategies and local area priorities
- A national school improvement strategy that places partnership – not structure – at its centre.

**We cannot build equity alone. Sustainable improvement depends on shared purpose, trusted relationships and long-term support.**





## The case for coordinated, long-term action

There is growing recognition that the challenges facing education are not isolated disruptions, but deep, structural issues. Schools and colleges are absorbing the impact of social and economic inequality, often without the coherence, capacity or support they need. And yet, across the country, educators continue to show what's possible: embedding inclusive practice, empowering teams and delivering strong outcomes for learners, even in the most stretched environments.

These examples are not anomalies. They are a blueprint for what a more joined-up, resilient system could look like. The risk lies not in ambition, but in failing to connect what works, learn from success and scale it system-wide.

The risks of inaction are clear: inclusion will remain patchy, attainment gaps will widen and workforce pressures will grow. But these outcomes are not inevitable. With shared purpose, practical long-term planning and collective leadership, the system can move from patchwork delivery to lasting improvement.

The answers already exist. The challenge now is to connect them; to strengthen what works, scale what matters and ensure long-term change is possible not just in principle, but in practice.

As **Dan Morrow**, MAT CEO, FED Partner and Education Leaders Council member, says,

“What is needed is a culture of courage – where people know how and when to use their agency to challenge unhelpful compliance.”



## Long-term planning is necessary to realise systemic change in education

In 2024, FED's National Education Consultation Report identified four key mechanisms to embed coherence, continuity and inclusion at the heart of education policy:

### A Long-Term Planning Framework

Enabling adaptive, cross-cycle strategy that supports continuity beyond political cycles

### A National Education Assembly

Ensuring the system is informed by and responsive to the voices of those it serves

### An Independent Education Council

Providing consistent oversight and safeguarding the integrity of long-term goals

### A Chief Education Officer

Embedding professional leadership at the core of national decision-making



Backed by 97% of stakeholders, these mechanisms are not abstract ideals but practical tools for sustainable, inclusive transformation, each grounded in the lived experience of those working within and alongside the education system.

These ideas have already begun to influence practice. The principles behind the Long-Term Planning Framework have already guided issue-led consultations and informed the development of this FED Futures report's policy recommendations. The government's structured listening exercises around Ofsted and the Curriculum and Assessment review reflect a growing commitment to inclusive dialogue and long-term thinking. The appointment of Sir Kevan Collins

as a senior adviser on education also signals renewed interest in coherent, cross-cutting reform.

Building on this momentum, FED will launch the National Education Assembly (NEA) in 2025 – the first fully stakeholder-led platform designed to give all parts of the education system a meaningful voice in shaping national education policy, practice and strategy. By convening diverse perspectives both in person and virtually and providing regular feedback to government and system leaders, the NEA will help embed long-term thinking at the heart of education reform.

Only by connecting what works, listening to those closest to the challenges, and committing to a long-term plan can we create an education system that is truly sustainable, equitable and fit for the future.



# CONTEXT & METHODOLOGY

**FED Futures was established to build on the insights gathered through FED's five-year consultation and to sustain momentum for long-term, system-wide reform.**

Recognising that current systems too often hinder rather than help, FED Futures shifts the focus from short-term fixes to structured inquiry into the foundations of a stronger, fairer education system.

This first report explores three priorities identified by FED stakeholders as critical to achieving that goal: inclusive learner pathways, a sustainable education workforce and deeper system collaboration.

To explore these themes in depth, FED Futures undertook a second phase of focused engagement, guided by the principles of FED's Long-Term Planning Framework<sup>17</sup>.

This structured methodology enabled a comprehensive exploration of each issue area through three core stages:

- **Vision setting:** Clarifying what success would look like over the long-term, grounded in the values of inclusion, equity, and coherence
- **Current state analysis:** Mapping the realities of the existing system, including key challenges, disparities and pressure points, using both qualitative insight and existing quantitative data
- **Identifying levers and blockers:** Exploring where change is already happening, what enablers could be scaled, and which structural or cultural barriers continue to hinder progress.

This process drew on a wide range of engagement methods, including targeted roundtables, focus groups, panel discussions, surveys, virtual policy roundtables and policy dialogues, regional listening events, cross-sector workshops and interviews with system leaders and practitioners.

**Importantly, the process combined both breadth and depth: engaging a diverse cross-section of stakeholders, from early-career teachers to national policymakers, from young people and families to leaders in education, business, health, and civil society. This ensured that each theme was shaped not only by a wide range of perspectives but by deep expertise and lived experience.**



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# INCLUSION:

## PATHWAYS FOR EVERY LEARNER TO THRIVE

fed  
Inclusion<sup>2</sup>

i.

### A vision for a wholly inclusive education system

The future of education in England must be unapologetically ambitious for every learner. Inclusion is not just about access or representation; it means removing the structural barriers that hold some children, young people and other learners back.

Rising complexity, from growing Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) to greater cultural and linguistic diversity, demands a system that adapts with its learners. Yet too often, those facing disadvantage encounter outdated structures, fragmented support and limited incentives for inclusive practice.

True inclusion means designing for diversity from the outset. It recognises that barriers to learning are systemic, not individual and that equity requires more than intention. It must be built into funding, accountability, workforce, and joined-up local provision.

**This isn't beyond reach. Across the country, inclusive approaches are already working. The challenge now is to move from fragmented effort to a shared, system-wide commitment, where every learner is supported to thrive.**

### Schools must be empowered to do the right thing and resourced to sustain it

An inclusive and equitable education system works for every learner – by design, not by exception. It ensures that curriculum, assessment, leadership, support services and governance reflect the full diversity of the communities they serve, so every child sees themselves in what they learn and knows that they belong.

This vision does not require lowering standards, but raising expectations for all. That means not just opening the gate but laying out a route where every learner can move forward at their own pace: whether that's a steady path, an escalator for those needing momentum, or a flight path for those ready to soar. Stakeholders are aware that this ambition has been discussed nationally many times before, but never delivered. Now is the moment to act and make that vision real.

Examples of this are already underway. The task is to make them the norm; empowering schools to do the right thing and resourcing them to sustain it.

Inclusion is not a bolt-on. It is the litmus test of a system's fairness, ambition, and humanity.





# ii.

## Defining inclusion: focused action on three fronts

Inclusion is a basic human right. At its core, it means creating the conditions where every learner can thrive by removing barriers to learning, fostering belonging and adapting systems to meet diverse needs, rather than asking children to conform to one-size-fits-all structures.

Yet despite its importance, England has no shared statutory definition of inclusion. This absence contributes to fragmented provision, undermines rights-based approaches, and leaves schools without a clear framework for coherent, joined-up support.

Stakeholders highlighted persistent system-level challenges:

- **Inconsistent practice across local areas, creating a postcode lottery of support**
- **Variable standards and accountability, with inclusion narrowly or inconsistently applied**
- **Conflicting policy pressures – such as accountability metrics and behaviour frameworks – that undermine inclusive intent and drive exclusion.**

Inclusion spans a wide range of needs, identities and experiences. Many learners face multiple, intersecting barriers such as poverty, neurodivergence, cultural or linguistic marginalisation and discrimination that compound disadvantage.

While inclusion is broad, this report, guided by stakeholder priorities, focuses on three urgent domains where sustained action could drive lasting impact:

- **Poverty and socio-economic inclusion**
- **Culture and identity**
- **SEND and neurodivergence.**

The sections that follow set out practical, evidence-informed proposals to strengthen inclusion across these areas – so that every learner feels seen, supported and able to thrive.

# iii.

## Situation

### A system under strain – but not without momentum

Despite a growing national focus on inclusion, frontline experiences reveal a fragmented and overstretched system of support. Many nurseries, schools, colleges and families face inconsistent access to services, limited local coordination and growing complexity – from rising SEND needs to deepening poverty.

### Gaps in support and growing expectations

Too often, education, health and social care operate in silos, with variable thresholds and documentation creating a postcode lottery of provision. In some cases, families have resorted to relocating across local authority boundaries just to access medical or educational support, even while their children remained in the same school. Schools and colleges are increasingly expected to act as the frontline for early help, safeguarding, and family services – but this shift has outpaced statutory guidance, training and funding. Leaders are doing more, with less, in systems not designed for the scale or complexity of current need.

### The costs of a narrow definition of success

Accountability systems focused narrowly on attainment can drive exclusionary behaviours. 'Off-rolling' – the removal of pupils from school rolls to protect results – disproportionately affects children with SEND, Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. 305,000 children are missing from education, a 41% increase in just six years.<sup>18</sup> Attendance remains critically low, with 1 in 5 pupils persistently absent. Exclusion rates for Black Caribbean girls have tripled.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond off-rolling, wider systemic pressures create perverse incentives that work against inclusion. Funding tied to pupil numbers can deter schools from admitting high-cost students, such as those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), particularly where top-up funding is insufficient. Performance measures like Progress 8 can divert attention from creative or vocational pathways that might better serve individual learners.



<sup>18</sup> Children missing from education report – Education Policy Institute

<sup>19</sup> School exclusion rates surge for Black Caribbean girls – Race Equality Foundation



## The SEND system is under significant pressure

The number of EHCPs has risen by 71% since 2018, but investment has not kept pace<sup>20</sup>. Over 40% of local authorities face SEND-related financial deficits, projected to reach £4.6 billion by 2026<sup>21</sup>. While central funding for high-needs pupils has increased by 59%, the strain is felt system-wide – only 59% of parents of children with SEND in mainstream schools say their child is well supported, compared to 90% in special schools<sup>22</sup>.

**Without comprehensive reform, schools will continue to be penalised for doing the right thing. The introduction of EHCPs was intended to clarify needs and entitlements, but from the outset, demand outstripped capacity.**

The transition from Statements to EHCPs raised expectations without corresponding increases in provision, creating a systemic gap that has only widened over time. As the number of EHCPs rises and neurodivergent learners remain disproportionately absent or excluded, it is clear that system-wide inclusion is no longer optional; it is essential.



## Representation and relevance still lag behind

Stakeholders inform us that many students from ethnically diverse, LGBTQ+, disabled and socio-economically marginalised groups feel invisible in school life – from the curriculum to leadership and governance. When young people don't see themselves reflected, it can lead to disconnection, disengagement and reduced aspirations.

Teachers frequently lack the training and confidence to teach sensitive and complex topics – such as migration, empire, and the histories and identities of marginalised communities – with accuracy and care. 78% have requested professional development on migration, and 71% on empire<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, traditional assessment methods, heavily reliant on written, high-stakes exams, disadvantage many SEND and English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These performance gaps reflect systemic design failures, not individual deficits in ability or effort.

**The stakes are high. Students who feel excluded or misrepresented in their education are more likely to disengage from learning, have lower aspirations and experience poorer mental health.**

Young people increasingly recognise they have alternatives – driven by technology, social media, and non-traditional routes – which means they are less willing to persist in systems that do not reflect or empower them. As Ashraf Ali of The Read Foundation, a FED partner, puts it, “We know that education should empower every child, provide them with knowledge and confidence to succeed in life. However, so many of our students feel invisible in our current curriculum.”

But the tide is turning: curriculum and assessment reviews are underway, with renewed focus on broadening representation.

<sup>20</sup> Spending on special educational needs in England: something has to change – Institute for Fiscal Studies

<sup>21</sup> Almost half of England's councils 'could face bankruptcy over £4.6bn deficit' – The Guardian

<sup>22</sup> SEND Futures: parental perceptions of school support for pupils with SEND at age 13-14

<sup>23</sup> Teaching Migration, Belonging and Empire in Secondary Schools – Runnymede Trust



## Poverty and hunger: daily realities, systemic impacts

Child poverty is a significant and growing barrier to education in the UK, with far-reaching consequences for children's wellbeing, learning, and future opportunities. Over 4.5 million children now live in relative poverty after housing costs<sup>24</sup>. This crisis is especially acute for larger families, with 46% of children in households with three or more children affected<sup>25</sup>. Schools and colleges report students arriving hungry, underdressed and sometimes showing signs of physical underdevelopment.

Food insecurity is a hidden but significant barrier to learning – with 250,000 children arriving at school hungry each day and 400,000 wearing unwashed uniforms.<sup>26</sup> Disadvantaged pupils face significantly poorer outcomes, falling nearly two years behind their peers by the end of secondary school, and are more likely to suffer from poor mental health and reduced life chances.<sup>27</sup> The cost of education has risen sharply: families in poverty now spend £2,000 a year on school-related costs, often going into debt.<sup>28</sup> Yet schools and colleges, already under-resourced, are absorbing the burden – running food banks, supplying basics and shielding children and young people from the effects of hardship.

## Doing more with less: the unseen burden on education

Within this landscape, schools and colleges have increasingly become informal welfare providers, establishing food banks, supplying basic resources and offering support to families, despite not having the funding or infrastructure to do so. Educational participation and achievement are directly affected: attendance rates are lower<sup>29</sup>, exclusion rates are higher<sup>30</sup> and academic outcomes are poorer for disadvantaged students<sup>31</sup>. GCSE re-sit pass rates remain extremely low, especially for those with health conditions or trauma histories. Longstanding geographic inequalities persist, with children from FSM (Free School Meals) backgrounds in some areas five times less likely to attend university than their peers elsewhere<sup>32</sup>. The combination of financial hardship, structural inequality and under-resourced services has created a system in which opportunity is anything but equal.

Alongside these challenges, the current workforce is overstretched and underprepared for inclusive practice. Many early-career teachers are placed in complex classrooms with minimal training on SEND and inclusion, but the gap is not limited to new entrants.

Ongoing professional development and leadership training often fail to embed inclusive expertise as a core competency. National standards for Teaching Assistants remain lacking, and SENDCO qualifications are still underfunded, inconsistently delivered and undervalued within school leadership structures.



## Signs of progress – and a path forward

Despite the pressures, encouraging steps are emerging. The Department for Education's (DfE) new Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams are placing inclusion and attendance at the heart of local school improvement. A national Inclusion Advisory Group is shaping policy with lived experience at its core. Ofsted is proposing stronger accountability for inclusion, with the power to downgrade schools that exclude or fail to support vulnerable students, and the December 2024 commitment of £740 million to expand SEND provision signals a welcome shift in priorities.

Encouragingly, current curriculum and assessment reform consultations also signal a growing commitment to broadening representation and dismantling structural barriers. Leaders such as Bridget Phillipson have reinforced that inclusion is not at odds with high standards, highlighting schools where inclusive practices have supported rising attainment.

Inclusion is no longer whispered at the margins; it is moving towards the centre of the national conversation. But there remains a long road ahead. As FED Futures continues to argue, piecemeal initiatives, however positive, are not enough. What is needed is a sustained, long-term plan for systemic inclusion designed with communities, embedded in policy, supported by coherent infrastructure, fully funded and owned across all levels of the system.

<sup>24</sup> Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2024 – GOV.UK

<sup>25</sup> Child poverty: Statistics, causes and the UK's policy response – House of Lords Library

<sup>26</sup> Hidden Hunger – The state of UK breakfast provision in 2022 – Magic Breakfast

<sup>27</sup> Annual Report 2024 – Education Policy Institute

<sup>28</sup> One in 10 parents in poverty say their child has been bullied for being poor – The Independent

<sup>29</sup> Examining post-pandemic absences in England – Education Policy Institute

<sup>30</sup> Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England: spring term 2023 to 2024 – GOV.UK

<sup>31</sup> Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage – Education Policy Institute

<sup>32</sup> Access to Higher Education and Regional Inequality: who is missing out? – University of West London



# iv.

## Education reimaged: Neurodivergence understood

A truly inclusive system must work for every learner. Yet too often neurodivergent, and SEND students more broadly, are expected to adapt to an environment that doesn't fit them. From rigid assessments to overstimulating classrooms, the education system is still largely designed around neurotypical norms. As one pupil put it:

“At school, I feel like I'm a star shape being wedged into a square hole.”

FED consulted with neurodivergent learners, SEND teachers, Alternative Provision (AP) educators, headteachers, parents, employers, accessible tech providers and assessment experts. Their message was clear: inclusion cannot be retrofitted. To work for everyone, the system must place a much greater understanding of the neurodivergent experience across its work.

### Systemic challenges

Current structures too often pathologise neurodivergence, SEMH, speech and language difficulties and other special educational needs – positioning them as problems to be managed rather than valuing them as part of human diversity. Learners are frequently siloed by diagnostic labels, with little support that sees the full child.

But the issue goes deeper than unmet needs. Many rigid approaches to critical areas like behaviour and attendance do not simply fail neurodivergent students; they actively cause harm.

This is more than unmet need – it is structural harm. Traditional assessments prioritise timed writing and memory recall, disadvantaging many neurodivergent learners. Meanwhile, sensory overload from lighting, noise and crowding can push students out of learning altogether. These barriers contribute to rising persistent absence, underachievement and mental health challenges.



A key insight from the consultation was that many neurodivergent learners thrive later in life due to the university-style flexibility that allows them greater control over when, where, and how they study. This flexibility enables them to manage sensory or cognitive needs, build autonomy and play to their strengths.

There is hope. Participants highlighted a number of innovative practices and case studies already making a difference:

- **Flexible environments** e.g. quiet zones, soft starts, uniform options
- **Assistive technology** e.g. voice-to-text, personalised tools
- **Self-advocacy training** to empower the learner voice
- **Inclusive employer partnerships** e.g. at The Dyson Institute, where neurodiversity screenings, tailored learning, and inclusive hiring are supported by anticipatory adjustments to teaching, working and learning environments, alongside staff training and cognitive diversity assessments
- **Innovative practice** e.g. The Hive at Surrey Square School, is a sensory-informed provision within a mainstream setting
- **Harnessing technology** In 2019, LEO Academy Trust embarked on a bold digital transformation, providing every Key Stage 2 student with a personal Chromebook and Early Years and Key Stage 1 students with on-demand access to iPads or Chromebooks. For just £12 per child per month, they embedded digital access into everyday learning across nine schools, serving over 4,500 students and 600 staff. Pupil attainment now exceeds national norms by 14-23%, SEN register numbers have reduced by a third through inclusive digital practices, and classroom efficiency has increased by 23% by moving away from paper-based tasks<sup>33</sup>.







Meeting the needs of every learner requires a highly targeted approach. To strengthen our SEND provision, we developed a consistent Person-Centred Plan (APDR PCP Template), ensuring that pupils' individual profiles, aspirations, and needs are clearly captured and regularly reviewed. Our Graduated Response Document and Curriculum Adaptations Guide offer practical strategies to prevent suspensions and exclusions, ensuring that interventions are both early and effective.

**CARLA WHELAN**  
CEO, Empower Trust MAT

The impact has been significant: we secured over £1.2 million in additional funding, appointed a Strategic Lead and Trust SENCO, and standardised SEND processes across the Trust, improving outcomes for some of our most vulnerable learners. Excitingly, we're now working with the local authority to establish a resource provision within one of our schools, designed to offer even more tailored support, particularly for pupils with SEMH needs."



There is growing hope among our partners and stakeholders. Practical steps can be taken now, without significant policy change, to improve the experience of neurodivergent learners, alongside clear policy solutions for consistent national provision. Simple but powerful measures like early cognitive screening, flexible classroom environments, alternative assessments and whole-school training can shift outcomes significantly. As **Ali Durban**, Co-Chair of the FED SEND Council, notes,

**"If the behaviours that often lead to exclusion instead triggered timely support, we could transform both response and result for these children."**

In the longer term, embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL), strengthening teacher training, expanding resourced provision in mainstream schools and scaling personalised learning will help create a system designed for human diversity, not conformity. Aligning education with inclusive employment pathways and designing with intersectionality in mind will ensure every learner can thrive.

The shift from bolt-on to built-in inclusion takes courage, creativity and alignment across the system. Too often, neurodivergent and SEND learners are expected to work harder just to access the same opportunities. While our understanding of how the brain learns has advanced, that knowledge still needs to translate into action.

**The prize, however, is profound: a future where success depends not on how well a child adapts to the system, but on how well the system includes every child by design.**





## V.

## From representation to transformation: embedding inclusion in education

**“Inclusion isn’t a strategy. It is the work.”**

Viv Grant, Director of Integrity Coaching & FED Futures Partner

Too often, students from ethnically diverse backgrounds, disabled students, LGBTQ+ students and those from marginalised socioeconomic groups report feeling invisible, not just in what they are taught, but in classroom culture and system leadership. As Ashraf Ali of The Read Foundation said, “So many of our students feel invisible in our current curriculum.” Despite increasingly diverse student populations, leadership, staffing and governance still fail to reflect the communities they serve and therefore cannot serve them fully.

Across consultations with teachers, leaders, learners, alternative provision educators, third sector partners and experts, FED heard a clear message: inclusion must be “built in, not bolt-on” (Amy Daniels, Cornwall Education Learning Trust). True cultural inclusion requires authentic connection, representation and shared ownership, not tokenistic gestures or isolated curriculum tweaks.

Students want to see themselves reflected and affirmed in both content and assessment. Educators want time, training and trust to create inclusive classrooms. Families seek to be recognised as equal partners in shaping learning. Current curricula too often overlook the histories and identities of many students, leaving them disengaged and limiting their success. Stakeholders expressed concern that proposals to enforce a single curriculum across all Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) could suppress local relevance. As one school leader put it, “If the curriculum is decided by people in a Whitehall office, are we going to lose something

vital?” There was a strong desire for schools and colleges to retain flexibility to work with communities and co-create meaningful, inclusive curricula.

Looking ahead, stakeholders want identity-informed teacher training, diverse assessment approaches – such as projects and portfolios – and accountability systems that recognise schools and colleges for inclusive cultures and strong community relationships. They also call for leadership development that prioritises reflective practice and a joined-up approach across education, health and social care to create more coherent, trusted support for families.

**The vision shared by learners, educators and communities is both urgent and hopeful: an education system designed from the ground up to empower every child fully, fairly and from the start.**



### What works – and what’s next

Despite systemic barriers, a number of institutions are already showing what meaningful inclusion can look like:

- **The Relational Inclusion Primary Project**, led by Victorious Academies Trust across 13 schools in Greater Manchester, aims to reduce suspensions and improve attendance through trauma-informed, relational practice. Leadership training, staff development, and targeted interventions helped raise attendance from 94.11% to 95.10% – equivalent to two weeks of learning gained per child.

- **Surrey Square Primary School’s** identity curriculum helps children explore their identities and appreciate diversity through weekly, story-based lessons and active discussion. It fosters self-awareness, cultural understanding and social responsibility, promoting inclusion and challenging stereotypes.

- **Beaumont Primary School** in Bolton demonstrates how academic excellence and deep inclusion can coexist. The “My Beaumont Journey” curriculum offers all pupils structured, inclusive experiences, from civic engagement and outdoor learning to cultural visits and enterprise activities.



## vi.

## Nourishing Change: exploring solutions to food poverty, equity and access

No curriculum reform or attendance strategy can succeed if children and young people are hungry. Food insecurity is one of England's schools' and colleges' most pervasive yet least visible barriers to learning. While academic outcomes dominate headlines, the lived experience of child hunger is often excluded from national conversations, despite mounting evidence of its impact on wellbeing, behaviour and attainment.

A 2024 survey by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) revealed that over half (53%) of school meal providers have seen more children arriving at school without having eaten breakfast.<sup>34</sup> This is not a marginal issue. It is a growing crisis affecting pupils' ability to learn, teachers' ability to teach and schools' ability to meet even the most basic needs of their communities.

At FED's *Nourishing Change* roundtable, part of our broader Inclusion inquiry, voices from across education, catering and governance made one thing clear: hunger is an education issue, and addressing it is a matter of equity.

### When inclusion breaks down at lunchtime

Nutritional inclusion is about more than calories. It means providing equitable access to healthy, culturally appropriate and stigma-free food, not only to meet basic needs, but to also ensure mealtimes foster dignity and belonging. Yet access remains deeply inequitable.

The threshold for Free School Meals (FSM) has been frozen since 2010 at £7,400 household income (excluding benefits), excluding around 900,000 children in poverty from eligibility. Even among those who qualify, uptake is inconsistent due to stigma, language barriers and digital exclusion. According to The Child Poverty Action Group, in an average classroom of 30, nine children are in poverty, but three of them will not be eligible for FSM and one eligible child won't be registered.<sup>35</sup>

The FED welcomes the DfE's recent announcement to extend free school meal eligibility to all children in families receiving Universal Credit from September

2026. We recognise that aligning eligibility with Universal Credit makes the system simpler for parents to navigate and could lead to higher uptake. However, to ensure this provision is sustained in the long term, it must be secured in legislation – ideally through inclusion in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

The burden is falling on schools and colleges. One in five schools now runs a food bank, up from just 4% in 2019.<sup>36</sup> Headteachers report absorbing tens of thousands in school meal debt. One told us they covered £17,000 in unpaid meals in a single year. These acts of compassion are not funded strategies. They are firefighting responses in a system that is reactive, not resilient.

As **Fiona Fearon** from the National Governance Association (NGA) put it:

“Outside of parents or carers registering their children for FSM, there is no systematic way to identify if a child is living in financial hardship – not until the symptoms emerge. A child too distracted by hunger to focus on a phonics lesson. An irritable teenager, unable to regulate their behaviour in a noisy classroom. A growing pile of dinner money debt that some schools quietly absorb, while others simply cannot afford to.”

Intersectionality magnifies the problem. Students with SEND, students from racially minoritised backgrounds, new arrivals to the UK and those facing trauma are disproportionately affected. As one school leader said, “We're not just feeding stomachs; we're feeding stability, safety and self-worth.”



### What works – and what's next

Despite the system's limitations, values-led leadership is making a difference. Alex Hall of Impact Food Group described the reality of children queuing for food they can't afford and the emotional toll that follows. Caterers want to be part of the solution – but need policy clarity, leadership and shared purpose.

Boards have a critical role. The NGA has launched an e-learning module to help governors provide effective oversight of school food and tackle food poverty as part of their inclusion strategy.

At Haringey Sixth Form College, CEO Russ Lawrance introduced universal free college meals, not just as a welfare measure, but as a matter of inclusion. The results: improved attendance, behaviour and belonging.

“This isn't just about food,” he said. “It's about fuelling learning and making every student feel valued.”

International models point the way forward. Scotland now inspects school food as part of its whole-school inclusion model. Wales is rolling out universal FSM for all primary pupils. In the U.S., the Community Eligibility Provision offers free meals to all students in high-poverty schools, reducing stigma and boosting participation.

These examples show what's possible when food is treated not as an add-on, but as fundamental to learning. The challenge now is to move from piecemeal action to a national commitment – ensuring that every child is nourished, included, and able to thrive.

The next chapter in education reform must be written with full stomachs and hearts because inclusion starts with meeting basic needs and grows into believing that every child deserves a full future.

<sup>34</sup> APPG on School Food Report Impact of food cost on school meals

<sup>35</sup> Poverty: facts and figures – CPAG

<sup>36</sup> Feeding Hungry Families: Food Banks in Schools in England – University of Bristol



## Policy solutions

### 1. A National commitment to all learners

FED proposes a statutory National Inclusion Framework - an Inclusive Education Guarantee - setting consistent, enforceable expectations for inclusive practice across all schools, colleges and settings in England. Regardless of background or need, every child and young person would be entitled to equitable education supported by integrated systems across education, health and social care.

The framework would define national standards for:

- Admissions, attendance, curriculum, assessment and SEND
- Workforce development, school and college culture, governance and community engagement.

All schools and colleges would produce an Inclusion Audit that they then include in their annual improvement plan. To deliver this, a shared language and audit documentation system would be introduced across sectors, with clearly defined national roles and responsibilities.

Schools and colleges would receive dedicated funding to train inclusion teams to national standards. Data should determine where resources should be allocated based on need. Students, their families and schools or colleges, should be able to access the support they require when and where they need it.

**Early years should be a focus through a universal offer, with multi-agency teams embedded to deliver integrated early help and safeguarding.**

Inclusion standards would be built into EHCPs, transition plans, inspections and leadership qualifications. Progress 8 and other accountability metrics would be reformed to reflect inclusive outcomes, supported by transparent, disaggregated national data.

#### IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

##### Short-Term:

- Establish a national taskforce; co-design standards
- Draft legislation and national guidance
- Inclusion Audits included in annual improvement plans in all education settings
- Ensure every school/college has funded multi-agency wraparound support.

##### Medium-Term:

- Pilot the framework and training in selected regions
- Launch national training and assessment pilots
- Build data and reporting systems.

##### Long-Term:

- Fully legislate and embed the framework
- Embed inclusion into all teacher and leadership training
- Standardise thresholds and responsibilities across local authorities.

This transformation would reduce regional disparities, strengthen early support and build a system where inclusive practice is embedded, measurable, and sustainable.

### 2. Curriculum and Assessment Reform for Equity and Belonging

An inclusive system must reflect the full diversity of learners. This means:

- Broadening content to include diverse histories, identities and languages
- Co-creating curricula locally, rooted in community knowledge
- Supporting place-based adaptation
- Expanding assessment models beyond high-stakes exams to include portfolios, oral presentations, and practical work.

#### IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

##### Short-Term:

- Prioritise inclusion in curriculum and assessment reviews
- Launch co-design processes with teachers, students, and exam boards.

##### Medium-Term:

- Pilot inclusive assessments across subjects and regions
- Develop systems for moderation, quality assurance and training.

##### Long-Term:

- Embed reformed curriculum and assessment models system-wide
- Integrate inclusive pedagogy into teacher training and accountability.

These reforms would close persistent gaps and ensure every student feels seen, valued and able to succeed. While national reviews are underway, they currently lack meaningful co-design and flexibility.



### 3. Strengthening the Workforce for Inclusive Practice

To deliver system-wide inclusion, teacher training must move from a deficit-based model to one that is strength-based and responsive to learner diversity.

Initial Teacher Training (ITT) provision in inclusive practice is highly inconsistent. Some providers offer just half a day on inclusion, while others offer up to three, but even

then, the focus is often limited. There is insufficient coverage of how to support learners affected by trauma, poverty, mental health challenges and other vulnerabilities. At the same time, key inclusion roles – such as SENCOs, pastoral leads and teaching assistants – lack national training standards, precise role definitions and sustainable funding.

**We also know that teachers want training on how to teach about culturally sensitive issues like Empire and migration. This leaves schools without the consistency or capacity to meet their learners' increasingly complex needs.**

#### Recommendations

- **National inclusion entitlement in ITT:** All trainees should receive mandatory training in inclusive pedagogy including unconscious bias awareness and anti-racism, communication, and mental health, tied to DfE accreditation
- **Three-year training pathway:** Embed inclusion training, from ITT through Early Career Teacher (ECT) development
- **Specialist placement requirement:** Require all trainees to spend time in SEND or AP settings, supported by a national network of inclusion hubs
- **National standards for inclusion roles:** Replace fragmented guidance with agreed national standards and ensure roles are funded and valued
- **Alignment with the inclusion framework:** All training should reflect shared national expectations across education, health and care.

Embedding inclusive training across the workforce will improve retention, reduce inequalities, and build confidence and capability at every level.

#### A note on funding

**Chronic underfunding remains a persistent barrier to inclusion. To be truly inclusive costs more; this reality must be recognised and cannot be ignored. While recent increases in SEND funding are welcome, they remain reactive and fragmented and are not being felt in the system. Sustained, systemic change requires a long-term, protected funding settlement, ensuring schools can plan confidently and embed inclusion in practice, not just intent.**



#### Case Study:

### OASIS ST MARTIN'S VILLAGE

Oasis  
St Martin's  
Village

Consider these three realities:

- More children are struggling to access the curriculum, facing exclusion, chronic absenteeism or falling through the cracks
- Meanwhile, school buildings lie empty while vital voluntary organisations, providing youth work and family support, are priced out of community spaces
- And yet, government policy talks of "harnessing civil society to deliver better outcomes," without the joined-up thinking needed to do so.

Oasis responded to this gap.

When a local school in south London closed, we transformed the site into **Oasis St Martin's Village**, a community hub based on the simple truth that it takes a village to raise a child. For too long, the village has been left out.

The Village is a partnership of local voluntary organisations working in an integrated, cross-referral model to support students, families and schools. It delivers:

- Mentoring through music
- Youth work for students at risk of exclusion
- Employability training in film and media
- Supplementary education for KS2/KS3
- A Well Centre offering mental and sexual health support (linked to a local GP)
- Football programmes for minority groups
- Food and clothing banks, cooking classes and community gardening.

We've built strong links with housing associations and are developing a trauma-informed school to open next year, offering day placements for students without EHCPs. Alongside it, a College of Therapeutic Education will offer diplomas in child psychotherapy to teachers, Teaching Assistants (TAs), and youth workers.



Our aim is to keep children on-roll at mainstream schools, while offering space to explore, grow and learn in ways that align with their strengths:



**If a child can't learn the way we teach, we should start teaching the way they learn."**

At the heart of the Village is a therapeutic approach to education. Drawing on Dan Siegel's '4 S's', we aim to create a space where everyone is:

- **Safe** – physically, emotionally and psychologically
- **Seen** – valued for who they are
- **Soothed** – calmly supported through challenges
- **Secure** – able to trust, take risks and grow.

The science is clear: when children experience these conditions, their brains shift from survival to learning. Safety, like trauma, is contagious—and our goal is to make the former the norm.



**Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." – Plutarch. Oasis St Martin's Village seeks to light that fire – for every young person, in every way we can."**

**JOY MADEIROS**

Founding Director, Oasis UK



# THE EDUCATION WORKFORCE

fed  
Education  
Workforce

i.

**A profession that is empowered, valued and trusted**

The future of education in England rests on the strength of its workforce. A workforce strategy fit for the future must begin with listening. Throughout our consultations, stakeholders consistently voiced a shared ambition: a profession where trust is at the centre, wellbeing is prioritised, professional development is purposeful and flexibility is the norm, not the exception. Young people also want teachers who are happy, supported and able to do their best work. As one practitioner noted,

**“The goal isn’t perfection – it’s purpose. Teaching should be a profession where people are respected, trusted to lead and given the space to grow.”**

Our collective vision is of an education workforce that is clear in their purpose, supported to grow, trusted to lead and given the flexibility needed to thrive. This is not a distant ambition; it is already emerging in parts of the system. Schools and trusts are piloting flexible working, embedding supervision for staff wellbeing, using technology to reduce workload and personalising professional development. Peer-led continuous professional development (CPD) networks are also gaining traction, strengthening both retention and teaching quality.





# ii.

## A workforce under strain

England's education workforce is under increasing pressure. While policymakers continue to highlight the importance of high-quality teaching for pupil outcomes, the reality in schools is one of escalating workload, low morale, and deepening recruitment and retention challenges.

Students notice this. Members of the FED Learners Council spoke not only of inspired learning but of the absence they feel when trusted adults move on. One aspiring teacher reflected,

**“It was one teacher who made me want to do this. But I also saw how others left because of the pressure. We need to change that.”**

In 2024, 34% of teachers and leaders said they were considering leaving the English state school system over the next 12 months for reasons other than retirement.<sup>37</sup> The overwhelming reasons for considering leaving? Workload (90%), poor wellbeing (90%), and a sense that their voices are not heard by policymakers (79%).<sup>38</sup> Workload remains a dominant issue. 49% of teachers and leaders report it is both unmanageable and beyond their control, with many citing worsening behaviour and inadequate support services as additional stressors.<sup>39</sup> A separate survey by the National Education Union (NEU) found that 75% of teachers feel underpaid given their workload and responsibilities, and 71% have considered leaving due

to low pay or perceived unfairness in performance-related progression.<sup>40</sup>

The consequences for pupils are clear. More students are now taught by unqualified or temporary teachers.<sup>41</sup> Behaviour standards are slipping: only 45% of teachers rate behaviour in their school as good or very good – down from 58% just two years ago, and over 62% of staff say their job negatively affects their mental health.<sup>42</sup>

These challenges are even more acute in schools and colleges serving disadvantaged communities. In 2020, 9.5% of teachers left secondary schools with the highest proportion of low-income pupils, compared to 7.1% in more affluent areas.<sup>43</sup> For women aged 30–39 – the largest group leaving the profession – workload, family responsibilities, and a lack of flexible working options remain critical push factors.<sup>44</sup>

There are emerging signs of policy attention to workforce development and teacher wellbeing. Flexible working arrangements are becoming more prevalent across schools and colleges, and the newly established Teaching Commission has been gathering evidence and is expected to report its recommendations later in 2025.

**In parallel, several proposals have been set out by Government to address recruitment and retention challenges.**

These include a target to recruit 6,500 additional teachers across mainstream, special schools and



colleges; incentives for recruitment in shortage subjects and hard-to-staff areas; and reforms to teacher development through a proposed Teacher Training Entitlement, updates to the Early Career Framework and a new Excellence in Leadership Training Programme<sup>45</sup>. In addition, the teacher appraisal guidance published in July 2024, puts professional development at the heart of teacher objectives and urges schools to dedicate adequate resources and ensure professional development opportunities complement each other<sup>46</sup>.

New data on Initial Teacher Training (ITT) applications in England shows some encouraging signs of recovery. Between April 2024 and April 2025, overall accepted applicants rose by 8%, with secondary subjects up 12%. Notably, subjects that have historically struggled to attract candidates – such as computing and physics – saw the largest increases, both up by 47%.<sup>47</sup> The National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) has noted that this improvement is likely influenced by a combination of last year's 5.5% teacher pay rise and a cooling wider labour market, particularly in technology and Science, Technology, Engineering & Maths (STEM) sectors, which may have prompted more candidates to consider teaching.<sup>48</sup> However, some subjects still experienced further declines, including Classics (–14%) and English (–18%), highlighting ongoing imbalances.<sup>49</sup>

**These gains offer cautious optimism. But the workforce crisis is not just about recruitment numbers; it is about retention especially in high-need schools, professional sustainability, and whether the system is designed to keep great people in the profession long enough to make the difference they came into it to make.**

<sup>37</sup> Working lives of teachers and leaders: wave 3 – GOV.UK

<sup>38</sup> Working lives of teachers and leaders: wave 3 – GOV.UK

<sup>39</sup> Working lives of teachers and leaders: wave 3 – GOV.UK

<sup>40</sup> Teachers pay and progression survey 2024 – National Education Union

<sup>41</sup> Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2025 – NFER

<sup>42</sup> Working lives of teachers and leaders: wave 3 – GOV.UK

<sup>43</sup> A Decade of Collective Impact: Our 2023–24 Annual Report – Fair Education Alliance

<sup>44</sup> Shocking new stats about the cost of parenting – Pregnant Then Screwed

<sup>45</sup> Teacher appraisal: Guidance for schools, July 2024

<sup>46</sup> Teacher recruitment, training and retention: Government Response, January 2024

<sup>47</sup> Initial teacher training application statistics for courses starting in the 2025 to 2026 academic year – Apply for teacher training – GOV.UK

<sup>48</sup> Teacher recruitment crisis: Are we finally turning the corner? – NFER

<sup>49</sup> Initial teacher training application statistics for courses starting in the 2025 to 2026 academic year – Apply for teacher training – GOV.UK



# iii.

## Scope: focusing on the workforce in schools and colleges

This chapter considers the future of the education workforce, recognising that it is people, not programmes, who hold education systems together. From headteachers and classroom teachers to teaching assistants, mentors, and wider support staff, every adult in a school community plays a vital role in helping children learn and thrive.

Our primary focus is on the school and college-based teaching workforce, including leaders, teachers, and teaching assistants in both mainstream and specialist settings. While we acknowledge the critical contribution of the wider education workforce - including support and administrative staff - these roles are not examined in depth within this chapter. Further work is needed to map their development needs and create coherent, long-term pathways across the system. The acute challenges in recruiting and retaining early years professionals were also prominent in our discussions. We haven't been able to explore this area in depth within this year's consultation but would urge organisations representing the early years sector to partner with us to develop a similar analysis for early years settings.

# iv.

## Making education careers more inclusive and appealing

Attracting the next generation into education roles across teaching, leadership and support is essential to securing the future of the system. Yet the sector is facing a demographic crunch with a significant number of educators approaching retirement age and not enough early-career entrants to replace them. As one contributor put it,

**“ We simply don't have enough people to teach the next generation – especially in the schools and colleges that need them most.”**

The recent uptick in ITT applications suggests that positive change is possible when recruitment and pay conditions improve. DfE data shows that the forecast for secondary recruitment this year has risen to 86% of target, a substantial improvement from the 48% seen in 2022/23.<sup>50</sup> However, supply remains below demand even at this improved level, especially for key subjects such as physics (forecast at 71% of target) and maths. This fragile progress underlines the urgent need for a

sustained, multi-year approach to recruitment and retention.

Underrepresentation also persists. NFER data shows that people from minoritised backgrounds remain significantly underrepresented in teaching overall, with the gap widening at leadership level. This disparity is often rooted in the early stages of the career pipeline, especially ITT.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Teacher recruitment crisis: Are we finally turning the corner? - NFER

<sup>51</sup> Racial equality in the teacher workforce - NFER





## Systemic challenges

A common message in our consultation was that teaching, while still valued by many, has become harder to sell. Young people increasingly expect variety, flexibility and purposeful work. Yet education is often perceived as offering long hours, limited mobility and lower long-term earnings than other graduate pathways.

**“ What put me off was seeing how dissatisfied or stressed teachers were in all of my educational institutions.”**

**Member of  
FED Learners Council**

While the government has made progress on starting salaries, NFER's report highlights that teacher starting salaries have not risen in line with average earnings in the wider economy between 2010 and 2024.<sup>52</sup> Last year's 5.5% pay rise, combined with the previous government's introduction of £30,000 starting salaries, has only returned salaries to 2010/11 levels in real terms.<sup>53</sup> Salaries for existing teachers have fallen even further behind: in 2023/24, the majority of classroom teachers were earning up to a third less (28.3% to 32.8%) in real terms compared to if their pay had kept pace with RPI inflation since 2010.<sup>54</sup> A recent Education Policy Institute (EPI) report has suggested exploring more flexible total compensation packages, including options to adjust the balance between take-home pay and pension contributions,<sup>55</sup> although this remains controversial. Meanwhile, schools remain hesitant to adopt salaried apprenticeship routes due to the additional perceived costs of release time. Recruitment methods also often fail to reach outside traditional networks, with an over-reliance on job boards and formal listings limiting access to those who might not yet see themselves in an education career.

## What works – and what's next

There is a clear appetite for more inclusive and innovative approaches to retaining our skilled workforce and recruiting into all roles in the education profession. Stakeholders consistently called for a national communications campaign to shift public perceptions – one that highlights the vital role of education in shaping future generations and celebrates the full breadth of roles that contribute to learning, including teachers, leaders, teaching assistants, support staff, and administrative professionals. Crucially, such a campaign must invite a broader, more diverse range of candidates into the system.

Inclusive recruitment, which actively places diversity, equity and access at its core, is emerging as a key area of focus. Equally, we need to make sure that the culture and environment of our education institutions are truly inclusive of the needs of a diverse and vibrant education workforce that wants to join, stay and progress in the profession. We have work to do in order to create a truly anti-racist culture across our education system for learners and the profession alike as **Viv Grant**, Director of Integrity Coaching reflects,

**“ Amid deepening calls for greater racial equity in the UK education system, there is increasing recognition that while policy and legislation are necessary, they are not sufficient. True transformation requires that the UK's majority-white school leaders engage in the inner work of anti-racism – work that enables them to embody anti-racist values in their leadership.**

**Systemic change and personal transformation are not separate endeavours; one cannot happen without the other. Unless we recognise that the change we seek is as much inward as it is outward, the future our children and young people deserve will remain out of reach.”**

<sup>52</sup> Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2025 – NFER

<sup>53</sup> Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2025 – NFER

<sup>54</sup> Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2025 – NFER

<sup>55</sup> What pensions do teachers want? – Education Policy Institute (EPI)



Stakeholders also highlighted the need to improve the accessibility of physical environments in early years settings, schools and colleges, noting that many potential teachers with physical impairments continue to face avoidable barriers to entering and thriving in the profession.

We need a more creative approach in how we market education roles in a way that reaches a wide range of prospective candidates, learning from successful recruitment practices in other sectors. As one FED Roundtable participant put it:

**“ We discussed shifting the nature of candidate attraction to look beyond job boards, which is a very heavily used platform in education. On a job board, you can only really describe things in text. On other platforms, social media for example, you can really get across engaging content, visuals, images, videos that are far better at conveying diversity, culture and inclusion.”**





## Case Study:

Several organisations are already trialling new recruitment models designed to broaden reach and reframe who sees teaching as a viable career. For example, the Xavier Teach Southeast SCITT partnered with Eteach to overhaul its recruitment strategy.

Together, they modernised the applicant journey, launched targeted campaigns for career changers and underrepresented groups and refreshed their digital content to be more inclusive and responsive. The results were striking: a 30% year-on-year increase in trainees, with application volumes tripling at key hubs within months. Their success demonstrates what's possible when providers are empowered to try new approaches and supported by dedicated marketing and engagement expertise.

There is also growing enthusiasm for work-based routes into teaching, such as salaried apprenticeships that allow individuals to earn while they train. These models are particularly attractive to career changers, parents and candidates from lower-income backgrounds, who may be unable to pursue full-time study without financial support. However, take-up remains limited.

**“I don't believe the apprenticeship route gets the recognition it deserves. The reason why I chose an apprenticeship to train as an Early Years Professional is because whilst I am learning I am also getting first hand experience which boosts my skills and confidence.”**

Member of FED Learners Council



There was strong support for earlier, more proactive efforts to encourage young people from low-income backgrounds to consider teaching as a viable and rewarding career. Proposals included targeted financial incentives – such as bursaries, tuition fee exemptions, or living cost support during undergraduate study – in exchange for a commitment to train to become an educator and teach in the state sector. These approaches were seen as practical levers for widening participation and fostering a more diverse workforce.

**“How early do you catch young people in terms of entering into the profession? As a recent graduate myself... it was very much the perception that if you wanted to become a teacher, you would have to go to university [first].”**

FED Roundtable contributor

Funding is one key constraint. While training costs may be covered via the apprenticeship levy, schools often struggle to absorb the associated costs of release time, mentoring and backfill, especially within already stretched budgets. Cultural and operational barriers also persist. Some school leaders are hesitant to invest in unqualified staff in high-stakes classroom settings, while others cite limited awareness of available routes or lack of clarity on how best to integrate trainees into existing staffing models.

Without stronger incentives, guidance, and infrastructure, these promising pathways risk remaining on the margins, rather than becoming a core and accessible route into the profession.



## Policy and practice – what needs to change

A sustainable, inclusive education workforce will not be achieved through piecemeal interventions. It requires coordinated action across short-, medium- and long-term horizons, underpinned by investment, innovation and trust in the profession.

### SHORT-TERM

#### LAY THE FOUNDATIONS

- **Launch national and local campaigns** – led by educators and learners – that celebrate and reposition the role of education in society, reinforcing the mission-driven, high-impact careers that exist within the profession
- **Provide practical guidance and case studies of successful models** that embed inclusive recruitment practices across schools and Multi Academy Trusts (MATs), including for governance recruitment
- **Create space and incentives in the system for the deep reflective work** that will enable leaders to create truly inclusive and anti-racist environments in our education settings
- **Invest in scaling salaried, work-based entry routes**, backed by incentives for schools and colleges to integrate these within their staffing plans
- **Ensure the breadth of education careers are meaningfully integrated** into school and college-level careers programmes.

### MEDIUM-TERM

#### EMBED AND SCALE

- **Promote diverse career pathways** into teaching and other education roles, particularly for underrepresented groups
- **Diversify leadership pipelines** through creating mentorship and sponsorship programmes in collaboration with industry and local partners
- **Build local education talent pipelines** in partnership with schools, colleges, universities, employers and careers services
- **Make the case for earlier financial incentives** for school leavers from low socio-economic backgrounds to enter the education profession.

### LONG-TERM

#### REIMAGINE AND FUTURE PROOF

- **Re-design educator roles** to reflect evolving learner needs, AI integration and shifting societal demands, making them more appealing and accessible to current and future generations
- **Pilot a scheme that supports school and college leavers** from low socio-economic backgrounds through undergraduate study in order to enter the education profession.



Taken together, these proposals go beyond plugging gaps. They offer a bold, credible framework for building a profession that is representative, resilient and ready for the future.

**“If we want people to join – and stay – we need to show what’s possible. Show them what’s great, what’s inspiring, and what’s already working.”**

Member of  
FED Learners Council



## V.

## Prioritising professional development

Professional development is central to a thriving education system, serving as the mechanism by which staff remain confident, competent and connected, especially amidst increasing complexity and demand. Yet, too often, professional development is experienced as fragmented, generic, or marginalised. Only 15% of teachers reported that their professional development activities had a significant impact on their teaching practice<sup>56</sup>, highlighting the need for more effective and targeted support. As one contributor put it,

“We talk a lot about retention, but little about development. If we want people to stay, we need to give them space to grow.”

Across our consultation there was a strong appetite for a system that treats development not as an event, but as an embedded, continuous process – from early career through to leadership. Participants also highlighted the emotional weight of education work, particularly when supporting vulnerable learners, and called for more time to reflect, reset and build practice collaboratively.

### Systemic challenges

Many teachers and teaching assistants report feeling underprepared for the complexity of today's classrooms. Behavioural needs are increasing, and unmet SEND needs place added pressure on staff. Yet CPD remains inconsistent in quality and access. Too often, staff development is reactive or uniform, squeezed into twilight sessions or overly focused on compliance.

Teaching Assistants (TAs) have become increasingly important in our classrooms, but their roles can be underleveraged. In many schools and colleges, TAs remain locked into outdated deployment models that usually mean they only work with a handful of learners, despite their deep knowledge of pupils and their potential to support learning at scale. A more strategic, structured approach to TA recruitment and development could unlock significant benefits for both pupils and workforce sustainability.

During a FED roundtable, Chartered College of Teaching Fellows highlighted that individuals often have to take control of their development by seeking their own pathways, making time outside their role (e.g., for a Master's degree, Chartered pathways and flexible NPQs), and paying for this themselves. Although the goodwill to improve one's professional expertise is there, this leaves people feeling undervalued and risks becoming an expectation of the system. This reliance on goodwill was also discussed regarding the growing number of people leaving the profession and burning out.



### What works – and what's next

Professional learning is not a peripheral concern; it is a cornerstone of an effective and inclusive education system. The consultations called for a system-wide commitment to sustained, high-quality professional development not as a one-off intervention but as a structural pillar of an effective education system. High-quality CPD not only strengthens teaching and learning but also plays a vital role in staff retention, well-being and long-term workforce sustainability.

Also highlighted was the consistent view that too much professional development is compliance-driven, disconnected from practice and constrained by time and budget. Instead, staff need access to meaningful, embedded opportunities for growth – both collaborative and personalised – throughout their careers.

There is a strong case for this investment. Research by the EPI found that 35 hours of high-quality CPD per year could increase pupil attainment by two-thirds of a GCSE grade and improve lifetime earnings by over £6,000 per student, making it one of the most cost-effective ways to improve outcomes and drive social mobility.<sup>57</sup>

As **Denise Inwood** of the National College puts it:

“

Being able to navigate change and empathise with young people requires the professional themselves to be constantly learning. An environment that stimulates and challenges, one that encourages a degree of risk-taking providing rigorous expectations with well-structured professional support would both attract and retain strong staff. A commitment to provide ring fenced staff time for professional learning activities such as collaborative planning and coaching as well as personalised professional learning would have a significant impact on pupil performance and quality of teaching. Some [successful] models already exist. Advanced Learning Partnership, a Multi Academy Trust, offers all staff six hours of protected 'genius time' annually – self-directed professional learning designed to spark innovation and ownership.”

<sup>56</sup> A system that empowers: The future of professional development – IPPF

<sup>57</sup> The effects of high-quality professional development on teachers and students: A cost-benefit analysis – Education Policy Institute



A recent Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) report calls for a professional development entitlement for all teachers that builds in some oversight while including choice, something that our partners called for during our consultation: “create structure without stifling autonomy.”

This approach is backed by a 2020 report by NFER that found that autonomy over professional development goals had the greatest potential to increase job satisfaction and retention<sup>58</sup>. To help scale effective practice, Denise Inwood recommends the creation of a national register of CPD strategies and case studies, allowing educators to access, share and adopt approaches suited to their needs. This register could range from classroom-based coaching models to trust-wide development frameworks and needs to show the wide variety of practice suitable for different contexts and localities.

CPD being regularly built upon, related to previous learning and sequential over a longer period rather than ad hoc and one-off sessions were seen as more beneficial by Chartered College of Teaching Fellows. Likewise, the importance of networking and building professional relationships with like-minded and experienced peers was seen as invaluable, as were school visits and shadowing of peers in different school types and areas. Technology was also seen as a key enabler. A recent NFER trial found that teachers using generative AI for lesson preparation saved 31% more time than peers who did not<sup>59</sup>.

Participants in our broader consultation suggested that AI could also be used to personalise CPD pathways, matching staff with relevant, contextualised training opportunities in real time<sup>60</sup>.

As was mentioned in our chapter on inclusion, a number of contributors to our discussions put forward recommendations for all educators to experience a placement in a Special school or Alternative Provision setting in order to support better inclusive understanding and practice. Our consultation also highlighted the potential of introducing supervision sessions for educators that enable structured reflection after supporting vulnerable learners.



If we are serious about delivering the best life chances for learners, we must offer the best learning opportunities to those who teach and support them.

## Policy and practice – what needs to change

Our consultation has uncovered a number of recommendations that centre professional development in a thriving education system, serving as the mechanism by which staff remain confident, competent, and connected – especially amidst increasing complexity and demand.

### SHORT-TERM

#### LAY THE FOUNDATIONS

- **Establish protected staff time for professional learning:** This should include collaborative planning, coaching, and individualised CPD and be supported through governance oversight
- **Develop a CPD resource repository:** Create a centralised register of high-quality professional development strategies, allowing schools and colleges to select resources tailored to their specific needs
- **Foster collaborative learning environments:** Promote initiatives such as peer shadowing, observations, and cross-phase visits across all types of education settings
- **Enhance AI training:** Invest in staff training to effectively integrate AI tools, aiming to reduce workload and personalise professional development pathways
- **Pilot structured supervision models:** Introduce supervision frameworks across schools to support staff wellbeing and reflective practices
- **Initiate TA qualification standards:** Begin the development of national qualifications and standards for entry-level Teaching Assistants to ensure consistent training and professional growth.

### MEDIUM-TERM

#### EMBED AND SCALE

- **Co-design the future of CPD:** Empower educators to collaboratively design professional development structures that prioritise voice, choice, and autonomy
- **Assess future leadership needs:** Conduct comprehensive assessments to determine the evolving requirements of educational leaders and develop support mechanisms accordingly
- **Expand SEND training:** Embed exposure to specialist settings within teacher training programs and CPD to better support students with special educational needs
- **Mainstream supervision practices:** Establish structured supervision as a standard tool for reflection across education settings
- **Pilot national TA qualifications:** Implement pilot programs for national qualifications for entry-level Teaching Assistants, setting the stage for widespread adoption.

### LONG-TERM

#### REIMAGINE AND FUTURE PROOF

- **Embed a national CPD framework:** Establish a holistic professional development framework that aligns individual teacher growth with broader systemic goals, local context and pupil needs
- **Leverage data and technology:** Utilise intelligent data systems and technology to embed personalised CPD models, ensuring relevance and effectiveness
- **Launch comprehensive TA qualifications:** Roll out national qualifications for entry-level TAs, coupled with investment in high-quality CPD pathways.

By implementing these strategies, we can move towards a professional development system that equips educators to meet future challenges effectively.

<sup>58</sup> Teacher autonomy: how does it relate to job satisfaction and retention? – NFER

<sup>59</sup> ChatGPT in lesson preparation – A Teacher Choices Trial – NFER

<sup>60</sup> “Effectively Implementing Flexible Working in Schools” – In Diverse Company, 2022

## vi.

Increasing flexibility  
in the profession

The future education workforce must be more adaptable, inclusive and sustainable. That means rethinking what flexibility looks like to support recruitment and retention and align with how people want to learn, work and live.

Across our consultation, flexibility was one of the most commonly raised themes – not just in terms of working from home but also in terms of how roles are structured, supported, and made viable over the long term.

“I don’t think teachers expect the same sort of flexibility as in other sectors. For most, it’s about being in a school where flexibility is part of the culture – where if they need a late start or an afternoon off, it’s genuinely considered.”

FEDSpace participant

The growing expectation of younger staff for flexible working opportunities is reshaping the conversation, with recent legislative changes pushing for greater flexibility in the workplace. Persistent failures to stem the flow of teachers linked to inflexible maternity arrangements and overly rigid attitudes to phased retirement have also contributed to deep problems in sustaining the supply of teaching staff within the sector.

This section explores what’s already possible, where more ambition is needed, and how flexibility can become a meaningful part of every education role.

Systemic  
challenges

Education has not kept pace with wider workforce expectations. Despite some progress, part-time and job share arrangements remain rare in leadership roles, and few schools have a formalised approach to flexible working beyond statutory requests. Meanwhile a rigid timetable model – designed for full-time, permanent staff – often limits creative deployment of people and resources, stymying opportunities for training and development.

This lack of flexibility disproportionately impacts those with caring responsibilities. In 2023 alone, over 9,100 women aged 30-39 left the teaching profession with many citing workload, family commitments and lack of part-time opportunities<sup>61</sup>. Teachers told us that a culture of presenteeism still persists in some settings, discouraging those who might otherwise stay.

“Trying to juggle being a new mum and returning to teaching is a massive issue we need to address.”

FEDSpace participant

What works –  
and what’s next

In the face of ongoing workforce challenges, flexible working is emerging as a powerful tool to enhance staff retention, attract diverse talent and promote wellbeing across the education sector. When integrated thoughtfully into long-term planning, flexible working can support a more inclusive and sustainable environment for both staff and pupils.

Research by the NFER indicates that flexible working arrangements – such as part-time roles, job shares, and remote working during non-teaching time – can significantly improve teacher job satisfaction and motivation, leading to better retention rates. However, these benefits are most pronounced when flexible working is part of a holistic approach to creating a supportive and nurturing school culture<sup>62</sup>.

“

Our hands-on work in schools – both as an employer and collaborator with teachers, SENCOs, therapists, examiners, governors, and admin staff – gives us a clear view of the systemic pressures facing the education workforce. Through flexible working models, targeted training, and partnerships with government, charities, and policy institutes, we’re actively shaping solutions with FED to attract, retain and empower staff. Bold and sustained, collaborative action such as this is key to lasting transformation.”

Claire McNulty, Capita Schools Managing Director

The Department for Education (DfE) has recognised the importance of flexible working in its guidance, encouraging schools and MATs to adopt policies that respond to staff needs and promote a healthy work-life balance. The DfE’s Flexible Working Ambassador Schools programme showcases institutions that have successfully implemented flexible working practices, providing models for others to follow<sup>63</sup>.



WICKERSLEY  
PARTNERSHIP  
TRUST.

## Case Study:

An illustrative example comes from the Wickersley Partnership Trust,<sup>64</sup> where secondary school timetables are co-designed across five schools to accommodate part-time requests, facilitate team-based professional development and allow occasional work-from-home options for planning and collaboration. By treating timetabling as a strategic asset rather than a constraint, they have met staff needs without compromising educational provision.



<sup>61</sup> Missing Mothers, 2024

<sup>62</sup> Understanding the factors that support the recruitment and retention of teachers – review of flexible working approaches – NFER

<sup>63</sup> Flexible working in schools – GOV.UK

<sup>64</sup> Wickersley Partnership Trust





Moreover, recent surveys have shown that over half of teachers are more likely to apply for positions at schools that offer flexible working options, highlighting their role in recruitment and retention.<sup>65</sup>

As the education sector continues to navigate the complexities of workforce management, embracing flexible working practices – supported by clear policies, leadership commitment and shared learning from successful models – can be crucial in building a resilient and inclusive educational environment. Adopting technological innovations could create more opportunities for greater flexibility, for example, in how and where children are taught in the coming decades.

**“We’ve tried to think creatively about how we use the resources we’ve got, to give people time, collaboration and flexibility.”**

FED partner and Trust leader



Participants also called for a broader view of a teaching career. For mid-career teachers, flexible options such as four-day weeks, job shares, or part-time leadership could offer a pathway to stay or return to the profession. Looking ahead, there’s growing interest in teaching as a portfolio career, allowing people to take career breaks, work in other sectors, or bring external experience into the classroom. Secondments to industry or community organisations could rejuvenate practice and enrich the curriculum.

**“Imagine being able to spend a week in industry, then bring that experience back into your teaching – it’s inspiring for teachers and for students.”**

Member of  
FED Practitioners Council

## Policy and practice – what needs to change

A flexible profession is a sustainable profession. To attract and retain a diverse workforce, schools and colleges must offer greater adaptability in how, when, and where people work whilst not compromising the education of our nation’s learners, supported by system-level enablers and cultural change.

### SHORT-TERM

#### BUILD MOMENTUM

- **Showcase real-world practice:** Promote case studies of flexible working, job shares, and portfolio careers to inspire adoption, including through the DfE Flexible Working Ambassador Schools programme
- **Target middle and senior leadership:** Invest in the development of part-time and job-share roles, particularly in leadership, to widen participation and progression
- **Highlight flexibility in recruitment:** Encourage education providers to actively advertise flexible working options in job descriptions and recruitment materials.

### MEDIUM-TERM

#### EMBED STRUCTURAL CHANGE

- **Reimagine teaching as a portfolio career:** Support phased career models that allow for more flexible career progression, including planned sabbaticals, structured re-entry pathways, and secondments to other sectors
- **Pilot secondment schemes:** Learning from existing practice, create opportunities for staff to gain fresh experience in industry, public services, or community organisations
- **Enable shared staffing models:** Develop timetabling approaches that allow for cross-site planning, co-teaching and staff sharing across schools and colleges within MATs or local areas
- **Support leaders to lead flexibly:** Invest in system-wide professional development for school and college leaders focused on embedding flexibility as part of strategic workforce planning.

### LONG-TERM

#### REDESIGN FOR THE FUTURE

- **Anchor flexibility in workforce planning:** Embed flexible working into national strategies for workforce development, ensuring alignment with system resilience and long-term sustainability
- **Co-create the future classroom:** Partner with learners, educators and wider stakeholders to reimagine learning environments that support inclusion, wellbeing, community connection and meaningful use of digital tools.

In a labour market defined by mobility and choice, flexibility will be key to attracting and retaining the educators we need. When structured well, this flexibility doesn’t just benefit staff, it strengthens consistency for pupils, enables better deployment of talent and helps schools compete with other sectors for the next generation of professionals.

<sup>65</sup> Over half of teachers are more likely to apply for a job in a ‘flexible friendly’ school – The Educator UK Magazine



# vii.

## Building a workforce that lasts

The cost of inaction is growing. Rising vacancies have forced schools to rely heavily on agency supply staff, at considerable public expense. In 2022, English schools spent over £1.2 billion on supply teaching, much of it with private agencies.<sup>66</sup> These short-term fixes rarely offer stability for learners or address underlying workforce challenges.

FED stakeholders have put forward a wide range of proposals to support the existing profession to feel valued and supported and attract a diverse range of new colleagues into teaching and other education roles. In this report, we have centred on the opportunities offered by making education careers more inclusive and appealing; prioritising professional development; and increasing flexibility. A key theme has been a call to showcase what already works by creating accessible case studies of successful practice in various settings that educators can adapt to suit their context. In the longer-term, given the fast pace of technological and wider societal change, we must make time to reimagine, alongside the profession itself and learners, what the learning environments and education roles of the future will need to look like and develop the proper support and development structures for our education workforce.

The goal is clear: to make education a desirable career where people feel supported, valued and proud to stay and grow.

<sup>66</sup> England's teacher retention crisis costs taxpayers £1bn a year – The Telegraph





# MAT, SCHOOL & EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS



## fed MAT, School & Education Partnerships<sup>2</sup>

### i.

#### A vision for a collaborative education system

A truly effective education system is built on connection. It brings together schools, colleges, universities, local services and wider partners in a shared mission to support every learner, strengthen every community and shape a future where every child is given the chance to thrive.

This should not be a system of isolated silos. It should be a connected ecosystem, where collaboration is not a luxury or an innovation, but core infrastructure, essential to equity, coherence and long-term impact.

A collaborative system is one where shared accountability replaces competition. Schools and colleges are seen and recognised not only as individual providers, but as civic institutions contributing to the collective success of children and communities. This requires deep, purposeful relationships across education, local government, civil society and business, anchored in trust, long-term strategy and a shared commitment to learner flourishing.

As one participant put it,

**“The ultimate goal is learner and community flourishing, a vision far broader than academic success alone.”**

FED Futures shares this ambition: a system where collaboration is routine, not exceptional, and where it unlocks real-world impact, especially for those who need it most.

Signs of hope are already emerging. Across our consultations, we heard a growing appetite for partnerships prioritising shared purpose, long-term relationships and responsiveness to local needs.



Leaders spoke of shifting from short-term projects to more embedded, place-based collaboration, aligning educational partnerships with youth services, local authorities, health and community organisations. Young people echoed this too, calling for partnerships that feel relevant to their lives and that help them to imagine broader futures. Crucially, many said the most effective partnerships are shaped locally, not imposed from above. As one learner said:

**“Hearing stories more holistically from people in the community would be awesome... not just about jobs, but what it means to be a human.”**

This vision is beginning to take shape in national policy. The Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) strategy,<sup>67</sup> with its focus on regional school improvement teams led by experienced leaders, reflects a growing recognition of the value of place-based support. Similarly, the 2024 English Devolution White Paper<sup>68</sup> signals a move toward stronger local agency and more coherent coordination across systems. These developments point in the right direction, but they remain nascent and uneven. They must be informed by lessons from previous attempts to join up support at place level, including the DfE's Opportunity Areas and Levelling Up policies. To realise their full potential, they must be underpinned by clear structures, long-term investment and a sustained commitment to collaboration as core infrastructure, not just policy ambition.

This is not just about efficiency or innovation. It is about equity, inclusion and system maturity. Strong partnerships tackle place-based inequalities by pooling resources, widening opportunity and delivering joined-up support. As one learner shared:

**“I really would've liked a different kind of organisation linked with school - to help me understand my post-school options, get academic support, internships and work experience. That kind of support would've been really good.”**

In this future, collaboration is the measure of a system's ambition, capacity and care. When we invest in communities, we empower learners. And when learners thrive, the whole system strengthens.

<sup>67</sup> RISE teams and a new era for school intervention – NGA

<sup>68</sup> English Devolution White Paper – GOV.UK

<sup>69</sup> Opportunity for all – Strong schools with great teachers for your child – HM Government

## ii.

## Situation – a fragmented landscape in need of alignment

At the heart of everything we heard in our consultations was this simple insight:

**“It doesn't work if it's not someone's job”**

Member of FED Learners Council

While there is growing recognition that collaboration is critical to long-term school improvement, the current system still incentivises autonomy, competition and institutional performance. Decades of reform have embedded market-based principles, rewarding schools for outperforming their neighbours rather than working with them. Funding, inspection and parental choice still prize institutional success over shared responsibility. The Department for Education (DfE) itself acknowledged in the 2022 Schools White Paper that the system has become “frequently messy and difficult to navigate”.<sup>69</sup> While strong partnerships do exist, they remain uneven and often rely on individual leadership rather than being

supported by a consistent national or regional strategy.

An increasingly centralised policy environment compounds this challenge. As decisions move further from the local level, the coherence once provided by strong networks and shared accountability is lost. In cities like Birmingham, where many schools belong to large national Multi Academy Trusts (MATs), leaders report being encouraged to “look out” to their trust for support, rather than “look in” to collaborate with local peers.

Alongside this, schools operate within a complex and evolving mix of governance models – from local authority-maintained schools and Standalone Academies (SATs) to MATs of varying scale, and independent schools. While each model brings different strengths, no governance structure on its own guarantees better outcomes. Without a coherent design or shared commitment to collaboration, even well-intentioned reforms risk entrenching fragmentation.





Yet there are signs of what's possible when schools work across these boundaries. In places like Bolton, independent schools play an active role in local partnerships alongside state schools. Nationally, the Church of England and Catholic Education Service also invest in collaborative local leadership and diocesan infrastructure, helping to move beyond historical isolation and support shared flourishing across diverse settings.

These system-wide challenges also intersect with issues of governance. Across England, tens of thousands of governors, trustees and volunteers play a vital role in school life. Their work is often under-recognised, yet essential to local accountability, strategic leadership and community connection. In a fragmented landscape, their contributions can be undermined by competing priorities, unclear roles and lack of coordination. As governance becomes more complex, particularly in large MATs, a growing disconnect exists between strategic accountability and local responsiveness, weakening trust and transparency. Strengthening collaboration must go hand-in-hand with a renewed focus on stewardship and service at all levels of the system.

At the same time, the system is under intensifying financial strain. Real-terms per-pupil funding remains below 2010 levels, even as demands on schools have risen sharply.<sup>70</sup> The capital repair backlog has reached £13.8 billion.<sup>71</sup> Costs for supply staff, school meals, and basic provision continue to rise, while funding for essential services such as mental health support remains inadequate.<sup>72</sup> Over 150,000 children are now waiting more than two years for treatment.<sup>73</sup> These funding pressures undermine individual school resilience and the wider capacity for collaboration, particularly in the areas that need it most.

Meanwhile, the social and educational challenges facing schools are increasingly interconnected – from persistent absence to food insecurity, youth mental health to post-16 transitions. Yet government departments remain siloed, with competing priorities and disconnected funding streams. In this context, schools and colleges are often left trying to stitch together local support independently, without the joined-up national infrastructure to back them.

Past government attempts to support place-based partnership – including the Opportunity Areas and Levelling Up initiatives – show what's possible. But they have too often been time-limited, poorly communicated, or unevaluated. Their learning risks being lost. One stakeholder said,

**“ We shouldn't keep reinventing the wheel without knowing what worked last time.”**

And yet, we also heard compelling evidence of what is possible when collaboration is sustained, place-based, and purpose-led. Initiatives like Oasis Community Hubs show how schools can act as anchor institutions in local systems, improving outcomes for learners and communities. As one MAT leader shared,

**“ We need a clear national strategy that enables us all to work together and pull that vision into reality.”**

The conditions for a more aligned system are beginning to take shape. But until collaboration is structurally enabled, equitably funded and strategically led, progress will remain patchy, and the full potential of partnership will go unrealised.



## iii.

### Scope – focusing on what enables collaboration

This chapter examines the conditions that enable effective collaboration within England's education system. Over the past two decades, the landscape has shifted from informal partnerships to a complex network of over 1,200 MATs overseeing more than 10,000 schools. While this has brought innovation and local flexibility, it has also created inconsistency, with wide variation in scale, governance and capacity.

Our consultation focused on collaboration between MATs, schools, colleges and communities, particularly in areas of entrenched disadvantage. We did not attempt to map the full education ecosystem – including Further Education, employer engagement, or lifelong learning – but instead concentrated on addressing a national gap: understanding how partnerships can be designed and supported to deliver systemic improvement, equity and sustainability.

Three key enablers emerged from our work:

**Purpose:** Partnerships must be driven by shared goals prioritising outcomes for all learners, not just individual institutions.

**Infrastructure:** Strong local leadership, clear roles, and the capacity to broker collaboration across organisational boundaries are essential.

**Measurement:** We must rethink accountability to recognise and reward the value of collaborative working and shared impact.

By identifying what makes partnerships effective, we aim to move beyond isolated successes to a system where collaboration is the default mechanism for improvement.

<sup>70</sup> School Spending Pupil 2024 Remain below 2010 Levels – IFS

<sup>71</sup> Maintaining public service facilities – National Audit Office

<sup>72</sup> English schools left to subsidise infants' free meals after 3p funding increase, say leaders – The Guardian

<sup>73</sup> Healthcare – The Times



# iv.

## Purpose – rethinking accountability to recognise collaboration

In a high-stakes, high-pressure system, what gets measured is what gets prioritised. Today, England's accountability model continues to reward performance against narrow, institution-level metrics – exam results, attendance figures, university entry – reflecting a performative model of success rooted in market-driven reforms that pit schools against one another in pursuit of league table rankings, rather than shared outcomes. This overlooks broader contributions to community, well-being or system-wide impact.

**“ We need to move from a system that just asks us ‘what grade did you get?’ to one that values how you got there – and who helped you along the way.”**

Member of  
FED Learners Council

Our consultation surfaced a strong view that if partnership truly matters, it must be valued accordingly. This doesn't mean adding more box-ticking but rethinking what success looks like in education and how we recognise it. As another school leader in a FEDSpace policy roundtable said,

**“ If partnership does matter, if it is important, if it does serve communities, then... make it something that we're asked to demonstrate effort and outcomes in.”**

The current system disincentivises collaboration – especially between high- and lower-performing schools – by tying school status and funding to individual results. As **Dr Joe Spence**, CEO of the School Partnerships Alliance, which seeks to encourage and promote impactful partnerships between schools in the maintained and independent sectors, questioned,

**“ You can't profess to be a great school if you're not helping the school that requires improvement down the road – but where's the incentive to collaborate rather than compete?”**

This reflects a wider contradiction at the heart of the current system: schools and colleges are judged individually, but improvement is increasingly understood as a collective endeavour.

A 2023 DfE report<sup>74</sup> found that performance pressures under current accountability frameworks directly impact collaboration, with schools fearing that sharing resources or good practice may disadvantage them competitively. The same research emphasised that many school leaders feel judged more for their test scores than for their contribution to wider system improvement.

Attempts to embed partnership in inspection criteria also come with real risks. For example, rural or isolated schools and colleges may have fewer natural collaborators. As one MAT leader cautioned,

**“ There is a risk that measuring collaboration formally would distort it or penalise schools who have fewer local opportunities. Any framework must be enabling, not performative.”**

This highlights a tension: accountability need not be the enemy of collaboration. But without careful design, it risks incentivising performative compliance over relational work.

Despite these constraints, strong examples are emerging. Schools, colleges and MATs nationwide support one another through shared leadership development, joint provision for vulnerable learners, and collaborative teaching practice.

Evidence suggests that such partnerships can increase teachers' motivation to engage in professional dialogue and knowledge sharing<sup>75</sup>, contributing to a more inclusive and improvement-focused school culture.

FED Futures proposes a reimagined, layered approach to accountability – one that values collaboration as a system asset and offers multiple, context-sensitive ways to demonstrate impact.

## Policy and practice – what needs to change

### SHORT-TERM

- Pilot inclusive accountability models in partnership-rich areas, drawing on the DfE's Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) initiative. These pilots should test new forms of recognition, such as peer-reviewed partnership narratives or evidence of community impact, and build an evidence base tailored to local capacity and context. These should then be used to inspire and support more and higher quality partnerships in other areas.

### MEDIUM-TERM

- Reconsider Ofsted, Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), and DfE accountability frameworks to allow schools, Trusts and colleges to report on civic outcomes, cross-school/college collaboration, and system contribution. Together, these steps form the foundation for a system in which collaborative behaviours are supported from classroom to boardroom, not through mandates, but through meaningful incentives and shared accountability
- Broaden the scope of what is measured to create space for partnerships to thrive, recognising the full value schools bring to their communities and encouraging deeper, purpose-led collaboration
- Governing bodies and trustees should be supported to prioritise system contribution as part of strategic oversight, embedding partnership values in leadership, not just inspection.

### LONG-TERM

- Embed a national framework that formally rewards schools, MATs, colleges and universities for their role in supporting others, reducing inequality and advancing place-based priorities. This would align with wider ambitions in the English Devolution White Paper, which emphasises stronger local leadership and regional accountability for outcomes.

**When we measure the right things, we encourage the right behaviours. In a collaborative system, success should not be defined by grades alone but by the depth of relationships, the equity of access, and the impact schools have beyond their own walls.**

<sup>74</sup> Exploring school collaboration and workload reduction Research report – Department for Education

<sup>75</sup> School-to-school collaboration in England: a configurative review of the empirical evidence (Armstrong, Brown, Chapman) 2020



## V.

## Infrastructure – recognising and resourcing "community weavers"

In every consultation, the message was the same: partnerships don't fail for lack of will; they fail for lack of infrastructure. Effective collaboration takes more than shared values. It takes people whose job it is to connect the system; trusted coordinators with the time, relationships and remit to build bridges across sectors. These we are calling the 'community weavers': those who find space to meet, time to build trust and capacity to drive sustained, place-based work forward. As one MAT leader said:

**“ There is a huge amount of goodwill, but it often goes nowhere because it lacks infrastructure.”**

Yet most partnerships across the country rely on informal relationships, overstretched leaders, or short-term project grants.

The result is a system where strong models struggle to scale, and many places – particularly rural or underserved regions – lack the capacity to collaborate at all.

The education system has historically prioritised programme funding over structural investment. Pilots come and go, while the relational glue that holds partnerships together is rarely resourced. In the absence of coordination funding, schools and local organisations often take on convening roles themselves, diverting limited budgets to keep collaboration alive.

**“ We became that hub – but we're doing it with our own funds, and without support.”**

Carla Whelan, CEO, Empower Trust

**“ Someone has to wake up thinking: how do I knit this all together?”**

Hannah Cohen, Head of Community, Big Change, FEDSpace policy roundtable

These roles are already emerging in some areas and are embedded in local authorities, MATs, education trusts and voluntary organisations. But they remain precarious and complex to scale without formal recognition, funding, or role clarity. Participants in our consultation consistently called for these roles to be professionalised, codified and embedded within system infrastructure, not treated as optional or ad hoc. Community weavers are not goodwill brokers or programme managers. They are strategic actors, with the mandate to align provision, sustain relationships and deliver on shared local missions.

The absence of recognised partnership roles hits hardest in places without infrastructure or networks. Without local infrastructure, the areas with the fewest connections risk falling further behind. Investing in community weavers is a matter of equity, not just efficiency. It risks deepening regional inequality, especially as the government moves to devolve more power to Mayoral Combined Authorities.

**Without capacity, local leaders risk being handed responsibility without the tools to deliver.**

### What works - and what's next

Examples like the Oasis Community Hubs and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Learning Partnership show what's possible when place-based roles are embedded, funded and trusted. These models coordinate provision across education, health, housing and youth services, creating joined-up support for learners and families and demonstrating that the effectiveness of partnerships depends on the people driving them. Across our consultation,

participants called for a clear shift in mindset: from funding isolated initiatives to investing in the conditions that make partnership work.

Community weavers should be recognised as core to system infrastructure, not optional extras. Whether embedded in schools, MATs, local authorities or voluntary organisations, these roles must be funded, professionalised and connected, with a clear mandate to align people, provision and place.

### Policy and practice – what needs to change

#### SHORT-TERM

- Launch a 'Partnerships in Place' Fund to support salaried convenor roles in diverse settings, including rural, coastal and underserved areas. Prioritise areas with limited existing infrastructure.

#### MEDIUM-TERM

- Establish regional collaboration hubs and digital platforms to support shared learning, long-term planning and joined-up delivery across schools, colleges, MATs and civic partners.

#### LONG-TERM

- Normalise the role of community weavers as part of the core education improvement infrastructure, recognised in accountability frameworks, supported through core budgets and reflected in system leadership planning.



This approach aligns with the English Devolution White Paper, which calls for greater regional leadership and system coordination in education. But local leaders can only deliver on that vision if they are empowered with the right people, tools, and systems.

In a truly collaborative education system, infrastructure is not a bolt-on; it's the engine room. Investing in community weavers is not just about making partnerships possible. It's about making them work, for learners, for families and for the places they call home.



# vi.

## Measurement – designing for integrity and long-term impact

To make partnership work, we must learn to measure what matters – relational strength, shared ownership, and long-term impact – not just short-term outputs. But too often, national policy pushes partnerships to scale quickly or conform to one-size-fits-all expectations without the space to reflect, adapt, or build shared meaning. The result? Partnerships may look good on paper but lack community buy-in or sustainability.

**“Top-down approaches are often disruptive. They arrive without understanding local dynamics.”**

**School leader, FEDSpace policy roundtable**

Partnerships today are rarely evaluated on what matters most to those they serve. National frameworks reward academic progress and financial efficiency but struggle to measure relational strength, place-based alignment or long-term equity impact. Without the right tools and signals, powerful models like Cornwall Education Learning Trust (CELT) or the Bolton Learning Partnership often go unrecognised, despite generating strong local outcomes.

Moreover, well-seeded partnerships are vulnerable to political cycles and funding volatility. As new reforms emerge, successful models can be sidelined or dismantled simply because they were never embedded in the system's infrastructure or recognised by national metrics.

### What works – and what's next

Our consultation found that partnerships built with integrity tend to share three characteristics:

**Start small, grow deep –** Effective partnerships prioritise depth and trust over visibility and speed, allowing collaboration to evolve over time rather than conform to immediate targets.

**Shared ownership, diverse voices –** Genuine impact comes when schools, colleges, universities, local authorities, charities and communities co-lead partnerships based on lived experience and mutual trust.

**Measuring what matters locally –** Evaluating success by community outcomes, not just institutional performance.



Examples like Bolton Learning Partnership and CELT's Cradle to Career model demonstrate the value of slow, place-rooted growth. These initiatives blend accountability with adaptability, measuring both learner outcomes and systemic influence. Wider research supports this approach. While the direct impact of

inter-school collaboration on student attainment is mixed, a strong body of evidence shows it improves school improvement capacity, enhancing teacher development, leadership pipelines, innovation, and organisational sustainability (Stoll, 2015;<sup>76</sup> Hill et al., 2012<sup>77</sup>; Chapman & Muijs, 2014<sup>78</sup>)

## Policy and practice – what needs to change

### SHORT-TERM

- Introduce flexible grants for early-stage partnership formation, including time for asset mapping, shared governance design and trust-building. Evaluation should be rooted in experience of what works, not compliance-based.

### MEDIUM-TERM

- Create a national storytelling platform and peer learning networks to share case studies, tools and outcomes from partnership-led innovation. Support local authorities and MATs to collaborate as anchor institutions.

### LONG-TERM

- Protect high-impact partnerships from disruption by future reforms through a national recognition framework, one that embeds values of equity, local ownership and civic contribution alongside traditional performance metrics.

**“So many young people are just left out. If the school doesn't know what to do with you, you're basically done. That's why partnership has to mean something real.”**

**Member of  
FED Learners Council**

When we design systems that recognise partnership as essential – not exceptional – we send a clear signal: no young person should be left without the support they need to thrive.

In a system built for equity, we must measure what matters, not just what's easy to count. When we invest in the early architecture of partnership and recognise its civic and educational value, we don't just deliver better outcomes. We build structures that last.

<sup>76</sup> Stoll, L. (2015). Using evidence, learning and the role of professional learning communities. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Leading Evidence Use in Schools* (pp. 54-72). London: IOE Press

<sup>77</sup> Hill, R., Dunford, J., Parish, N., Rea, S., & Sandals, L. (2012). *The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership

<sup>78</sup> Chapman, C., & Muijs, D. (2014). Does school-to-school collaboration promote school improvement? A study of the impact of school federations on student outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 25(3), 351-393





## Case Study:

## THE BOLTON LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

BOLTONLEARNINGPARTNERSHIP.ORG.UK



The Bolton Learning Partnership (BLP) is a cross-sector collaboration bringing together the full range of secondary and further education institutions in Bolton – including academies, maintained schools, colleges, alternative provision and independent schools. United by a shared mission to improve the life chances of all 19,000 learners in the town, BLP is built on the principle that every organisation is responsible for every learner.

**Established long before academisation, BLP began with the “19K” commitment – a pledge by leaders to look beyond their own institutions and work together to tackle shared challenges.**

This early, voluntary collaboration laid the foundations for borough-wide systems of school improvement, rooted in the values of collaboration, ambition, integrity and respect.

The partnership has delivered significant impact. Working closely with the Local Authority, BLP has helped to redesign in-year admissions and co-create a borough-wide Inclusion Strategy, leading to a substantial reduction in permanent exclusions and stronger inclusive cultures. Academically, Bolton's Progress 8 scores have improved from -0.20 in 2018/19 to +0.05 in 2023/24, with particularly strong progress for disadvantaged learners, who now outperform national comparators.

**Credit:** Dom McKeon and Philip Britton, The Bolton Learning Partnership

Could formal accountability structures, as they currently stand, make the partnership even stronger? Leaders in Bolton believe not. BLP's strength lies in its collective moral purpose – a shared belief that collaboration, not compliance, drives improvement.

**That belief continues to shape a partnership defined by ambition, impact and hope for every young person in Bolton.**



## Case Study:

## CORNWALL EDUCATION LEARNING TRUST – CRADLE TO CAREER PARTNERSHIPS

CELTRUST.ORG



Cornwall Education Learning Trust (CELT) is developing a 'Cradle to Career' approach to drive positive, place-based change across mid-Cornwall. Recognising that great schools are necessary but insufficient working in isolation to close the disadvantage gap, CELT is embracing its civic role, working with families, health services, local government, faith groups, and businesses to build stronger foundations for every child's learning, wellbeing and future opportunities. CELT identified St Austell as its priority community using public data and direct family engagement. Asset mapping and listening exercises with

vulnerable families helped pinpoint local barriers. Over 50 partners are now involved in collaborative 'impact hubs', including a birth-to-school hub focused on improving early speech and language development, and a post-16 pathways hub tackling destination tracking, transport, and inclusion challenges.

Relationships are at the heart of CELT's strategy. Investing time in trust-building has led to rapid expansion of partnerships and more substantial alignment between services. Progress is measured through shared speech and language data across primary schools and sustained engagement metrics.

**CELT's work underscores that schools are the anchors of their communities. By reaching beyond their gates, they can drive system-wide collaboration to support children from birth through to positive post-school destinations.**



**DAN MORROW**  
CELT Trust Lead

# CELT



# CONCLUSION

**This report shows that, even under immense pressure, England's education system has the appetite and ideas for meaningful progress. Across every region and role, we heard a shared vision: one where inclusion is not an add-on but a foundation, where the workforce is valued and supported, and where collaboration is the norm, not the exception.**

The challenge now is alignment. Too often, inclusion is inconsistent, the workforce is overstretched, and partnerships remain fragile or short-lived.

But the path forward is more apparent than ever. This report outlines a focused blueprint for system renewal, structured around three strategic pillars: inclusion, workforce and collaboration.

It calls for a statutory National Inclusion Framework, requiring every school or college to include an inclusion audit in their annual improvement plan; a focused priority age point offer with early years being a focus area; and nationally agreed standards for inclusive practice across education, health and care.

It proposes reimagining our learning environments and educator roles in line with evolving learner needs, shifting societal demands and the role of technology;

expanding access to the profession by supporting underrepresented groups earlier in their education journey; establishing a national entitlement for high-quality professional development; and embedding flexibility as a key principle in workforce planning.

It advocates for structural support to unlock genuine partnerships, new metrics to measure and reward them and reforms to funding and accountability that incentivise shared outcomes.

These three priorities are deeply interconnected. Progress in one often depends on or accelerates progress in the others. Together, they offer a route toward a more equitable, coherent and sustainable system. While they do not represent the full set of challenges facing education, meaningful progress in these areas would create the conditions to unlock wider improvements across the sector.

**But this change cannot be delivered through goodwill alone. This report shows that the most effective inclusion and partnership models are often patchwork, short-term, or precariously funded. To realise their full potential, they need long-term, protected investment, supported by cross-party commitment and a shift in how we value the social infrastructure of education.**



This report is not an endpoint. It marks the beginning of a new phase grounded in action, accountability and shared leadership. In 2025 and beyond, FED will:

- **Establish the National Education Assembly** – a standing, stakeholder-led forum to drive long-term system reform, supported by a new digital platform and quarterly convenings
- **Launch the Annual State of Education Report** – an independent mechanism to monitor progress, hold the system to account and highlight pressure points
- **Expand FED Futures to address emerging national priorities** – including AI for Education, Creativity and Innovation, Student Financial Wellbeing, Careers and Skills, Maths and Numeracy, and English and Literacy – while continuing to advance recommendations that support Inclusion
- **Continue to convene lived and learned expertise** – bridging insight from learners, practitioners, leaders and communities into tangible policy recommendations.

## Some of these next projects are already underway:

- **FED's AI for Education Futures** project will shift the conversation from "what AI can do" to "what education truly needs." Drawing on insights from educators, global experts and learners, it will deliver a practical, data-driven report and launch a globally inclusive, interactive AI Toolkit to support safe, equitable adoption worldwide
- **Our Creativity & Innovation** workstream will explore how we unlock innovation responsibly, not through unproven fads, but through sustained investment in teacher agency, inclusive pedagogy and learner-centred design
- **Our Financial Wellbeing in Education** initiative will combine research, digital tools and policy reform to ensure every student leaves the system financially literate with the skills, confidence, and habits needed for long-term security and success.

Each strand reflects a single belief: the future must be designed, not defaulted to. And the expertise to design it already exists across the education system. What is missing is the structure to align it, fund it and scale it.

FED Futures was established to disrupt the pattern of short-term fixes and bring sustained, strategic focus to education policy. As part of this work, FED will shortly launch the National Education Assembly (NEA) – the first fully stakeholder-driven initiative designed to ensure all voices across the education community have a genuine role in shaping national policy, practice, and priorities. The NEA will provide structured, independent feedback to government and system leaders through regular assemblies, combining in-person and virtual engagement, strengthening the foundations for coherent, long-term system improvement.

**Our call to decision-makers is clear: listen systemically, plan for the long-term and lead collaboratively. When we build a system around those furthest from opportunity, with coherence, investment, and inclusion at its core, we create a system where everyone can thrive.**



# APPENDIX

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- Chris Bingley**, Assistant Headteacher at Thornleigh Salesian College
- Dr Chris McLean**, Senior Lecturer at Manchester University
- Chris Reddy**, Founder of Bright Leaders in Bolton
- Dan Blackedge**, Deputy Headteacher at Up Holland High School
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- Helen Carter**, Deputy Headteacher at Burnidge Academy
- Ian Parry**, Director of Education for Southport Learning Trust
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**Alastair Falk**, FED Executive team, Education Consultant

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**Carla Thomas**, Finance Officer at The Inspirational Learning Group

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**Dr Phil Martin**, Partner at Marks & Clerk LLP

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**Allana Gay**, Founding Trustee of BAMEd Network and Headteacher

**Ashraf Ali MBE FRSA**, Strategic Partnership Manager at The Read Foundation

**Corianne Gjertsen**, Senior Student Support Advisor at Dyson Institute

**David Parr**, CEO Oasis Group

**Dom McKeon**, Head of Little Lever School and Chair of BLP

**Fiona Fearon**, Head of Policy and Research at the National Governance Association

**Graeme Routledge**, Doncaster PINS

**Jack Worth**, Education Economist at NFER

**Dr Joe Spence**, CEO of Schools Partnerships Alliance

**Kate Longworth**, Founder/CEO at Gaia Learning Ltd

**Natasha Armstrong**, Head of Impact Strategy at NFER

**Oshoke M**, Oasis Academy Southbank student

**Paddy McGuinness**, Head of Education Strategy (EMEA) at Texthelp

**Patrick Cozier**, Headteacher at Highgate Wood Secondary School

**Penelope Harrison**, Law student, former co-chair of FED's Learner Council

**Phil Denton**, Chief Operating Officer at EdStart School

**Philip Britton MBE**, Headteacher at Bolton School

**Rhys Howells**, Managing Director at ETeach Group

**Russ Lawrance**, Chief Executive at Haringey Sixth Form College

**Viv Grant**, Director of Integrity Coaching

**Professor Wayne Holmes**, Professor of Critical Studies of Artificial Intelligence and Education UCL

**Zoë Elder**, Associate Director of Professional Learning and Innovation at ASDAN

The FED would also like to acknowledge the hundreds of participants in the 2025 virtual policy roundtables.

**FED & Hays Education National Breakfast Seminar Experts:**

**Manchester**  
Frank Norris MBE  
Jamila Kossar MBE

**Liverpool**  
Mayor Steve Rotheram  
Sir Paul Grant

**Birmingham**  
Sean Harris  
Katrina Morley OBE  
Daniel Locke-Wheaton  
Kate Tague

**Chatham**  
Dr Matt Silver  
Mandy Gage  
  
Michelle Storer



## Join the National Education Assembly

**FED has launched the National Education Assembly (NEA) – the first fully stakeholder driven initiative designed to ensure all voices across the education community have a genuine role in shaping the future of education.**

The NEA is the first of its kind: of an education system, for an education system.

Stakeholder led, driven by no vested interests, the NEA is designed to give all education stakeholders a meaningful input into national education policy, practice and strategy.

The NEA is powered by FED and is an organisation created to support Education Stakeholders (Teachers, Lecturers, Leaders, Support Staff, Parents / Carers, Business Leaders, Learners and more) to ensure their voice is heard, shared and amplified.

The NEA meets at regular intervals throughout the year to consider education issues. It acts to provide objective and positive developmental feedback to government, its institutions and wider stakeholders.

### Join the NEA today

Help us create a thoughtful, sustainable, long-term approach to the education of our country's young people. Only by doing this can we build a positive, thriving, economically robust and morally driven future.

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