



EPI Conference - May 2022

The Schools Bill: How can it deliver opportunities for all by 2030?

Introduction

The Schools White Paper, published in March 2022, provided a much-anticipated opportunity for the government to set out its education policy, presenting it within the context of its levelling up agenda. The White Paper set out plans to ensure every child can fulfil their potential, with the dual aims of 90% of primary school children achieving the expected KS2 standard in reading, writing and maths by 2030 and the national average GCSE grade in English language and maths rising from 4.5 in 2019 to 5 by 2030. To meet these aims, the White Paper set out a series of proposals including the following:

- The goal of all schools being a part of, or in the process of joining, a Multi Academy Trust by 2030.
- Increased investment in underrepresented or highly disadvantaged areas in parallel with the levelling up agenda proposed by the government.
- A minimum school week of 32.5 hours by September 2030.
- An Ofsted inspection of every school by 2025 including the backlog of 'outstanding' schools that have not been inspected for many years.
- A register for children not in school to ensure no child is lost from the system.
- Greater investment in teacher recruitment and retention including £30,000 starting salaries, payments to recruit physics, chemistry, computing and maths teachers working in disadvantaged schools and 500,000 teacher training and development opportunities by 2024.
- An amended National Funding Formula for schools aiming to increase the transparency and equity of the funding across the country through creating a single national formula where every mainstream school is funded on the same objective measures of need, rather than 150 different local formulae.
- The Parent Pledge: a commitment to ensure any child who falls behind in English or maths will be supported to ensure they make up learning losses, based on a system of involving parents in the learning recovery journey.

The Schools White Paper was soon followed by the publication of the Schools Bill, announced during the Queen's Speech in May 2022. The Bill translates the long-term goals of the White Paper into primary legislation.



In May 2022, EPI, in partnership with Capita, brought together policy makers from the Department for Education, school leaders and education sector experts to discuss the policies laid out in the Schools Bill, as well as future challenges and opportunities. The discussion considered the feasibility of all schools joining MATs, the impact of government plans on school leadership and educational outcomes, and which, if any policies, could be adapted or further expanded in future if the government is truly to close the disadvantage gap, raise standards and reduce learning loss by 2030.

This paper provides a summary of the discussion that occurred during the event. We are grateful to all participants for their contribution.

View from DfE - The Schools Bill: Unapologetically Ambitious

The government's Schools Bill was described by Clare MacDonald, Deputy Director for Schools Strategy, Academies and Support at the Department for Education (DfE) as being "unapologetically ambitious". The central goals laid out by the bill have been set to improve education standards, with a focus on reading, writing and maths, whilst simultaneously aiming to make current robust academy standards the model for the entire country. It is the view of the DfE that everyone who works in teaching and the education sector share the common goal of improving the quality of learning, with trickle down effects in boosting opportunities across the country as part of the wider levelling up agenda.

The narrative of the White Paper is a focus on teachers as the key element of education delivery. The policy utilises professional development and training in new areas to give teachers the best tools to succeed in education and leadership. The levelling up element of this agenda also considered the premium of better pay and opportunity in areas that are deemed to have the most urgent need.

The translation of the White Paper into the Schools Bill is based on a broad programme to improve standards and education quality while taking into consideration the need to help all children catch up on learning and development lost to the pandemic. Moving beyond the traditional definition of key performance indicators in literacy and numeracy, the bill also promotes other areas such as arts, science, and mental health.

Chapter III of the White Paper lays out investment in education recovery, signalling the government's intention to boost successful programmes which not only facilitate post-pandemic education recovery, but become embedded as standard into the development and operation of education in the future.

Moreover, Chapter IV of the White Paper focuses on the environment beyond immediate classroom education. The ambitious goal of all schools being part of MATs by 2030 aims to ensure more than 90% of children remain in full time education past KS2. This chapter is heavily reflected in the final version of the bill, mapping out how the government intends to



promote and foster collaboration and open communication with local authorities, school leaders, teachers and families to achieve this.

Clare MacDonald highlighted that the current policy was written at a time where school academies and MATs were relatively uncommon. The government acknowledges this is now the reality and is working on how to ensure the system can both sustain current standards and adapt them to meet future needs. The aim is to translate funding agreements and other operational aspects of academies into academy or MAT statutes. This requires cooperation and working in partnership with the sector to ensure that government, local authorities and schools can create a coherent system that works for all.

The DfE acknowledged neither the White Paper nor the Schools Bill will achieve absolute equal opportunity for all, but believe they are the key drivers of conversation and collaboration with regional and local education authorities that will translate into overarching, tangible and achievable change.

Panel Discussion:

Challenges beyond the classroom

Factors beyond the classroom are acknowledged by many school leaders and education experts as a key determinant of the success of pupils. Using the Schools Bill's objectives of raising standards, reducing learning loss and closing the disadvantage gap as a starting point, the discussion at this event touched on some of the elements which are seen to have the largest impacts on teaching and learning beyond the classroom.

It was the opinion of some on the panel that, if the government truly wants tangible education reform, it must first address challenges that extend beyond schools themselves. Current statistics shared by one of the participants show that in 2021, estimates place 9 out of every 30 classroom schoolchildren in poverty, with 45% of those at risk of extreme poverty coming from single parent families or with only one working parent. Furthermore, one in six 6–16-year-olds in England are living with a diagnosed mental health condition, with estimates of a further 1.5 million needing support over the coming months due to COVID concerns. These areas have not been given enough attention in the Schools Bill.

Other participants welcomed the Schools Bill and some of the focus areas of investment such as technological development and investment in accessible, good quality broadband as having the potential to drive change. By investing in areas that go beyond schools themselves, participants highlighted the potential of schools to become drivers of their environment, with a crucial civic duty of shaping and contributing to their communities. Teachers and school leaders, with the appropriate levels of training and resources, are the biggest determining factor in addressing the priorities set by the government and the DfE in the Schools Bill.

While the panel recognised that the White Paper and the Schools Bill referenced many of the outside elements that may impact teaching and learning, more must be done. The goals were argued to be too ambitious and intangible, with a need to shift the focus from schools as an



isolated problem to schools as an adaptable and dynamic element of the wider community they serve. The DfE acknowledged the need for more specific compromises on investment areas beyond schools and assured the audience this is an ongoing working priority for the department and in wider government too.

Funding and standards

The panel also discussed concerns regarding the ways in which schools are and should be funded. It was the view of the panel overall that if schools and trusts are to achieve these goals of improving standards, reducing learning loss and closing the disadvantage gap, increased and targeted funding would be necessary.

It was the view of some on the panel that school funding was already underperforming in efficiency, geographical distribution and overall investment amounts prior to 2020, concerns which were only heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The panel agreed strong financial planning and forecasting at the school and trust level, with appropriate experienced governance and leadership, will be the cornerstone of successful schools and trusts, paired with increased investment in teacher recruitment, training, CPD and resource allocation. One speaker highlighted the need not only for more investment, but also for the funding to be targeted and specific to schools and areas which are most disadvantaged, linking to the socioeconomic concerns outlined above. The DfE representative confirmed the department is working closely with HM Treasury and other elements in the government, local authorities and leaders to ensure future funding goes to the areas who need it most.

Some members of the panel mentioned the role of Ofsted, suggesting that the current focus on school standards and performance is not only excessive, but in fact drives good quality, experienced teachers and staff away from schools that need them most.

Capacity emerged as the most important element when discussing the raising of school standards, and it was grouped into three principal aspects:

- **Leadership:** the need for good quality, experienced and tenured leadership was seen as essential in order to raise school standards. School leaders with an education background, who have a wide array of experience in both well performing and struggling schools was agreed to be the way forward.
- **Governance:** one of the panellists argued school and trust governance is in many cases a voluntary position, where those with experience in leadership or expertise in the education sector dedicate time and resources of their own free will. A system that recognises, rewards and incentivises talent and performance in governance at the local level was agreed to be essential in order for schools and trusts to work together to improve standards.
- **Collaboration:** cooperation between schools and academies themselves, between schools and local authorities and the overall community they serve was argued to be



an indispensable element of the operation of schools and trusts. Open communication and discussion between all those with a stake in education performance should not only be encouraged but fostered and maintained to ensure all have the best tools and resources at their disposal.

The overarching theme of the conversation on funding and school standards was the shared understanding that increased, targeted and dynamic funding is paramount if the goals set out by the Schools Bill are to be achieved. Investment is needed not only in teacher training and development nationwide, but specific funding must be ringfenced for areas that need it most. Increased incentives and rewards for good governance are also needed.

The role of government

An important thread that ran throughout the discussion was the role of government, in particular, how to navigate the line between autonomy and accountability for schools. One speaker felt that the White Paper confirms that the DfE lexicon is highly aspirational but intangible, emphasising the fact that the goals set will only become reality if schools and trusts deliver them. They felt it is up to the DfE to be the enabler of positive change but ultimately it is at a classroom level where it will be delivered, through the actions of teachers and school leaders.

There was discussion on the volume of administrative work and governance hurdles currently in place that take time away from the core activity of teaching and supporting students. One speaker noted that the government should enable schools and teachers to focus on teaching by helping to clear distractions and ultimately “get out of the way”.

There was a general feeling that the government has placed emphasis on a compliance system that is too rigidly controlled, meaning that new programmes are too tightly monitored. Teachers need to be allowed to be professionals; they need to have opportunities to take their learning (supported by continuous professional development) and have space to adapt and contextualise it, using their intuition and experience to build and implement solutions that work for them, their pupils and community. This is difficult within a framework of rigid standards.

Ultimately, there is a degree of worry about the level of control the government is trying to exert in these reforms and about the risk of losing innovation and diversity of ideas if the government is too involved. While coordination and oversight are key to improve standards, over-regulation may create unnecessary pressures that prevent teachers and school leaders from focusing on education. It was emphasised that more work is needed on the part of the government to work out where it adds value to ensure a system that improves outcomes for all, particularly the most vulnerable children in society.



Finally on the role of government as set out in the White Paper, one speaker felt that the parent pledge is a “gimmick”, highlighting that it shifts responsibility away from the government to improve education outcomes, intending to “pass the problem” onto someone else. While collaboration and communication were key themes running throughout the discussion, it was felt a parent pledge “does nothing”. What is needed is to build mutual respect between families and schools on a local level.

Academisation by 2030

One of the more controversial policy aims set out in the Schools White Paper is the move to full academisation by 2030. One speaker felt this is a determination by the government to finish an agenda it has been pursuing for years, with all schools being in MATs seen as inevitable and necessary. While there was acknowledgement that there is need for a single unified school system to address the “messy” current landscape, scepticism remains over how this policy would be “transformational.”

Concerns were raised over the feasibility of this policy. One speaker felt that the DfE does not in fact have the levers, in terms of power and influence, to achieve it. “A target is meaningless without a plan and an open conversation between educationists and leaders.” Moreover, primary schools were raised as a concern when it comes to recruiting into MATs; capacity becomes an issue when dealing with small schools with three or four members of staff. Finally, one speaker pointed out concerns over unchecked growth and effect it would have on educational outcomes. Adding more schools into a MAT is not a difficult financial decision but this may incentivise some MATs to grow without control, diluting standards and “forgetting” existing schools in the trust in favour of the new additions. They emphasised the role of school leaders and local authorities in ensuring this does not happen and suggested a target of three to four schools before expanding.

Questions were asked over the incentive for well-performing standalone schools to give up their independence to join a MAT, though it was acknowledged that the particular skills and achievements of these schools could serve as examples to others when they are part of the same MAT, offering increased routes to share best practice. Once again, communication and collaboration were emphasised.

Building on this, another speaker highlighted that there is no single structure that has all the answers for raising standards. Rather, the correct vehicle, a clear development plan and good leadership can make a difference. They laid out seven indicators of a strong trust:

- 1. Clear central values and culture**
- 2. A coherent strategy**
- 3. Expert professional governance**, not only in the form of trustees but also at a board and local level



4. **Focus of leadership** on improving outcomes
5. **An alignment of goals** between headteachers, governors and local authorities which still allows for retaining autonomy
6. **Capacity**, driven through talent management and an overarching structure that allows CPD to thrive
7. **A financial strategy** which questions how every investment during economic challenge periods can make a positive impact on the lives of pupils

While these are important indicators, they are not deterministic. Instead, they highlight the importance of local context and the need to have flexibility to be adaptable and responsive in all environments. It was felt that academisation is not a silver bullet to improve standards but rather a necessary tidying up of the landscape.

Ultimately, speakers felt there must be a plan; the roadmap has to be determined as soon as possible if the idea is not to just “fizzle out”. The longer the education sector is left without a plan, the more opposition will crop up thus there is need for tangible action now.

Conclusion

As this summary shows, there are mixed views on the Schools White Paper and Bill and their ability to improve education outcomes for all, particularly for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Panellists welcomed the focus on the importance of every child having an excellent teacher, through supporting teachers’ professional development. There was support for the macro ambition to level up and ensure all can access the same opportunities and they expressed enthusiasm for the White Paper as an initiator of important conversations around collaboration and collective responsibility. There was also a sense that the government is open to further discussions on how to best work together to improve outcomes.

However, panellists emphasised that there is a need to further acknowledge the wider societal challenges beyond education that play a huge role in the lives of children and young people. More work must be done to understand the role of schools within wider communities and how all stakeholders can work together. A more concrete, tangible plan is needed from the government as to how the targets laid out in the Bill are to be achieved, in particular through laying out how these initiatives will be funded.