Building an effective school system

A summary of a roundtable and three webinars held ahead of the schools white paper

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It should be noted that this report reflects a range of discussions and views, and not necessarily the views of the author.

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Contents

Introduction

School groups are a key feature of the school system in England and understanding what makes them effective is critical for delivering system-wide improvement. Beginning in 2021, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) carried out a programme of work examining the characteristics of effective school groups. This programme developed a suite of metrics to assess school group performance across four domains: pupil attainment and progress, pupil inclusion, workforce sustainability, and financial management.

This multi-dimensional approach is important because:

- Outcomes and school experience vary across pupil groups. In 2024, the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers was the equivalent of 19 months of learning. The gap in attainment for children on SEN support and their peers was equivalent to 22 months of learning. For those with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) it was almost 40 months. EPI research also shows that access to SEND identification is uneven across the system. Factors such as school fragmentation, prolonged absences, language barriers and living in disadvantaged areas can all make it challenging for pupils' needs to be assessed consistently.
- Access to high-quality teaching is the single biggest lever schools have for improving educational outcomes, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.[1] The government has pledged to recruit 6,500 teachers by the end of this parliament, but retaining the teachers and leaders is equally critical to achieving positive outcomes and breaking down barriers to opportunity. EPI analysis of the latest DfE statistics on the state of the teaching workforce shows that the pandemic recruitment boost has stalled and retention rates continue to fall, citing challenges including pay, work-life balance and workload.[2]
- Funding constraints compound these challenges. While school budgets have increased in cash terms, the rising costs of the workforce and resources mean these are often tighter in practice. These pressures are further exacerbated by the issue of falling rolls, where funding tied to pupil numbers will fall as pupil populations decrease.[3]

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[1] Education Endowment Foundation, *Our Submission to the Education Select Committee Inquiry* (2023), https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/eef-blog-three-takeaways-from-the-evidence-on-improving-teacher-recruitment-and-retention#:~:text=Access%20to%20high%2Dquality%20teaching,biggest%20recruitment%20and%20retention%20challenges.

[2] Jamez Zuccollo, *The Workforce Challenges Facing an Incoming Government* (Education Policy Institute, 2024), https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/blog-the-workforce-challenges-facing-an-incoming-government/.

[3] Robbie Cruikshanks, *School Funding Model: Effect of Falling School Rolls* (Education Policy Institute, 2024), https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/school-funding-model-effect-of-falling-rolls/.

Our metrics informed the development of EPI's Effective School Groups tool, an interactive resource designed to enable schools and trusts to benchmark their performance against other groups, facilitating comparative analysis and sector-wide discussion.

In 2025, EPI and Capita convened a series of webinars offering insights into the key challenges currently facing schools. The first webinar focused on workforce sustainability, the second examined the use of technology to support inclusion, and the third explored how schools are responding to constrained budgets and the policy support required to sustain educational provision.

Following this series, EPI and Capita convened a roundtable, bringing together policymakers, school leaders and sector experts to consider how far the schools white paper was likely to address the core issues identified.

This report is a summary of the webinars and roundtables that took place prior to the publication of the schools white paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving, in February 2026.

This report reflects participants' views at that time, while also considering how the white paper aligns with the issues they raised. This paper synthesises these discussions, highlighting both the opportunities within the white paper and the practical considerations for effective implementation.

Several overarching themes emerged:

- Participants consistently emphasised the need for joined-up working across education, health and social care to support inclusive mainstream provision.
- Participants highlighted the value of early intervention and preventative models in reducing the reliance on EHCPs, emphasising the need for adequate staffing and cross-sector support.
- Participants underscored that reforms should be evidence-led, drawing on rigorous data and research, and supported by a well-resourced and sustainable workforce.
- Innovative approaches to classroom instruction were identified as pivotal for personalising learning, but implementation should be carefully managed.
- Participants advised considering explicit funding incentives for inclusive practice in schools, alongside wider financial reforms such as a cohort funding model and a flexible system that follows the needs of pupils with SEND.
- Finally, they advised that accountability reform must shift from measuring performance to also recognising and rewarding inclusive practice.

We are grateful to Capita for supporting this work and to all event participants for their contributions.

This report, including recommendations, reflects a range of discussions and views. It does not necessarily represent the views of any individual participant, the author of this report, Capita or the Education Policy Institute.

Inclusion and SEND reform: enabling equitable access

Inclusion and SEND reform: enabling equitable access

Roundtable participants considered what needs to be achieved to deliver inclusive reforms at scale and enable equitable access nationwide. They considered the interconnected challenges faced by schools and predicted how the schools white paper and related consultations would aim to respond. Here we synthesise the key points made by participants, and the extent to which they align with the schools white paper.

Information sharing and partnership working

Participants felt that increased data sharing and meaningful partnership working will be required to enable schools, trusts, local authorities and health services to work together in ways that have become unfamiliar over the past decade. They highlighted that information sharing would be vital to enable shared understanding and joined-up policymaking. For example, local councils collect data from their communities from birth through health visitors and Best Start in Life Hubs, which could support evidence-led decision-making across departments.

The Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINS) programme is already bringing specialist health and education professionals, and expert parent carers, into mainstream schools, producing findings that show statistically significant improvements.[4] Participants reported stronger outcomes in local authorities where there is meaningful partnership working and agreed that this approach should be made national and consistent across authorities.

In our first webinar, focused on workforce sustainability, participants highlighted further opportunities for information sharing through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, currently making its way through parliament. The Bill contains provisions for single unique identifiers (SUI), designed to bridge data for children across public services, and, if passed, will link data across services and connect professionals across agencies.

Roundtable participants emphasised the need for alignment across wider policy developments which increased information sharing could enable. These include the post-16 education and skills white paper, the Milburn Review looking into the rise in young people (16-24) who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the Prevalence Review investigating the rising prevalence of, and referrals for, mental health conditions, ADHD and autism and the "Giving every child the best start in life" (Best Start in Life) strategy that aims to enhance early education, childcare affordability and early access to healthcare and support for parents.

They emphasised that the solutions and responsibilities for supporting young people sit across government departments, including the Department for Education and the Department for Health

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[4] Department for Education, *Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINS): Interim Evaluation Report* (2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/partnerships-for-inclusion-of-neurodiversity-in-schools-pins-interim-evaluation-report.

and Social Care. The government have since outlined their ambitions to rebuild services for children and families in two parts: "first, to make services available and accessible to families and, second, to join up those services so that information can be shared between them to give children and young people consistent support that fits around their needs."[5] Insights from our participants suggest that delivering this ambition will depend on effective data sharing and sustained cross-sector collaboration.

Recommendations from participants for enabling equitable access:

- Policymakers should focus on enabling data sharing and meaningful partnership working across schools, trusts, local authorities and health services.
- Proven models of partnership, such as the PINS programme, should be scaled nationally to achieve consistent outcomes.
- Local and national strategies should be aligned across governmental departments to ensure consistent, evidence-led decision-making.

Early years and holistic family support

Participants predicted that the schools white paper would primarily focus on education in the primary and secondary phases. However, they wanted to see a roadmap towards a truly preventative system, including early intervention and joined-up thinking across departmental strategies. As part of the plan to rebuild local services, they emphasised the importance of the early years and holistic family support in shifting towards a preventative model. They felt that wider support is essential to help all vulnerable pupils to be and stay in education, and for SEND pupils in particular, participants recognised that challenges are already visible from these early phases.

EPI research has found that the disadvantage gap at the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) has been widening.[6] Data from 2024 showed that disadvantaged five-year-olds were 4.7 months behind their peers, an increase of 0.5 months from 2019. The gap for reception-aged children with SEND also widened to its highest level on record, increasing by 0.8 months between 2019 and 2024. The report identified that higher rates of absence and increasing persistent poverty were key contributing factors.

In our first webinar in the series, Jo Hutchinson, EPI's Director for SEND and Additional Needs, recognised that the legacy of austerity has reduced the availability of public services that once supported parents and institutions. Currently, only six per cent of local authorities say they have sufficient childcare for disabled babies and toddlers, and statistics from the Office for Health

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[5] Department for Education, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (2026), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version.

[6] Dr Eva Jiménez, Sam Tuckett, Emily Hunt and David Robinson, *Breaking down the Gap* (Education Policy Institute, 2025), https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/breaking-down-the-gap/#:~:text=Share,to%20the%2016%2D19%20gap.

Improvement and Disparities show that universal two-year-old health visitor checks are no longer reaching all children.[7]

Between 2023 and 2024, the coverage of health visitor checks stood at 78.4 per cent, meaning that more than one in five did not receive a check, and a further 6.7 per cent did not have a full assessment.[8] A quarter of children are therefore not receiving health checks before entering reception, contributing to reports that children are entering education with lower-than-expected levels of development because their needs have not been identified.[9]

The white paper has similarly underscored the importance of the early years.[10] Plans have been outlined to improve child development through the Best Start in Life strategy, jointly funded by the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care. To improve childcare and accessibility, additional funding will be made available for early years providers from the new Inclusive Early Years Fund. Building on the model of "Sure Start" children's centres, Best Start Family Hubs will provide healthcare services alongside advice for parents to build local community networks. This reflects a shift to a prevention model by improving neighbourhood health services and community healthcare.

As the white paper recognises, an evaluation of Sure Start revealed "overwhelmingly positive" impacts on outcomes such as educational attainment at school and reduced hospitalisations, and children with access to Sure Start children's centres were more likely to have their needs recognised at age 5 and less likely to require SEND support between ages 7 and 16.[11] The white paper states that all Best Start Family Hubs will be required to have a dedicated SEND practitioner to help parents understand their child's development and identify emerging needs. The presence of a SEND practitioner will also support join-up between Hubs and early years settings. However, questions remain about whether the current scale of investment will enable the strategy to replicate the success of Sure Start.[12]

Recommendations from participants for early years and holistic family support:

[7] Lydia Hodges, Sam Shorto and Emma Goddard, *Childcare Survey 2024* (Coram, 2024), https://www.coram.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Childcare-Survey-2024.pdf.

[8] Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, *Child Development Outcomes at 2 to 2 and a Half Years, 2023 to 2024: Statistical Commentary* (2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/child-development-outcomes-at-2-to-2-and-a-half-years-april-2023-to-march-2024-annual-2023-to-2024/child-development-outcomes-at-2-to-2-and-a-half-years-2023-to-2024-statistical-commentary.

[9] Lauren Powell, Sarah Spencer, Judy Clegg, Evie Shore and Josie Dickerson, *Supporting Children in the Preschool Years: Preschool Children Are the UK's Future* (N8 Research Partnership, 2025), https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CotN_Pre-School_Report_Update.pdf.

[10] Department for Education, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*.

[11] Pedro Carneiro, Sarah Cattan, Gabriella Conti, Claire Crawford, Christine Farquharson and Nick Ridpath, *The Short- and Medium-Term Effects of Sure Start on Children's Outcomes* (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2025), https://ifs.org.uk/publications/short-and-medium-term-effects-sure-start-childrens-outcomes.

[12] Christine Farquharson, 'A Response to the Government's Best Start in Life Strategy', *Institute for Fiscal Studies*, 8 July 2025, https://ifs.org.uk/articles/response-governments-best-start-life-strategy#:~:text=The%20strategy%20also%20commits%20to,19%2C%20not%20just%20age%204.

- Policymakers should increase investment in early years and family support, building on the Best Start in Life strategy.
- Universal early health and development checks should be fully restored and monitored to identify needs before children start school.
- Family Hubs should be expanded and fully resourced, with SEND specialists to support early identification and joined-up support.

SEND identification

Participants emphasised that earlier identification and intervention would improve the system by supporting children with emerging needs. If implemented effectively, early support could enable children to access their learning and meet additional needs without the delay of waiting for an EHCP. Participants argued that spending should shift towards earlier intervention to reduce reliance on EHCPs over time.

It was acknowledged that trust needs to be rebuilt with parents who have had to fight to secure an EHCP entitlement for their children. Reflecting on parental anxiety, one participant felt that EHCPs should initially be retained with some tweaks around entitlement, if there are enough resources to invest in early intervention. Another participant felt the government should go further by making SEND support statutory. This would mean that every child in need would have a legally binding plan to ensure their rights remain intact.

The schools white paper has set out plans for all children in year three and beyond to retain their EHCP status until they are 16 years old, at which point their EHCP will be reviewed. Younger children will have their EHCP renewed when they transition from primary to secondary school. This staggered approach is intended to provide stability for families during the transition to a reformed system, while allowing time for new arrangements to become embedded and for trust to be built in practice.

Another concern raised about the EHCP system by participants is that families with greater resources are often better able to navigate diagnostic pathways, highlighting wider system inequalities that reform is seeking to address. During the roundtable, one MAT leader shared an example of neighbouring local authorities where the more affluent local authority had significantly higher rates of EHCP provision. This may suggest that children from lower-income families may be going without support that they are entitled to.

EPI research has revealed that SEND identification is inconsistent and heavily influenced by the school attended, rather than the needs of the child.[13] Identification is often delayed or less likely for vulnerable groups who are more likely to experience additional needs, including children in social care, those with low attendance, young age suspensions, children with high levels of school mobility and those with additional language barriers. Among EPI's recommendations were to

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[13] Jo Hutchinson, *Identifying Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities* (Education Policy Institute, 2021), https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/identifying-send/.

make training in child development and different types of SEND a mandatory part of initial teacher training and early career development.

Roundtable participants recommended that scrutinising these inequalities on the national level should be at the forefront of the government's thinking. They agreed that the EHCP process should be standardised and simplified, with intent being driven by the needs of the child rather than parental capacity.

The white paper has since outlined reforms to SEND provision, including a 'universal offer' that the government claims would meet the needs of most children in mainstream schools.[14] For those children who are identified as requiring extra support, a three-tiered system will be introduced: targeted, targeted plus and specialist. Teachers will receive training and support to meet these expectations. Alongside additional training, health and care professionals will provide support through the "Experts at Hand" service. Supporting SEND identification in schools through training and cross-sector support has the potential to reduce the disparity between pupils identified from high and low-income backgrounds.

Recommendations from participants for SEND identification:

- The EHCP process should be standardised and simplified to reduce inequalities.
- Policymakers should actively monitor disparities in SEND identification across socio-economic groups and school contexts.

Curriculum adaptation

Roundtable participants felt that many pupils enter secondary school with high aspirations but become disengaged by around year 8. This prompted questions about how to better capitalise on opportunities at key stages 3 and 4. A common concern is that pupils often don't experience applied learning approaches until post-16, which can make it challenging to choose non-A-level options. However, expanding applied learning would likely require schools to reduce the volume of content in the curriculum.

For example, one trust at our roundtable created a "Next Generation" curriculum, including several routes through post-14 to personalise the learning journey. The curriculum focuses on financial literacy, oracy, AI and digital fluency and future pathways to give every learner the knowledge, skills and confidence to navigate a rapidly changing world. The MAT is shifting from a Progress 8 to a Progress 5 model to reduce the disjunction between GCSEs and post-16 pathways, and, working with the Careers and Enterprise Company, have produced a rich careers offer, including a two-week placement in year 10. The trust is currently working to produce evidence of impact to influence policymaking.

Participants emphasised the need for teachers and leaders to be aware of a wider range of pathways, such as apprenticeships and the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc), to advise

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[14] Department for Education, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*.

their students effectively. They believed that pathways such as the MBacc provide excellent opportunities to broaden the scope of the offer available to young people. By placing value on technical education as a prestigious route, the MBacc is expanding access and opportunity and connecting young people aged 14-16 with employers. By 2030, the aim to ensure every young person in Manchester has a clear path to training or a job opportunity.[15]

The white paper has outlined its aims to build on the changes set out in the government's response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review to deliver a curriculum that is rich in knowledge, broad in scope, inclusive and innovative.[16] However, the Review does not include accessibility of the curriculum as one of its key principles.[17] Participants identified this as a missed opportunity to connect the objectives of the white paper with a more accessible national curriculum.

Recommendations from participants for curriculum adaptation to support inclusion:

- Allow space for applied learning styles and support for children to access different progression routes, including apprenticeships and vocational pathways.
- Future curriculum reforms should ensure that accessibility and inclusion are key principles.

Education technology (edtech) and AI

Participants highlighted that edtech and AI are creating more opportunities for inclusion, while acknowledging the associated risks. They discussed the use of adaptive and assistive technologies, which are improving access and outcomes for pupils with SEND. AI was viewed as inevitable and transformative, but concerns were also raised about data security and students relying on AI for "cognitive offloading" rather than developing their independent thinking skills.

Some participants warned that concerns around screen time could lead to overly restricting the use of technology, which could leave students unprepared for a future where AI is used more widely. They argued that technology should be used pedagogically when there is clear evidence of impact on learning, rather than being limited to administrative tasks. However, participants also cautioned that the dominant pedagogy in classrooms is overly focused on knowledge recall. Some were concerned that this approach may not be developing the types of thinking and collaboration skills that distinguish humans from AI.

In our first webinar, one MAT shared insights from their digital implementation strategy. By embedding AI within strong teaching practices, they have improved outcomes across a range of measures, including the good level of development measure in the early years and the phonics

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[15] Greater Manchester Combined Authority, *Laying the Foundations: Green Shoots from Greater Manchester Baccalaureate Year 1* (2024), https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/pfgov4cm/laying-the-foundations-mbacc-year-1-green-shoots-report.pdf.

[16] Department for Education, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*.

[17] Department for Education, *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Building a World-Class Curriculum for All, Final Report* (2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report.

screening check in years one and two. They attributed this improvement in part to the use of AI because it has enabled teachers to move beyond differentiation and towards adaptive teaching.

According to several roundtable participants, integrating AI pedagogically will also require assessment systems to be radically transformed. They highlighted that many schools have already developed digital curricula, with students developing advanced skills, such as prompt engineering. This has reinforced the need to rethink what should be assessed to capture human expertise, potentially using oral assessment, such as vivas, which can reveal genuine understanding.

Among the key challenges are the current duplication of efforts taking place in schools and trusts, and the lack of strong evidence about which technologies are effective. Participants called for a national edtech strategy, building on the work being done by the Edtech Evidence Board.[18] This could be led by the Department for Education or the Chartered College of Teaching in partnership with industry and employers. They felt this would help to reduce the duplication of work and improve national consistency based on the evidence that is currently available.

The white paper has highlighted that education benchmarks will be established to assess the safety and pedagogy of AI in education.[19] Working with a task force of education experts, the government will aim to ensure AI meets rigorous quality standards. However, it remains unclear how quickly these will be developed or how effectively they will address the lack of coordination across the system.

Recommendations from participants for using edtech and AI to support inclusion:

- To enable technology to be used pedagogically, policymakers should continue funding the Edtech Evidence Board to focus on:
    o Building evidence of effective practice, including the pedagogic methods and teaching practices that underpin improvements to children's outcomes.
    o Building evidence of effective assessment to capture genuine understanding.
- Policymakers should develop a national edtech strategy to reduce duplication and ensure consistency across schools and trusts.

[18] Chartered College of Teaching, *EdTech Evidence Board Project: Insights from Phase One*, 20 June 2025, https://chartered.college/news-blogs/edtech-evidence-board-project-insights-from-phase-one/.
[19] Department for Education, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*.

Implications for the education workforce

Implications for the education workforce

Participants outlined key priorities for ongoing recruitment and retention challenges in the sector. The discussion focused primarily on secondary education, where several challenges are particularly acute. Participants considered what is needed from initial teacher training (ITT) and continuous professional development (CPD) to support the expansion of SEND provision in mainstream schools, and the role of edtech and AI in addressing critical challenges such as capacity and workload. Beyond the schools white paper, participants discussed the barriers that are likely to remain in tackling workforce sustainability.

Recruitment and retention: intensifying pressures and expectations

A significant recruitment challenge highlighted by participants is the persistence of gaps for specialist teachers. For example, approximately one-third of schools in deprived areas cannot deliver the computer science A-level, and approximately one-quarter cannot deliver the French A-level. EPI research has shown an increasing gap between affluent and disadvantaged schools in terms of the proportion of lessons being taught by subject specialists.[20] However, participants argued that the white paper should prioritise retention challenges to stabilise the workforce. Developing as a teacher can take many years, and concerns were raised that early-career teachers may lack the support they need to build confidence if experienced teachers are not retained.

The impact of retention challenges in secondary schools has been evident in EPI's research.[21] There are substantial and persistent gaps between disadvantaged and affluent schools in the experience of teachers and leaders, as well as in subject expertise, turnover and absence rates. These disparities risk reinforcing existing inequalities in pupil outcomes.

Webinar participants highlighted that workforce pressures are being compounded by an expansion in the role of schools. Schools and colleges are increasingly expected to provide support services to pupils and families that extend beyond teaching and learning. Evidence from the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) suggests that this widening remit is placing additional strain on workforce stability.[22] Similarly, research conducted by Action for Children found that teachers are increasingly providing emotional support and basic necessities such as food and clothing, particularly in disadvantaged areas.[23]

Roundtable participants cautioned that the white paper must take stock of the current school context. One participant felt that school finances have pushed staff ratios "right up" over the last

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[20] Dr Joana Cardim-Dias, Dr Eva Jiménez, and James Zuccollo, *Closing the Workforce Quality Gap* (Education Policy Institute, 2025), https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/closing-the-workforce-quality-gap/.

[21] Dr Joana Cardim-Dias, Dr Eva Jiménez, and James Zuccollo, *Closing the Workforce Quality Gap*.

[22] Association of School and College Leaders, *A Roadmap for a Sustainable Education System* (2025), https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Campaigns/A-roadmap-for-a-sustainable-education-system.pdf.

[23] Action for Children, *Above and beyond: How Teachers Fill Gaps in the System to Keep Children Learning* (2024), https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/Action_for_Children_Above__Beyond_April_24_Final.pdf.

decade, with most teachers working at capacity to meet the needs of children inside and outside of their classrooms. At the same time, expectations on teachers are increasing with the white paper setting out plans for more children with additional needs to be taught in mainstream schools. Participants argued that without additional funding and capacity, these expectations risk exacerbating burnout and attrition. Therefore, participants argued that funding and capacity must be increased through alternative approaches, including greater cross-sector working and the use of technology.

Participants also argued that the system needs to advocate for the education workforce. They highlighted a damaging narrative over the last decade that, in their view, has been shaped by a high-stakes accountability environment and a wider public discourse that has too often focused on deficits rather than strengths. The emphasis on performance measures, inspection outcomes and comparative metrics has contributed to a perception that teachers are being judged against narrow indicators of success, rather than as skilled professionals working in complex contexts. Participants felt this has been compounded by political and media narratives that have at times framed schools as underperforming or in need of reform, without fully recognising the broader challenges they face. Participants suggested this combination of factors has undermined professional autonomy and contributed to the gradual erosion of trust between schools and families, particularly as schools have taken on an expanding role in supporting pupils' wider needs.

In response, participants advocated for a shift towards reinforcing the competence and value of educators, both through national messaging and through the design of policy and accountability frameworks. They emphasised that improving retention will depend not only on addressing workload and staffing pressures, but also on creating the conditions in which teachers feel supported and able to exercise professional judgement. Below, we set out the key policy levers raised for improving retention, including access to specialist professionals, flexible working arrangements, edtech and AI, and training and professional development. Participants felt that, if implemented in combination with this cultural shift and high-quality implementation support, these initiatives would improve fulfilment and assist the move towards a sustainable workforce.

Recommendations from participants for the education workforce:

- Efforts should focus on prioritising retention to stabilise the workforce, particularly in disadvantaged schools.
- The system should address capacity pressures by reducing the burden placed on schools, including greater involvement of professionals from other sectors.
- The system should advocate for the education workforce, recognising teacher professionalism and supporting wellbeing.

Policy levers for improving retention

First, webinar and roundtable participants agreed that making specialist professionals available would be integral to improving both retention and inclusion. This could be achieved through co-location, where professionals, including speech and language therapists and educational psychologists, are available alongside other services such as schools and nurseries, health centres

or community hubs. The white paper has confirmed that this model will be implemented through initiatives such as Best Start in Life and the Experts at Hand service, but participants emphasised that successful implementation will depend on sufficient capacity and effective integration across services.

Second, flexible working was identified by participants as a key policy lever for improving retention, particularly for experienced staff. Participants emphasised that flexible working should be implemented as part of a wider workforce strategy, rather than a standalone initiative, alongside high-quality implementation support. This was characterised as an implementation strategy that focuses on depth over "quick win" approaches. However, concerns were also raised about the impact of the lack of separation between work and home.

Third, edtech and AI were seen as having significant potential to reduce workload and improve efficiency. There was a general sense that technology is already cutting administrative burden and streamlining administrative tasks such as timetabling. However, some participants argued that the true benefits of AI will only be realised when schools can train models using their own data and documents, rather than the current use of prompts. This could allow schools to build tools tailored to their own context, rather than relying on generic data. As a caveat, some participants cautioned that AI is not reducing workload in practice, but rather displacing tasks. Strategies should therefore be evaluated to assess whether edtech and AI are producing intended outcomes.

Finally, training and professional development were also raised as critical for improving retention. Participants highlighted the need for nationally consistent frameworks, with the same expectations and access to high-quality training across schools and MATs. Training can also support consistent SEND assessment and identification, addressing known variability across schools. However, it is not possible to train all staff to be experts on all kinds of special needs. Therefore, participants recommended developing communities of practice focused on specific SEND needs, providing targeted support when less common challenges arise.

Recommendations from participants for teacher retention:

- Policymakers should expand access to specialist professionals through co-location models, building on initiatives such as Best Start in Life and the Experts at Hand service.
- Flexible working and digital strategies should be evaluated to support workload reduction.
- Nationally consistent training and professional development frameworks should underpin SEND and early intervention practice.

Implications for school finances and accountability

Implications for school finances and accountability

The roundtable discussion questioned whether the white paper would offer credible solutions to support financial stability or place additional pressures on schools. Participants highlighted that school funding has been experiencing a relative decline for over a decade, while schools and teachers have been expected to expand their remit and provide support services to pupils and families. They raised serious concerns about the intention of the white paper to further expand the responsibilities of schools and teachers without adequate funding. Experts at our webinar held similar views, arguing that although early intervention is backed by evidence, reforms to school finances are critical to facilitate inclusion and meet the needs of the education workforce.

School funding

The 2025 three-year spending review announced that funding for schools would increase by £4.7 billion by 2029.[24] Before this, schools experienced a 'long-term funding squeeze' with funding only returning to 2010 levels by 2024-25. After accounting for the 4 per cent teacher pay award and the expansion of free school meal eligibility, the £4.7 billion increase in per pupil funding is broadly flat in real terms. Funding increases have also been felt unevenly in the system, with levelling up policies in 2017-18 distributing the largest funding increases to schools with the lowest levels of disadvantage.[25] In sum, funding has not kept pace with the increasing demands being placed on schools, and those serving the most disadvantaged communities have felt the squeeze disproportionately.

While funding has lagged behind increasing demands, pressures are set to intensify due to falling pupil rolls.[26] By 2030, the DfE has predicted a fall of around 300,000 pupils in primary schools and 100,000 in secondary schools, which will affect core funding because allocation is distributed on a per-pupil basis, and pupil numbers will not decrease evenly across the sector.[27] Cohort funding was identified as a potential solution by several participants. In addition to resolving per-pupil funding challenges, they argued that the cohort funding model could enable long-term planning so funding budgets can remain stable year on year.

Participants also emphasised the need for a flexible funding system that follows the needs of pupils with SEND. This approach mirrors the pupil premium, targeting resources to pupils with the greatest needs.[28] To achieve this, children would need to be assessed early, starting with development in the early years.

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[24] HM Treasury, *Spending Review* (2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html.

[25] Jon Andrews, 'Current Estimates of School Funding Pressures', *Current Estimates of School Funding Pressures*, 24 October 2022, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/current-estimates-of-school-funding-pressures/.

[26] Robbie Cruikshanks, *School Funding Model: Effect of Falling School Rolls*.

[27] Office for National Statistics, 'National Pupil Projections', GOV.UK, 17 July 2025, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/national-pupil-projections/2025.

[28] Department for Education, *Pupil Premium: Overview* (2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium.

During the third webinar, one participant emphasised that policy should be judged not only on its intent, but also on how effectively it is implemented to deliver long-term value for money. They highlighted the importance of evidence-led policymaking, noting that while there is strong evidence for approaches such as early intervention, this is not always reflected in funding decisions or system incentives. In some cases, significant investment is being made without a clear evaluation strategy to assess impact or guide effective spending.

The white paper has confirmed that reforms will be backed by an Inclusive Mainstream Fund of £1.6 billion over 3 years, distributed directly to schools.[29] While this funding has shifted support upstream, there are still no explicit funding incentives for inclusive practices. Based on participants' views, explicit funding incentives might be considered alongside wider financial reforms, such as a cohort funding model and a flexible system that follows the needs of pupils with SEND, to support the shift towards inclusion in mainstream schools.

Recommendations from participants for school finances:

- Policymakers should consider explicit funding incentives for inclusive practice in schools.
- Cohort funding should be considered to mitigate the impact of declining pupil numbers and support long-term planning.
- Funding should be flexible and targeted to SEND needs, informed by early identification and local data.

Accountability reform

Participants felt that the new funding model should be backed by an accountability framework that rewards schools for inclusive practices. They described this as a shift towards providing an 'inclusive by design experience for every child'. Accountability measures and targets often compare results against averages. In practice, this means that schools can be penalised for accepting higher proportions of pupils with SEND and children growing up in poverty onto their school rolls. Accountability reform is therefore a central component that runs through the shift towards inclusion.

This is closely linked to both workforce and financial pressures within the system. Schools serving higher levels of need often face greater demands on staff capacity and resources, yet are not always recognised for this within existing accountability frameworks. Without alignment between funding, accountability and workforce support, participants felt there is a risk that schools will be disincentivised from inclusive practices.

To address this, it was felt that a reformed approach should recognise the additional demands placed on staff and budgets and ensure schools are supported by accountability frameworks to deliver inclusive provision. It was argued that accountability measures must recognise progress for every child, including where raw attainment remains below average, to support schools in accepting higher-need pupils. The challenge, then, is to identify and implement accountability

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[29] Department for Education, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*.

measures that allow for this nuance, holding schools accountable without penalising them for inclusive practices.

Participants raised concerns about the new Ofsted inspection framework and whether it is yet fit for purpose in supporting this shift.[30] Those who had experienced the new framework noted that while it places less pressure on middle leaders and classroom teachers due to the removal of "deep dives", it has increased pressure on school leaders. There was a strong view that the system still operates on fear rather than trust, and that this must change to reduce the pressure on schools. A specific concern was also raised around the consistency of accountability regimes across different types of school groups, with participants questioning why the inspection regime for trust-level oversight is different from that applied to local authority groups. In their view, a reformed framework should include equity of treatment across school groups, alongside rewarding schools for inclusive practice.

In September 2025, the DfE announced the introduction of a new school profile.[31] The white paper has since confirmed that schools will be rewarded for supporting the progress of students who face the highest barriers to learning and are achieving progress across different domains.[32] Alongside publication of the white paper, a consultation was announced on a new progress measure that will help to give recognition to those schools.

Recommendations from participants for accountability:

- Accountability measures should reward inclusive practices, focusing on progress as well as attainment.
- Performance measures should be contextualised, recognising the challenges faced by schools with high levels of need.

[30] Ofsted, *Education Inspection Framework: For Use from November 2025* (2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework/education-inspection-framework-for-use-from-november-2025.

[31] Department for Education, 'New Era of Accountability to Drive up Standards for All Children', GOV.UK, 9 September 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-era-of-accountability-to-drive-up-standards-for-all-children.

[32] Department for Education, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion and recommendations

Ahead of the publication of the schools white paper, the Education Policy Institute and Capita hosted a series of webinars and a roundtable to consider the opportunities and challenges that might result. Topics discussed included workforce retention, improving inclusion and budgetary constraints, as well as the policy support required to sustain educational provision. In this paper, we have summarised those discussions.

Below we set out the recommendations arising from participants at those events. However, they do not necessarily reflect the views or recommendations of the Education Policy Institute, Capita or any individual participants.

On enabling equitable access, participants recommended increased data sharing and meaningful partnership working across schools, trusts, local authorities, health services and charities and co-creation with industry and employers. They advised that coordinated policy action is needed across government departments, including the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care, informed by broader reviews such as the post-16 education and skills white paper, the Milburn Review, the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the Prevalence Review and the Best Start in Life strategy.

Participants highlighted that taking a preventative approach, which starts with the early years, will also be vital. This approach can reduce reliance on EHCPs over time, but teachers must not be expected to take on greater responsibility without adequate staffing and cross-sector support. Maximising professional input from other sectors and improving staff ratios are therefore critical to reducing burnout and ensuring workforce sustainability.

Participants also felt that the volume of curriculum content would need to be reduced to improve inclusion and meet the needs of all children. They felt this would allow room for applied learning and personalised pathways, as exemplified by initiatives such as the "NextGen Curriculum" and the MBacc. It was advised that edtech and AI should also be used pedagogically to meet varied needs, supported by high-quality training and adapted assessment approaches to capture genuine understanding. A national edtech strategy, building on the Edtech Evidence Board, could also reduce duplication and enhance consistency across the system.

Inclusive reforms cannot be expected to succeed without retaining high-quality staff, and participants agreed that policymakers should prioritise retention to stabilise the workforce. This includes using policy levers such as cross-sector collaboration, technology, flexible working, and access to high-quality professional development. They felt that efforts must also be made to advocate for the education workforce and rebuild the professionalism and trust that have been eroded over the last decade.

Sustainable inclusion also depends on robust funding and accountability frameworks. Participants advised policymakers to consider funding incentives for inclusive practice, cohort-based funding for declining pupil numbers and flexible allocation to target SEND needs from the early years. It was agreed that accountability frameworks must also recognise inclusive practices

and reward progress across multiple domains, including pupil outcomes, inclusion, financial efficiency and workforce development. Taken together, participants advised that school policies should not penalise schools for enrolling pupils with additional needs, and accountability and funding systems should instead reward progress and inclusion.

Recommendations from participants for enabling equitable access:

- Policymakers should focus on enabling data sharing and meaningful partnership working across schools, trusts, local authorities and health services.
- Proven models of partnership, such as the PINS programme, should be scaled nationally to achieve consistent outcomes.
- Local and national strategies should be aligned across governmental departments to ensure consistent, evidence-led decision-making.

Recommendations from participants for early years and holistic family support:

- Policymakers should increase investment in early years and family support, building on the Best Start in Life strategy.
- Universal early health and development checks should be fully restored and monitored to identify needs before children start school.
- Family Hubs should be expanded and fully resourced, with SEND specialists to support early identification and joined-up support.

Recommendations from participants for SEND identification:

- The EHCP process should be standardised and simplified to reduce inequalities
- Policymakers should actively monitor disparities in SEND identification across socio-economic groups and school contexts.

Recommendations from participants for curriculum adaptation to support inclusion:

- Allow space for applied learning styles and support for children to access different progression routes, including apprenticeships and vocational pathways.
- Future curriculum reforms should ensure that accessibility and inclusion are key principles.

Recommendations from participants for using edtech and AI to support inclusion:

- To enable technology to be used pedagogically, policymakers should continue funding the Edtech Evidence Board to focus on:
  - Building evidence of effective practice, including the pedagogic methods and teaching practices that underpin improvements to children's outcomes.
  - Building evidence of effective assessment to capture genuine understanding.
- Policymakers should develop a national edtech strategy to reduce duplication and ensure consistency across schools and trusts.

Recommendations from participants for the education workforce:

- Efforts should focus on prioritising retention to stabilise the workforce, particularly in disadvantaged schools.
- The system should address capacity pressures by reducing the burden placed on schools, including greater involvement of professionals from other sectors.
- The system should advocate for the education workforce, recognising teacher professionalism and supporting wellbeing.

Recommendations from participants for teacher retention:

- Policymakers should expand access to specialist professionals through co-location models, building on initiatives such as Best Start in Life and the Experts at Hand service.
- Flexible working and digital strategies should be evaluated to support workload reduction.
- Nationally consistent training and professional development frameworks should underpin SEND and early intervention practice.

Recommendations from participants for school finances:

- Policymakers should consider explicit funding incentives for inclusive practice in schools.
- Cohort funding should be considered to mitigate the impact of declining pupil numbers and support long-term planning.
- Funding should be flexible and targeted to SEND needs, informed by early identification and local data.

Recommendations from participants for accountability:

- Accountability measures should reward inclusive practices, focusing on progress as well as attainment.
- Performance measures should be contextualised, recognising the challenges faced by schools with high levels of need.