



National Foundation for
Educational Research

Research Digest

Issue 6: September 2026



About us

At NFER, our mission is to generate evidence and insights that can be used to improve outcomes for future generations everywhere, and to support positive change across education systems.

Our long history, vast experience and pioneering methods have established our reputation as an authoritative, trusted and respected voice in education. Today that reputation is enhanced with an unmatched depth and breadth of specialist education knowledge, talent and methodological expertise.

We use our expertise to produce high-quality, independent, research and insights to inform key decision makers about issues across the education system, including:

- Accountability
- Assessment
- Classroom Practice
- Education to Employment
- Education Workforce
- Social Mobility
- School Funding
- Systems and Structures

Our clients include government departments and agencies at international, national and local levels, third sector organisations, private and public companies, employers and other organisations with an interest in education. They all benefit from the full range of our expert and professional services.

As an independent, not-for-profit organisation we invest any surplus funds directly back into our programme of research to address key questions in education and increase our impact and support for policy makers and practitioners.

Recent research

The sixth issue of our Research Digest summarises recent reports and blogs, highlighting key findings and recommendations for policy makers and classroom practice.

Reports include:

- [Measures to help with cost-of-living pressures](#)
- [Free School Meal eligibility changes](#)
- [Falling pupil numbers and SEND rates](#)
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- [What should happen to teachers' pay from 2026? and What should STRB recommend for teachers' pay from 2026?](#)
- [Tracking attainment without a counterfactual - Lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic](#)
- [Skills Imperative 2035: Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce](#)

How far will new measures help families facing cost-of-living pressures?

August 2026

[Read more](#)



This blog examines how new government measures may help families facing ongoing cost-of-living pressures, and what this means for schools already under strain.

Key findings

- Cost-of-living pressures are **increasing demand for school-based welfare support**, with more pupils arriving hungry or without adequate clothing and many teachers personally covering basic needs.
- **Government measures** being introduced in September 2026, including limits to uniform cost and expanded free school meal eligibility, **are expected to benefit over 500,000 pupils**.
- Cost-of-living pressures are **linked to poorer wellbeing and higher absence**, reinforcing the need to address wider family and community factors to tackle persistent absence.
- **Schools are under growing financial pressure**, with rising deficits and falling rolls. This creates a difficult balance, making it harder to meet increasingly complex pupil and family needs, while also managing constrained budgets.
- The new measures provide partial relief, but **sustained government action, guided by evidence and school insight**, is needed to support families facing ongoing financial pressures.



Read more



Planning for changes to Free School Meals eligibility

July 2026

This blog explores how upcoming changes to free school meal eligibility will reshape the way disadvantage is measured, funded and understood in schools.

Key findings

- Free school meal (FSM) **eligibility has risen sharply since 2018/19**, largely driven by Universal Credit transitional arrangements, with 2.21 million pupils (26.5 per cent) eligible in January 2026.
- From September 2026, FSM will split into two categories: targeted FSM and expanded FSM. This will end the transitional arrangements and **change which pupils attract pupil premium funding**.
- These changes will affect how disadvantage is measured, making it **harder to assess the government's progress** in reducing the disadvantaged pupils' attainment gap.
- FSM eligibility changes will also **impact school funding**, though the effect may be overtaken by wider reforms to disadvantage funding.
- While this change will mean pupils who had not previously been eligible for FSM will newly qualify, it will **create additional workload for schools**, who have not had to monitor ongoing FSM eligibility changes for eight years.
- Schools will need to restart annual eligibility checks, and should **prioritise this, to ensure pupils receive FSM and schools can claim funding**.

The relationship between falling pupil numbers and SEND rates in primary schools

July 2026

Read more



This blog investigated the relationship between falling pupil numbers and SEND rates in primary schools in England, building on NFER's research on high-SEND schools

Key findings

- Primary schools with a **higher percentage of pupils who have any SEND have tended to see larger falls in pupil numbers**.
- When looking at school Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) rates alone, there was **no clear link between falling rolls and EHCPs**.
- Schools with the **largest declines in pupil numbers have tended to see the biggest rises in SEND** and EHCP rates since 2018/19, but this trend is relatively weak.
- **Most schools have seen increases in SEND and EHCP rates** regardless of changes in pupil numbers.

Recommendations

- Department for Education (DfE) should **closely monitor the interaction between falling pupil numbers and rising SEND need**.
- DfE should ensure schools' responses to declining numbers **do not undermine the system or pose risks to pupils with SEND**, especially during ongoing reforms.
- System leaders should **monitor and support a more even distribution of SEND pupils** and provide adequate funding so that budget pressures from falling rolls do not exacerbate challenges in meeting SEND needs.

Read more



Pupil wellbeing and persistent absence

July 2026

This research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and explored the relationship between pupil wellbeing and attendance to understand the views of pupils, parents and carers, and school staff

Key findings

- Pupil wellbeing was seen as a major factor of declining attendance, with online bullying linked to **increased social media use seen as a key reason**.
- Attendance was shaped by **interconnected factors** across pupils, families, schools and local contexts, **including worsening mental health**.
- Pupils saw **poor wellbeing as a legitimate reason** for absence, affected by the pressures of school.
- School absence was seen as both a **short-term coping mechanism and a long-term risk**, potentially reinforcing cycles of poor wellbeing and non-attendance.
- Schools used **a wide range of strategies to support attendance**, from curriculum adjustments to pastoral and specialist provision.
- Parents, carers and pupils emphasised that **strong relationships matter more than specific interventions**.

Recommendations

- Government should **ensure adequate resources for wider public services**, including local authorities, family support and mental health provision.
- Government should **monitor the impact of proposed social media restrictions** on school attendance.
- Schools should **take a supportive approach to persistent absence**, focusing on understanding pupils' needs and building strong relationships with families.
- Schools should **address the impact of bullying**, including online bullying, on pupil wellbeing and attendance, and continue to prioritise creating a safe and supportive school environment.

The widening disadvantage divide

June 2026

[Read more](#)



This blog examined the emerging distributional impacts of falling pupil numbers, and considers the possible consequences and policy implications of this trend.

Key findings

- **Disadvantaged primary schools** are seeing the fastest falls in pupil numbers.
- Primary school rolls have already fallen by almost five per cent since their 2018/19 peak, and Department for Education (DfE) projections indicate **a further five per cent drop nationally by 2030**.
- **Secondary pupil numbers fell** for the first time since 2014, with significant decline expected from 2028 onwards.
- The **impact on individual schools has been uneven**, with some schools, especially in London, facing much steeper declines than others.
- Schools with the **largest drops in pupil numbers tend to have the highest free school meal rates** today and have seen the biggest increases in disadvantage since 2018/19.

Recommendations

- The Department for Education (DfE) should **urgently assess the impact** of falling rolls on disadvantaged pupils' outcomes.
- DfE should **expand support through the falling rolls fund** by easing eligibility thresholds and increasing funding so schools can avoid immediate cuts, which risk pupils' outcomes.
- Local authorities should **make proactive decisions** about the school estate with parents, schools and trusts to ensure every child has access to a sustainable local school.
- Local authorities and system leaders should be working closely with schools to **monitor how pupil numbers are changing** and help them plan accordingly.

Read more



Understanding the relationship between attendance, wellbeing and sense of belonging

June 2026

This report examined the relationship between pupil wellbeing, sense of school belonging and school absence to help inform solutions to the attendance crisis.

Key findings

- Pupils' **life satisfaction was strongly linked to school absence**, especially for those with higher absence, though improving life satisfaction alone will not resolve attendance challenges.
- Life satisfaction was a **far stronger predictor for girls** than for boys.
- Sense of school belonging predicted absence only until life satisfaction was considered, showing that **improving belonging alone is unlikely to fully address attendance issues**.

Recommendations

The report recommends the government:

- **Broaden its focus beyond school belonging** to include wider factors, such as timely wellbeing support, a balanced curriculum and support for disadvantaged pupils and their families.
- **Target efforts to improve life satisfaction** towards females and pupils with the highest absence rates, including persistently and severely absent pupils.
- **Ensure sufficient capacity and funding** across public services so schools, family support and mental health teams can work together to overcome barriers to attendance.
- **Strengthen the evidence base** on the causal impact of improving school belonging on attendance and attainment, including through What Works Centres.



High-SEND schools: Patterns and pressures in mainstream provision

May 2026

Read more



This report, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, built on earlier [scene-setting work](#) and explores why pupils with SEND cluster in certain schools and what this means for schools, pupils and families.

Key findings

- Some inclusive schools **become known as places that will “make it work”**, shaping parental choice and local authority placement decisions.
- Schools with strong inclusion reputations are **often treated as default placements** when specialist capacity is limited, even when needs cannot always be met safely or sustainably.
- High-SEND schools frequently demonstrate stronger inclusive practice but face **heavier workloads, financial pressure and more complex needs**.
- Pupils with SEND in high-SEND schools are **less likely to move schools** than peers in other settings.
- Not all SEND needs can be met in mainstream schools - **some pupils require specialist provision** in order to be supported safely and effectively.

Recommendations

- Monitor the distribution of pupils with SEND and **prioritise a more even spread** across schools.
- Ensure accountability and inspection frameworks **support sustainable inclusion**.
- The Department for Education (DfE) should **commission ongoing evaluation** of inclusion bases to inform guidance and support improvement.
- Publish **clear, tailored, evidence-based guidance** for implementation and oversight of inclusion bases
- Be explicit that mainstream schools, including inclusion bases, cannot meet every pupil's needs, and **plan sufficient specialist places** accordingly.
- Where inclusion remains uneven, **funding should better match patterns of need** so inclusive practice is sustainable rather than reliant on goodwill.

Read more



Competition and cooperation in the further education sector

May 2026

This report was commissioned by the Association of Colleges (AoC) and examined how competition and fragmentation in England's post-16 education system affect the range of subjects available to students, geographic inequalities in subject choice, and delivery efficiency.

Key findings

- Students' **access to marginal and specialist subjects varies substantially by geography**, with patchy provision and clear 'cold spots' in many local areas.
- Providers in more **fragmented local post-16 markets face greater barriers** to delivering efficient class sizes.
- Fragmented markets are typically those where a **high share of learners attend school sixth forms** rather than colleges for 16–19 learners.
- Across many subjects, particularly humanities and social sciences, **school sixth forms tend to continue offering marginal subjects inefficiently** rather than withdrawing them.
- Areas with a **proliferation of school sixth forms may have a system-level effect** on colleges' economies of scale.
- **Smaller school sixth forms face the greatest barriers** to maintaining broad and efficient subject offers.

Recommendations

- Government should **strengthen oversight of school sixth-form expansion** to prevent efficiency and sufficiency being undermined by a proliferation of small providers.
- **Support partnership, shared provision and timetabling** between schools and colleges to maximise subject choice while improving efficiency.
- **Encourage specialisation and subject hubs**, particularly in the creative and performing arts, and discourage unnecessary duplication by other providers.
- Where informal coordination is not viable, authorities should **consider encouraging formal mergers** between schools and/or colleges to improve efficiency and sustain broad subject choice.

The School Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2026

March 2026

Read more



The fourth in a series of reports, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, on the education workforce to monitor the progress towards meeting workforce supply challenges.

Key findings

- **Secondary and special school teacher numbers have increased**, while primary teacher numbers are falling due to fewer pupils.
- **Teacher pay** has grown slightly faster recently but **remains less competitive than in 2010/11**. The proposed 6.5% rise over three years would still lag behind wider earnings growth.
- Initial teacher training (ITT) **recruitment is projected to improve** in 2026/27, despite some bursary cuts
- **Vacancies and recruitment challenges remain** high, though they have slightly eased since 2023.
- **Teacher retention has improved**, with exit rates among first-year early career teachers the lowest ever recorded.
- **Working hours and workload perceptions** have improved modestly but **remain less positive** than comparable professions.

Recommendations

- **Teacher pay competitiveness should be maintained** by aligning pay with wider earnings growth and fully funding schools to deliver it.
- **Workforce planning should be strengthened** for special schools and alternative provision, given their central role in meeting the 6,500-teacher target.
- **Bursaries for languages and arts should be increased** where ITT recruitment is below target, supporting delivery of the revised national curriculum and new accountability measures.



Read more



Investigating job roles in the further education workforce

March 2026

This report, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, used the Further Education Workforce Data Collection (FEWDC) to provide a comprehensive picture of the further education (FE) workforce, addressing gaps in understanding the composition, structure and range of job roles.

Key findings

- There is **considerable variation in job roles and sub-roles across colleges**, suggesting an opportunity to improve consistency in how roles are structured and described across the sector.
- **Salaries vary widely** within and across FE roles. In 2022/23, median earnings (annualised and adjusted by FTE) vary widely from Instructors (£25,452) and Progress Tutors (£25,594) to Teachers (£34,875).
- Salaries **generally do not differ by subject** taught, even though recruitment challenges vary significantly between subjects.
- The FE teaching **workforce is older, more likely to work part-time, and more gender-balanced** than the secondary school teaching workforce.

Recommendations

- Producing a **clear and consistent set of job descriptions** for FE roles could be an important first step toward achieving consistency in how roles are structured and described across the sector.
- There is value in **better understanding how the Practitioner role varies** across providers, particularly given that practitioners typically earn less than Teachers and Lecturers in the FEWDC data.
- Government should address and **prioritise better coverage of certain data fields** and complete data for all providers.

The Further Education Teacher Workforce in England Annual Report 2026

March 2026

Read more



The third in a series of reports, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, on the education workforce. This report summarised emerging trends in further education (FE) teacher numbers, recruitment, retention, pay and working conditions, and highlighted the policy actions most likely to improve these challenges.

Key findings

- The FE sector is facing a **significant teacher shortage**, with around 3,000 vacant posts in 2023/24 despite some recent signs of improvement.
- FE providers will need to **recruit significantly more teachers** over the coming years, as the number of 16- to 18-year-olds is projected to rise by seven per cent between 2023 and 2027.
- **Pay has fallen sharply relative to other workers**, decreasing by almost 20 per cent since 2011 while average UK earnings have risen by four per cent.
- FE teachers do not appear to work unusually long hours, but **low pay and limited overtime opportunities** may be contributing to dissatisfaction with workload.
- FE teaching plays **a vital role in supplying the skills needed for the Government's priority sectors**, yet high vacancy rates in key subjects risk slowing progress toward these ambitions.

Recommendations

- The Government should **provide funding that enables higher FE teacher pay**. While recent announcements are welcome, a sustained multi-year effort is needed.
- FE leaders should **involve teachers more meaningfully in organisational development and decision-making**.
- The Department for Education should **begin publishing regular FE teacher retention data**, either through the Further Education Workforce Data Collection (FEWDC) or, if necessary, by using pension scheme data as it has done previously.

Read more



The School Support Staff Workforce in England Annual Report 2026

March 2026

The second in a series of reports funded by the Nuffield Foundation on the education workforce. This report summarised emerging trends in support-staff numbers, recruitment, retention, pay and working conditions, and highlighted the policy actions most likely to improve these challenges.

Key findings

- Leaders continue to find **recruiting teaching assistants (TAs) harder than recruiting teachers**, with three in four still reporting TA recruitment difficulties in 2025 despite recent improvements.
- Support staff considering leaving most often say **they do not feel valued**, alongside low morale, understaffing and financial pressures.
- Support staff now **account for more than half of the school workforce**, and their numbers continue to grow each year.
- Support staff **pay sits in the lower half of the earnings distribution in England**, with TA pay even lower, although both have risen significantly in recent years in real terms and relative to average earnings.

Recommendations

- The Government needs to **strengthen support for schools in recruiting support staff**, with a particular focus on expanding SEND-related training for both prospective and current staff.
- The Government and the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) should **improve career progression pathways** for support staff, who are currently far less likely than comparable workers to feel they have good opportunities.
- The Government and the SSSNB should **assess whether low pay is driving recruitment and retention challenges**, and consider further medium-term action to make support staff pay, especially for TA roles, more competitive.

Can inclusion bases provide part of the solution to the SEND crisis?

March 2026

Read more



This blog examined what schools' experiences with SEN units and/or resourced provision can teach us about inclusion bases and considers whether they might form part of a meaningful solution to the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) crisis.

Key findings

- Around **two-thirds of schools with a SEN unit or resourced provision say it strengthens their overall capacity**. However, just under 10 per cent of schools explicitly disagreed with this, and around a quarter were on the fence.
- Over two-thirds of schools with a base report **significant pressure on staffing or budgets**, and fewer than half feel they have sufficient expertise.
- In a quarter of schools, pupils in bases have **limited interaction with their peers**, and over a third report weak collaboration between base staff and mainstream teachers.
- Many more schools consider themselves to be running an inclusion base, but **some may not receive formal recognition or funding**.

Recommendations

Inclusion bases can strengthen school capacity, embed specialist expertise, and provide tailored support closer to pupils' communities.

To fully realise this potential, and to ensure that inclusion bases enhance rather than fragment mainstream provision, it will be essential to provide:

- Sustained, **adequate funding**
- Access to **specialist staff**
- **Strong integration** between base and mainstream teams
- **Clear expectations** for inclusion and pupil experience
- **Monitoring** to ensure bases extend, rather than limit, opportunities for pupils.

Read more



The Early Years Workforce in England Annual Report 2026

February 2026

The first in a series of reports, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, on the education workforce to monitor the progress towards meeting workforce supply challenges.

Key findings

- After strong growth between 2023 and 2024, **early years staffing appears to have levelled off**, with numbers increasing by only around 600 staff between 2024 and 2025.
- **Pay in the early years sector remains lower than in comparable occupations**, particularly for more highly qualified staff.
- Compared with similar workers, **early years staff report lower anxiety, higher life satisfaction and a stronger sense that their work is worthwhile**. These benefits have increased over time.
- **Limited career progression and lower pay may make the sector less attractive** to highly qualified staff and reduce incentives for others to gain further qualifications.

Recommendations

- **Ensure funding allows providers to offer competitive pay** and reward staff who gain higher qualifications.
- **Deliver the planned early years professional development** and career pathway programmes to support workforce development.
- **Create clearer progression routes and pay incentives** that encourage staff to develop their skills and qualifications.
- **Promote the rewarding nature of early years work**, including high levels of job satisfaction and positive working environments, to attract new recruits.

What helps improve teacher retention?

A pathway analysis of factors affecting retention

February 2026

Read more



Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, this report explored the factors that influence teachers' decisions to leave the profession to help identify the actions policymakers could take to further improve teacher retention rates.

Key findings

- **Managing pupil behaviour** and providing pastoral support are major factors influencing whether teachers stay in the profession.
- **Time spent on lesson planning** is a significant contributor to teachers leaving teaching.
- **Teachers are more likely to remain in the profession when they feel valued**, involved in decision-making and supported through flexible working arrangements.
- The impact of **Continuing Professional Development** (CPD) on teachers' practice is a significant retention factor.
- **Satisfaction with pay is a key factor in retention.** Teacher pay has grown more slowly than earnings in the wider labour market since 2010/11, which is likely to have affected recruitment and retention.

Recommendations

- **Strengthen support for schools to improve behaviour**, meet pupils' pastoral and learning needs, and access effective external services, backed by adequate funding.
- **Involve teachers more closely in shaping school priorities** and key decision-making processes.
- **Maintain the competitiveness of teacher pay by matching growth** in wider earnings and providing schools with the funding needed to deliver pay awards.
- **Explore how generative AI tools**, such as ChatGPT, can help reduce teachers' lesson planning workload.

[Read more](#)



Securing success from start to finish: Investigating factors associated with apprenticeship withdrawal

January 2026

This report, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, examined the factors linked to apprenticeship withdrawal and evaluated policy options aimed at reducing withdrawals.

Key findings

- Apprentices from **disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to leave their apprenticeship early**, particularly those with lower prior qualifications.
- The **move from apprenticeship frameworks to standards** has been a major factor in the **decline in apprenticeship achievement rates** over the past decade.
- Apprentices **trained by more experienced providers are less likely to withdraw** from their programme.
- **Withdrawal rates are lower among apprentices working for larger employers, employers** with more experience of apprenticeships, and those running larger apprenticeship programmes.
- **Higher first-year apprenticeship pay is linked to lower withdrawal rates**, although the impact is relatively small.
- **Apprentices who complete their programme go on to earn more** than similar learners who withdraw before finishing.

Recommendations

- **Target additional support** at apprentices, employers and training providers where the **risk of withdrawal is highest**.
- **Ensure there are enough pre-apprenticeship programmes to help young people**, especially those with lower prior attainment, prepare for and complete an apprenticeship.



School Teachers' Review Body and teachers' pay

December 2025 & January 2026

[Read more](#)



This two-part blog series, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, provided context for the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) as it developed recommendations for teachers' pay.

Key findings

- The Department for Education's (DfE) proposed 6.5% pay increase over three years is **unlikely to keep teacher pay competitive** and could make recruitment and retention more difficult.
- Setting a pay award for 2027/28 in April 2026 risked missing future changes in the labour market. The STRB should **retain flexibility to review pay decisions** if circumstances change.
- **Secondary teacher supply is expected to improve until 2026/27**, but is **then forecast to decline**, with shortages increasing in the following years.
- Achieving the Government's target of recruiting 6,500 teachers may require **greater reliance on teachers in special schools, alternative provision and further education**, as well as more non-specialist secondary teachers.
- **Higher teacher** pay over the next three years could help reduce some of future teacher shortages, but not all.

[Read more](#)



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Tracking attainment without a counterfactual – lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic

January 2026

This report, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation, reviewed seven major studies of pupil attainment during and after the Covid-19 pandemic in England to provide informed recommendations for future research during prolonged educational disruption.

Recommendations

- **Develop and adopt shared models of learning and participation** to reduce bias and improve consistency across future studies.
- **Use questionnaires more widely**, including with participating and non-participating schools, to **better understand and address bias from selection and missing data**.
- **Include sensitivity testing** for missing data to show how different assumptions could affect study findings.
- **Improve data systems and permissions** so that test data can be more easily linked to the National Pupil Database and used in future research.
- Design studies so their findings **enable inclusion with other research**, helping to build a stronger evidence base for policy and practice.
- **Strengthen assessment and analysis methods** to ensure findings accurately reflect real-world outcomes.
- **Improve reporting transparency** by clearly explaining methods, assumptions and limitations, helping readers interpret findings appropriately.



The Skills Imperative 2035

November 2025

[Read more](#)



The culmination of eight working papers, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, on how the structure of jobs in the labour market could change by 2035, which skills will be most needed, and who is most likely to be affected by these changes.

Key findings

- Around 12 million people in England currently work in jobs that are declining. By 2035, **between one and three million of these roles could disappear**.
- **Overall employment is expected to increase by 2035**. However, most new opportunities will be in professional and technical fields such as science, engineering and law.
- Providing **opportunities to upskill and retrain** will help people move into new jobs and adapt to changes in the workforce.
- The research has identified **six essential employment skills** (EES) which will be most in demand by employers in the future: communication; collaboration; problem solving; organising, planning & prioritising work; creative thinking; and information literacy.

Recommendations

- **EES should be embedded across the curriculum** so that teachers have a clear and consistent understanding of how subject learning can help students develop these skills.
- The Government should consider introducing **new incentives** that encourage post-16 providers and universities to develop students' EES.
- The Department for Education (DfE) should **strengthen existing careers guidance**, encouraging schools to use a shared skills framework when planning work experience opportunities and employer engagement activities.
- **Schools should be provided with practical guidance, tools and training** to help them assess and monitor students' progress in developing EES.
- The Government should **help young people understand why EES matter** and support them in recognising and describing these skills using a common framework.

Learn more about NFER

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In a world of unprecedented change and technological innovation, it is more important than ever that education policy and practice is informed by high-quality evidence.

NFER exists to create this evidence and get it into the hands of those who can use it to make a difference.

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