

Celebrating Partnerships



independent
schools
council

ISSUE 10



INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS COUNCIL
 “THE COLLECTIVE VOICE FOR
 INDEPENDENT EDUCATION”



POLICY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

- recognised sector representative organisation with the DfE
- building relationships with ministers, officials and MPs/Peers
- policy development/influence
- responding to consultations and inquiries
- stakeholder and external relations across education
- political monitoring and updates

MEDIA AND COMMS

- national press and broadcast
- education blogs
- newsletters and Daily News Summary
- publications
- social media
- find a school for parents
- parental enquiry information for schools
- member zone for schools and associations

RESEARCH AND DATA

- annual Census
- public exam results analysis
- economic impact
- data tools/portal for schools and associations
- HE applications surveys
- bespoke research projects
- monitoring partnerships



Annual report of
 cross-sector partnership
 work between
 independent
 and state schools

Introduction

Schools are at the heart of their communities. Regardless of how stormy seas may be elsewhere, schools – regardless of type – remain a calm port for local families, providing education, support and pastoral care.

Everyone who has chosen a career in education feels that responsibility deeply; they want to work for the benefit of all children, not just those in their classrooms.

It is in that spirit that educational partnerships continue to flourish. It is a group of professionals coming together to pool their resources, expertise and talent to help 100% of students reach their potential.

Everyone wins in a good school partnership. School leaders win, because they are able to find collaborative, cost-effective ways to evolve their educational offering.

Teachers win, because they are able to get constructive experience at other schools while gaining valuable CPD, expanding their skillset and improving their practice.

The government wins, because – as you’ll see throughout this publication – schools are working together on the political priorities for education. And, most importantly, children win: they get more opportunities, richer educational experiences and the chance to broaden their horizons.

We know that there is always more to do on partnerships. The schools you’ll see featured throughout provide just a snapshot of the thousands of examples of schools working together across the country. They are the lighthouses showing others the course that can and should be charted as we continue to journey towards better outcomes for all children.



Julie Robinson
 Chief executive,
 Independent Schools Council

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Editors - Emily Roberts, Sarah Cunnane and Alex Beynon

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Celebrating Partnerships is published annually by the Independent Schools Council (ISC).

The Independent Schools Council brings together seven associations and four affiliate associations to represent over 1,400 independent schools. These schools are amongst the best in the world and educate more than half-a-million children. Around half of UK independent schools are ISC schools and these educate around 80% of all independent school children.

Independent schools save the taxpayer £4.4 billion a year from students not taking up places in the state sector and contribute £16.5 billion to the economy.

With thanks to Radley College and Broadway Academy for supplying this issue's cover photo.



From decline to revival: THE FIGHT TO SAVE vulnerable subjects

Social sciences, languages, and other key parts of the curriculum are under threat – but not without resistance. Adi Bloom investigates

“STEM won the game,” says John Cloughton. “Kids are much more likely to be doing sciences than languages. STEM won.”

John Cloughton is one of the founders of WoLLoW, a teaching resource designed and funded by the independent sector, which aims to redraw the battle lines – enhancing language teaching in primary and early secondary school.

His resource has become necessary, he says, because languages – both modern and ancient – are in decline in the state sector.

This is borne out by recent research commissioned by the British Academy and conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The report, *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*, found that take-up in humanities and arts subjects has declined considerably over the last two decades in comparison with STEM and social science subjects. A student in 2021-22 was between 15 and 21 percentage points less likely to study a humanities or arts subject than in 2003-04.

In 2024, less than three per cent of A levels taken were for modern foreign languages, classical subjects, Welsh as a second language or Irish, according to *The Languages Crisis: Arresting decline*, a new report published by the Higher Education Policy Institute. There are now more A-level entries for PE than for French, German and classical languages combined.

“Participation in modern languages and Latin is either flat or in decline, and has been for a long time,” says Michael Scott, senior economist at the NFER and lead author of the British Academy report. “Humanities are in decline.”

This decline can be traced in part to a series of A-level reforms between 2016 and 2019. These reforms decoupled AS levels from A levels, so that AS courses no longer counted towards the final A-level grade. Before this reform, students often took four AS-level subjects in their first year of sixth form, three of which they would pursue to A level in their second year. Since the decoupling, the full weight of their A-level grade depends on their final-year exam – which means that students tend only to study three subjects.

“A-level students appear to have a strong perception that they need STEM subjects”



“The average subject is seeing slightly less engagement,” says Scott. “But the humanities and the arts are often the subjects that people are most willing to drop – and now students are deciding not to do those subjects.”

So students who would previously have taken three science A levels and a humanities or arts AS are now only taking the three science A levels.

However, the decoupling of AS and A levels merely exacerbated an existing trend. There has long been an assumption among pupils and their parents that STEM subjects are more likely to lead to lucrative careers than humanities or arts subjects – especially now that ChatGPT can translate a document or design a graphic for you.

“A-level students appear to have a strong perception that they need STEM subjects,” says Scott. “Particularly if they want to engage with those subjects at university, they need to do two or three STEM A levels. It leaves very little space for anything else.”

The language drop-off

People rarely talk about the advantages of a language degree in the way that they will about engineering or physics, says John Cloughton: “Languages are seen as a small corner of the curriculum, only relevant to a minority. Parents don’t see an obvious career through languages.”

He believes that this marginalisation of languages begins at primary school. “Ofsted don’t care about languages at primary,” he says. “And the average primary teacher is a generalist who may not have much linguistic expertise, and maybe 40 minutes a week to teach languages.”

This situation only worsens at secondary school, because acquiring the functional basics of a language can be difficult and not particularly interesting. “The GCSE syllabus is pretty tedious,” he says. “There’s quite a lot of drill when you’re starting to learn a language.”

And the more pupils drop a subject early, the more expensive it becomes for schools to offer it for the handful who want to continue. Budget constraints have meant that minority-interest subjects are therefore becoming financially unviable for schools.

“It’s becoming very expensive to offer subjects to small numbers,” says Barnaby Lenon, formerly headmaster at Harrow School and now dean of education at the University of Buckingham. “We’ve seen this most obviously in German, but also in Latin, Greek, music – subjects not taken by many people.

“State schools don’t have the budget to offer them to a few children. An obvious way to save money is to scrap individual subjects that are not very popular.”

“It’s a chicken-and-egg thing,” says Michael Scott. “Presumably, one of the biggest reasons a provider stops offering a subject is because no one wants to do it, so it costs too much to offer it. But if you stop offering it, no one will want to do it.

“So are fewer providers offering it because not as many students are doing it? Or are not as many students doing it because fewer providers are offering it? It’s probably a bit of both.”

The shrinking pipeline

Fewer A-level candidates in a subject inevitably means fewer people choosing to study that subject at degree level. And of those few, even fewer will subsequently train to teach it – as Cloughton says, “Who would want to be a languages teacher in a declining industry?”

In June 2015, universities had made 3,110 offers to graduates wanting to train as modern language teachers the following September. This rose to 4,460 in June 2016. In June 2025, 1,418 offers had been made.

Teacher training courses in other declining subjects are similarly undersubscribed. The government set a target of 780 offers to be made to candidates wanting to train as religious education teachers from September 2025; by June 2025, only 397 offers had been made. And for Classics, only 41 places were offered out of a target of 60.

“The long-term prognosis gets worse,” says John Howson, emeritus professor of education at Oxford Brookes University and founder of DataforEducation. “Fewer people are doing A levels in these subjects, so fewer people are studying them at university. And if fewer people are coming through degree courses, then the long-term problem is quite serious.”

Turning the tide

This is where independent schools come in. Many independent schools offer precisely the smaller subjects that are being squeezed out of the state sector.

“The only pupils who do Greek tend to be very high-performing – the majority will go to Oxford and Cambridge, which is very good for our reputation,” says Barnaby Lenon. “But it’s also a missionary thing: if we don’t offer Greek, who will? So we have to offer it.”

An independent-state partnership, therefore, is often as simple as a state school sending pupils to the neighbouring independent school to study Greek or Latin.

This was something Lenon initiated during his time as headteacher at Harrow. “We had space, because not many students chose Latin – maybe six a year,” he says. “So it’s no problem adding three state school pupils to the class, and we were very keen to offer Latin and work with state schools.”

Another well-established form of partnership is for independent schools to offer trainee teachers placements in subject departments – Dulwich College in South London, for example, offers 50 training places, including several ringfenced for modern languages teachers.

“The important thing is: they’ve got to see what a really good modern foreign languages department looks like,” says Lenon.

Reimagining language learning

Some independent schools have found other, more innovative ways to share their expertise and resources. Newly retired from his post as chief master of King Edward’s School, Birmingham, John Cloughton started talking to Steffan Griffiths, head of Norwich School, about language teaching – and specifically about the ways in which modern foreign languages, classical languages and English could work better together.

They also believed that schools needed to place greater value on the community languages that pupils already spoke.

“Instead of teaching French and Spanish not very well, we thought: why don’t we think of a primary course that allows children to talk about languages, including their own?” he says. “That allows them to understand how languages work.

“When kids are curious and learning, why don’t we just do something that’s open-ended, to do with curiosity, talking and sharing?”

And so they developed WoLLoW – the acronym stands for World of Languages, Languages of the World – a programme for Key Stages 2 and 3. Completely free of charge to schools, WoLLoW includes teaching resources and guidance for teachers.

Cloughton and Griffiths felt strongly that the way that languages were taught was problematic. “Kids spend four years studying a language at primary school, then they start secondary school and start all over again,” Cloughton says. “Can you imagine starting maths or literacy from scratch again at secondary school?”

They therefore designed WoLLoW so that children learnt about different languages, and acquired skills useful for future language learning, but were not taught a specific language.

For example, one lesson looks at the days of the week in different languages. This begins with the English names – taking in the Viking gods along the way – followed by the French and Spanish names, leading to a conversation about the Roman gods.

Children who speak different languages at home are then invited to tell the class the names of the days of the week in their own language – and to go home and ask their families about the origins of those names.

The course is designed so that anyone can teach it, whether or not they have language teaching experience. This is useful for primary teachers, but it also allows for further cross-sector partnership. In some cases, senior pupils from an independent school will visit a local state primary to teach a WoLLoW lesson – for example, by talking about their own community language.

The WoLLoW founders have shared the programme as broadly as possible within the state sector, via personal as well as union contacts. So far, around 900 schools have downloaded their resources. And they are working with eight teacher training universities – including Liverpool John Moores and the University of East Anglia – to encourage future teachers to think differently about language learning.

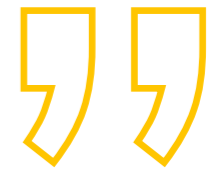
“We think it’s become not just a means whereby the independent sector can deal with its educational responsibility, but also a civic issue,” says Cloughton.

“We’re preserving things that would otherwise be dead. Through our efforts, as independent schools, we’ve made a difference.”

Adi Bloom is a freelance writer



Through our efforts, we’ve made a difference



FROM ODYSSEY TO OPPORTUNITY

WINCHESTER COLLEGE



A free after-school club run by **Winchester College** is introducing young people to the wonders of the ancient world through Classical Greek, bringing the language and its fascinating history to life.

Local Year 11 pupils with an interest in the subject are welcomed to the weekly sessions, which take place on Tuesdays during term time. While young people in Winchester are fortunate to have numerous opportunities to study Latin – and with it, the civilisation of the ancient Romans – Classical Greek is only offered at two schools in the area. As such, Winchester College founded the club in 2022 to give more pupils the chance to study the subject.

The sessions are led by head of Classics Edmund Lewis, with support from several Winchester College students acting as teaching assistants. While the focus of the classes is on the language, pupils also have plenty of time to explore Greek civilisation. Teaching takes place in a classroom at Winchester College, in easy reach of the school's impressive collections of Greek vases, casts, coins and texts.

The Winchester Greek Club has proved very popular in its first three years: around 15 pupils a year have sat the ICCG exam (Intermediate Certificate in Classical Greek) at the end of the first year, and most of those chose to stay for a second year to pursue the subject at GCSE level. Several graduates of the club have gone on to apply for classical subjects at university and have earned places at top institutions, including Oxford.

OPENING DOORS TO STEM CAREERS

NOTTINGHAM GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL



In a world increasingly shaped by science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), meaningful careers guidance and work experience opportunities are more important than ever. Yet many young people, particularly girls, often lack access to these pathways.

Nottingham Girls' High School (NGHS) has been working to change this through its Bright Girls, Bright Futures partnership with two local primary schools: **Dunkirk** and **Jesse Gray**. The project offers a hands-on, future-focused approach that showcases the achievements of women, past and present.

Over the course of three years, Year 8 students from NGHS mentor Year 4 pupils at the partner schools, working in pairs to tackle STEM challenges.

In the first year, pupils dive into the world of codebreaking. Using various tools and techniques, they decipher codes created by NGHS' outreach coordinator. Once confident, they design their own coding packs, creating interactive puzzles to share with their friends. The second year of the programme sees students designing, building, and programming LEGO robots. Together, they explore the fundamentals of engineering and coding as they put their own creations to the test. In the final year, STEM meets creativity through a textiles-based project. Students experiment with colour theory and tie-dye techniques, discovering how scientific principles influence design. The programme culminates with each pair producing a custom t-shirt, combining technical skills with artistic expression.

The partnership recently celebrated a major milestone: the graduation of its first cohort. Over time, participants have grown in confidence, clarity, and curiosity, leaving the programme with not only a deeper understanding of STEM careers, but a stronger sense of who they are and what they can achieve.



Unlocking futures through careers education

Collaborative careers programmes are giving students across the country a clearer path to success, finds Amanda Akien

For every pupil who knows a lawyer, there's another who has never met one. This is the reality of the careers education divide, creating a two-tier system that entrenches existing socioeconomic inequalities.

While the government has pledged to boost career opportunities, momentum is coming from the ground up. Independent and state schools are emerging as solutions. These partnerships share resources and expertise, helping more pupils understand careers within their reach.

Why careers education matters

Investing in careers education is not a luxury; it's a necessity. **Research** shows that among students in the most disadvantaged schools, high-quality careers advice can increase the chance of progressing in education, employment, or training by a third.

Studies show that schools with strong careers provision reduce the likelihood of pupils becoming NEET (not in education, employment, or training) by up to **20 per cent** in disadvantaged areas.

Personal guidance is essential. High-quality advice helps students identify their strengths and interests, giving them direction. This is not only about choosing a job; it is about building a purposeful life. An Education Development Trust report highlights the impact of strong careers programmes. Students gain confidence and

practical tools to navigate the transition from education to work.

Beyond aspiration

Good careers guidance goes beyond 'raising aspirations'. While disadvantaged students may have similar levels of ambition as their peers, they often lack the knowledge and support to turn aspirations into plans. Good guidance shows students the next steps: which subjects to study, work experience options, and which universities to consider.

Effective careers education can challenge stereotypes from primary school onwards, ensuring that talent, not background, drives success. Integrating careers education with real-world experiences, such as work placements and curriculum projects, can also lower exclusion rates and improve classroom behaviour. Beyond specific jobs, effective careers education develops soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.

What the research shows

Employer engagement improves attainment. The **Motivated to Achieve** report by the Education and Employers charity found a link between increased careers guidance and educational outcomes, including higher GCSE performance. Even short interventions work. Research from the **Commercial Education Trust** found that three 20- to 30-minute career talks from volunteers across sectors made a measurable difference in Year 11 students' awareness and motivation.



Disparities in careers education

The divide in careers education is multifaceted. 'Assumed knowledge' is a silent barrier, preventing many from exploring certain paths, even when they have the academic ability to succeed.

A Social Market Foundation (SMF) study, undertaken on behalf of Speakers for Schools, found that independent school students were **11 percentage points** more likely to have spoken to a careers advisor. Ofsted has criticised schools and colleges for "poor" levels of collaboration in ensuring students from disadvantaged backgrounds have **good careers advice**. A 2025 report, *Navigating Post-16 Careers Guidance: Supporting Learners from Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds*, found that it was rare for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to receive tailored guidance. College students could not remember receiving careers guidance at school.

This divide is about more than access; it is about assumed knowledge. The SMF found that the more sources of advice people had used, the better they scored in a benchmarked Assumed Knowledge Index. There are widespread misunderstandings about which professions need certain degrees. For example, **two thirds of students** mistakenly think lawyers need a law degree.

This links to the lack of role models across sectors. As Joe Spence, chief executive of the School Partnerships Alliance (S.P.A.), explains: "You get young people who have never met a lawyer, [and] could not find work experience opportunities, unless it is through partnership programmes."

The SMF report also reveals that those with connections in prestigious industries such as law, medicine, and academia had higher levels of assumed knowledge. Among students eligible for free school meals, 42 per cent did not know anyone in a prestigious profession.

The capacity challenge

Helen Pike, master of Magdalen College School (MCS), explains that while excellent careers provision exists in both sectors, "the challenge is always time and resource, particularly people." She says: "Independent schools often have better networks because they keep in touch with former pupils. It breaks my heart

that never once have I heard from my secondary school or sixth form college, while we ask our former pupils and current and former parents to volunteer their expertise on a regular basis. People give their time free of charge, but you need someone to maintain a database and to have the time to ask and follow up."

Preparing for the unknown

Careers education is complicated by future job market uncertainty. With automation, AI, green jobs, and digital skills transforming the economy, many roles that today's pupils might fill don't yet exist.

Roles such as social media managers, data scientists, and sustainability consultants have emerged. Careers advisers need to give guidance on pathways yet to be defined.

Today's students will enter a transforming job market. According to the *World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025*, structural changes will affect 22 per cent of all jobs, and about 14 per cent of jobs will be brand new. Careers education needs to equip students with adaptable skills and exposure to emerging industries.

Some skills and aptitudes will always be in demand. As Spence states: "This creates a real appetite for the kind of holistic learning at the heart of independent education. Skills such as leadership, teamwork, communication and creative thinking can be developed through competitive sport, cultural activities, running clubs and societies, or launching a school magazine."

Pupils from underrepresented backgrounds risk falling behind in a complex job market if they lack exposure to diverse industries and roles.

Partnerships between independent and state schools, offering mentoring, work experience, and exposure to emerging industries, help all students navigate a changing labour market.

Partnerships as a solution

Pike believes independent schools "can make a positive difference far beyond our walls by ensuring that as many pupils as possible can benefit from our networks and resources." Last year, her school was named **Independent School of the Year for Contribution to Social Mobility**.



We ask our former pupils and parents to volunteer their expertise on a regular basis

These collaborations are not feel-good initiatives; they are practical and effective ways to deliver on policy objectives



Through their professional networks, these partnerships connect students with mentors, employers, and real-world experiences.

Spence notes: "One of the most useful ways in which independent schools can support careers advice nationally is by opening their networking events to children from the local state schools." He adds that the parent body of an independent school often provides access to a wider network of professionals, freelancers, and entrepreneurs, creating valuable opportunities for work experience, shadowing, and career talks.

"Alumni organisations are gold dust in this area, and many state schools are looking to independent schools to help them set up alumni and development offices."

Partnerships in action

Partnerships help to demystify careers and provide a tangible link between a student's education and their future. These partnerships take many forms, from joint university entrance initiatives to specialised support for applications. By combining resources, expertise, and sharing networks, collaborations expand opportunities. Activities often include:

- Academic workshops and subject-specific masterclasses, from coding and science labs to essay writing.
- University visits and campus tours, giving pupils a taste of university life.
- Coaching for competitive applications, including mock Oxbridge interviews and personal statement guidance.
- Careers fairs and networking events, bringing together professionals, alumni, and pupils from different schools to explore careers.

Pike provides examples from MCS: "We run a biennial careers fair to which we invite partner schools. We also host specialist events, such as a one-day medics' conference and an engineers' conference, with speakers to give insight into these careers."

A recurring challenge is that opportunities offered to state schools often go untapped due to a lack of capacity to access them. As Spence explains: "It's often the case that they don't know who to approach in the state schools." The S.P.A. acts as a broker, connecting independent schools with multi-academy trusts (MATs).

This ensures opportunities reach the schools and pupils who need them most.

Government alignment

Partnerships between independent and state schools align with government initiatives to boost careers education and work experience. The Department for Education and the Careers & Enterprise Company emphasise the need for high-quality guidance, particularly for pupils without access to networks or role models. Independent schools, with alumni networks, employer contacts, and dedicated careers staff, are well-placed to support.

The government recognises the importance of improving careers education. These collaborations are not feel-good initiatives; they are practical and effective ways to deliver on policy objectives.

Critics sometimes label partnerships as tokenistic, but as Pike points out, the tangible results speak for themselves. "I would point them to our **impact report** and to the work of the S.P.A., whose conference we are hosting in November. I would say that many schools are profoundly and proudly rooted in their communities."

The work of the S.P.A. and the examples highlighted in the annual ISC Celebrating Partnerships booklet demonstrate that these are deep, authentic collaborations rooted in a shared purpose.

Impact

"We know these events make a difference because schools tell us when pupils make successful UCAS applications," says Pike. Independent school pupils also gain from these exchanges, developing leadership and gaining a richer understanding: "We know that our own pupils benefit from that exchange both in and beyond school."

"Sometimes people think that schools can fix everything in society, and of course we can't, but we do a lot more than educate our own pupils."

By highlighting and supporting these partnerships, policymakers and educators alike can help ensure that careers education is not a privilege but a pathway to opportunity for every pupil.

Amanda Akien is a freelance writer

Oracy education: The **power of speaking** up

IN CLASSROOMS AND COMPETITION HALLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, A QUIET REVOLUTION IS TAKING PLACE – ONE POWERED NOT BY TECHNOLOGY OR TESTS, BUT BY TALKING

Oracy education, the teaching of speaking and listening skills, is gaining traction as schools increasingly recognise its value in helping pupils build confidence, prepare for their futures, and understand the world around them.

It's also climbing the political agenda; in 2023, Keir Starmer pledged to improve children's speaking skills, announcing that oracy would be a central part of Labour's educational priorities if it won the general election. In July this year, campaigners wrote an open letter to the prime minister urging him to establish oracy as a core part of the revised national curriculum.

South Hampstead High School embeds oracy across its curriculum and widens access to public speaking opportunities through its award-winning partnership programme, Debate Hub.

Chris Dearmer and Michael Hepburn reflect on this sector-leading work and its lasting impact on the lives of young people.



We do oracy in some form from Reception all the way through to the Sixth Form. In Year 5, students begin a timetabled programme of debating, with over an hour each week. It's the same programme we share with our state school partners: the Junior School Debating Programme.

When they progress to senior school, all pupils embark on a year-long course: Oracy and Critical Thinking. This involves a lot of debating and public speaking, but it also involves thinking about logical fallacies and how to spot bad arguments, in a theoretical and philosophical sense.

We have embedded a variety of oracy projects for different year groups. Our Global Issues Oracy Project enables pupils to develop their understanding of international current affairs. We partner with a school in Rwanda for our annual Think Global, Act Local project – a sustainability challenge whereby pupils work together to reduce waste and effect change. And, of course, we have good oracy happening in lots of our classrooms, with teachers supported by the debating and oracy department.

We have lunchtime debate clubs every day of the week, and an after-school club four or five days a week, from beginner to advanced. We compete in about 20 competitions annually and host around 12 competitions a year where other schools come to us – our own students take part in a lot of those or help run them.

We are also in the process of creating our own school-directed course in oracy – which we believe is the first of its kind. From next September, GCSE students will be able to take our two-year course – Scholarship through Speech – and earn an in-house qualification at the end.

Since appointing a head of debating, we've been building up a culture of oracy; it really has become a cornerstone of what we do here. Through our Debate Hub, we share a wealth of resources and debating opportunities with our partner schools, and it's a statement of the importance we place in that area.

“

Oracy is about allowing people to speak in their authentic voice



”

Giving young people a voice

We've always encouraged girls at South Hampstead to speak up and speak out – that's been something of a mantra we've had for many years. If you go to a debating competition for beginners, you notice that the boys are significantly more confident than the girls, particularly at secondary school. That's something that can be very quickly solved – by giving girls the skills to debate well. It's on us to equip young women not only with the belief that their voice is important, but with the skills to advocate for things they care about with calmness and surety.

There are so many misconceptions about what debating and oracy is about. A lot of them come down to this idea that good public speaking sounds a very particular way, and often that idea of a good public speaking voice is a white, male, upper-class person with a strong vocabulary who doesn't use filler words.

In reality, oracy is about allowing people to speak in their authentic voice. These voices will be different, and that difference is awesome: that's what makes it fun. There's not sufficient celebration of the authenticity of girls' voices, young people's voices, diverse voices, slang, regional dialects – that's the biggest thing holding oracy back. We have students from all different backgrounds, and they all come with their own opinions, ideas, and personalities. They are encouraged to use their own voice, as opposed to feeling that they need to fit into a preconceived model.

Diversity of opinion is incredibly important, and it's very good for all our students to be exposed to different viewpoints. One of the great strengths of our partnership work is the glorious discovery that, when it comes down to it, for all those perceived differences between pupils from different schools, they actually have far much more in common. Through the process of debating, they discover there is so much more that ties them together.

Where language comes alive

There is a real buzz during our competitions – the energy is palpable. There will often be as many as 200 students involved, taking part in about 30 concurrent debates. When we put the topic on the board, there's that moment where there's a cheer if they like the motion, or there are a few shocked gasps – we even have some running to the room as quickly as possible to maximise their prep time. With the younger pupils especially, there's a lot of chaotic excitement.

Giving pupils independence and autonomy is a big thing here; our debaters have to go out to the big hall, find a room, prep with their teammates, come up with their ideas, decide who's speaking first, get their notes ready. They're not in their comfort zone, but they love it.

We see them offering to shake hands afterwards, applauding other teams without being asked – it's very sweet. It's also lovely to witness our mixed-age group events, watching that dynamic at play and seeing how much the younger pupils learn from the older ones.

Changing lives

From the start, we've been struck by the confidence and the assurance that our girls have when they stand up and speak, whether that's in a classroom or in front of a whole-school assembly. Two of our girls recently attended an event at the House of Lords to speak about the value of girls' education, and we were amazed by the brilliance with which they spoke and were able to articulate their ideas.

It's incredibly rewarding to witness pupils' transformations. There's a girl who started debating with us when she was in Year 8 and she was incredibly quiet and shy. By the time she left, she was this dynamic, funny, confident young woman, and now she is at university in Paris. Another pupil recently delivered two speeches at the Lib Dem party conference. And several of our girls have been selected for Debate England's national squad.

Being able to see that growth is really satisfying. We take real pride in our girls achieving extraordinary things but also pride in the processes that we have in place to promote that. A few years ago, a pupil from a nearby state school came to one of our debating competitions and liked it so much she applied to join our Sixth Form on a fully funded bursary; she went on to become the borough's local Youth MP and is now studying global humanitarian studies at university. The benefits to the wider community are especially tangible. As one of our partner school teachers said: "You have really revolutionised the debating scene – this has the power to change lives."

A growing priority

One reason why oracy is getting a lot of focus at a national, governmental level – and rightly so – is because it's arguably the best means to enable young people to understand the world around them. In an age of social media, echo chambers, and very prominent voices with extreme points of view, there's a lot out there to make sense of. Our girls are able to engage with those issues and make sense of them because of the oracy provision that we give. That is something that should be accessible to everyone, and it should be on the government's agenda.

There's also a social equality angle. Students need to be able to interview well to get into the top university courses, Magic Circle law firms or Big Four accountancy firms. If the top-tier jobs, universities, and to some extent, careers, all revolve around oracy, and you want everyone to be able to access them, you're going to have to teach everyone oracy.

Practical steps for schools

When it comes to making oracy a priority, don't overthink it. Start with something small and simple – a debate club, Model United Nations, or your English department hosting a little public speaking competition at the end of every year. There are lots of resources out there, particularly for state schools, including free training and free entry to competitions. Importantly, there has to be genuine support from senior leadership. Both our current and previous heads have made it a point to highlight the value of oracy. Even if the teachers want



I had an interview with a law firm for a training contract yesterday, and I got the job! I just wanted to tell you both that debating has had the biggest impact on my life, and I truly don't believe I would have got to this stage without it

A former South Hampstead High School pupil



to do more – and they do – the time, money, and training must come from the top.

You can't just give staff more work; teachers are incredibly busy. One of the ways we talk about oracy is that it can sometimes save time; for example, rather than having to mark a lot of homework, you can mark a classroom debate or speech during lesson time instead.

And don't be afraid of getting it wrong. At Debate Hub, we have plenty of ideas and resources to tap into – and anyone can check our website to see what we personally advocate and why – but just doing some of it is better than nothing. No one is an absolute authority on oracy, so you might as well give it a try and learn as you go.

All schools will be offering oracy in some way, shape or form, whether they're conscious of it or not. Just introducing that word into the vocabulary of the school, getting it into the consciousness of students and staff, and recognising its importance can be the first step.

Debate Hub is a partnership programme promoting a culture of oracy among pupils and the wider community. For access to competitions, lesson plans, debate curricula, video guides, workshops and other key resources, visit debatehub.co.uk.

Chris Dearmer is deputy head (co-curricular, community & careers) at South Hampstead High School. Michael Hepburn is director of the school's Debate Hub.

‘Working together, schools can achieve more than they can alone’



What do you think are the key pillars of successful, mutually beneficial partnership working?

First and foremost, they must be impactful. Key to this is that partners have a shared vision and agreed goals. From the outset, these will have associated outcomes (ideally measurable ones), with plans for their evaluation in place.

Everyone involved, from all partner schools, will have a clear role, and partners commit for the long-term; they must be sustainable.

For me, though, the key to successful, mutually beneficial partnership working lies in positive relationships. Relationships between schools, between leaders, between staff, and between students.

Deep relationships enable open and honest exchanges, ensuring meaningful joint projects, and making the partnership responsive to changing needs.

What is the S.P.A.’s mission, and how has your research informed your work there?

At S.P.A. we support and promote schools of different types working together – and learning from one another – to improve outcomes for all young people. Key to this is creating a network in which school leaders and partnership professionals can share best practice, ideas and concerns.

Through my PhD research I found that the stronger and closer the relationships between the schools, the more equitable the benefits and the greater the worth of the partnership.

I have also learned that effective partnerships rarely stand still; they are constantly revisiting their aims and the current needs of each partner school. They make no assumptions, but ask open questions. They are also prepared to stop running a project if it is not impactful.

Some critics have said that partnership work is superficial, and not very widespread. What would your response be to this?

I think people sometimes look at those schools sharing facilities (which are typically independent schools) and consider this superficial; perhaps more outreach than partnership.

In my research, I met many teachers whose pupils were enjoying these ‘connections’ as we call them at S.P.A.; activities that were perhaps one-way, or using specialist facilities.

I asked the heads involved how they felt about this. One state school head unashamedly wanted her pupils to experience things her school didn’t have, such as “the theatre stuff... I don’t have a theatre” and when she requested “a bit of Latin” she told me that “the independent school obliged”.

While I prefer to see mutually beneficial partnerships, such as S.P.A.’s ‘collaborations’ or ‘alliances’, that doesn’t mean ‘connections’ are superficial – being able to use a local swimming pool might be the difference between pupils fulfilling their KS2 targets or not.

As for them not being very widespread, you only have to reflect on the partnerships included in this publication to see that they can be found right across the country.

They are more concentrated in some geographical areas, but largely because of the density of schools there. We’re not complacent, though: at S.P.A. we won’t rest until every school in the country has at least considered and been given the opportunity to get involved in partnership working.

At S.P.A., we are working on a framework for measuring the impact of partnerships that should help make clear the difference that partnership working makes, and the value it adds.

Margaret Hunnaball is an expert when it comes to cross-sector collaboration. With 35 years’ experience of teaching in both state and independent schools, and a PhD from King’s College London on the enactment of educational partnerships, she brings a deep and nuanced understanding of how schools can come together for the benefit of their communities. Drawing from her experience and the work of the School Partnerships Alliance (S.P.A.), Hunnaball offers valuable insights into the power of partnerships



As a former teacher, what would you say the biggest benefits of partnerships are for educators today?

Partnerships give staff in schools opportunities to learn from each other, enter into joint projects and do new things. Many partnerships run CPD sessions for teachers, such as the East Kent Schools Together TeachMeets.

Sometimes teachers are the only subject specialists in their schools. Partnerships give them opportunities to work with specialists from other schools on activities from innovative projects to reviewing changes in examination specifications.

At S.P.A. we offer CPD ‘for partnership leads, by partnership leads’, giving partnership professionals opportunities to learn from others in the sector.

Can you give an example of one of the most innovative partnership initiatives you’ve come across?

This is a tricky one; as a physicist, what I consider innovative, others might not! I’m going to highlight two of the myriad of brilliant partnership activities that I have observed first-hand.

At the York ISSP Summer School, students from all schools enjoy sessions co-created by a state school teacher and a colleague from an independent school, taking them beyond the national curriculum. There I saw quantum physics being taught to students from Years 7 and 8, and workshops on identity and journalism.

When I was at King’s College School, Wimbledon, one of the highlights of the year was (and still is) the Partnerships Production. This is the culmination of weekly partnership working across two terms, where staff and students from King’s and partner schools work together on the act of a play. Every year this includes students from maintained secondary, primary, and special needs schools. At the end of the spring term all the acts come together in a spectacular performance.

Looking to the future, are there any particular areas where you’d like to see more partnerships blossom?

We are currently seeing the creative and performing arts being widely cut in state schools. Partnership work can really help these subjects shine, benefitting both students and staff.

Another really important area for partnership working is mental health and wellbeing. When schools work together, they can pool their expertise in this area, helping every student to flourish.

How can a school that has never been involved in partnership work best get involved?

I would encourage the school to look at what it does well, think about what it might benefit from, and start a conversation. This can be started by any school, irrespective of phase or sector. The conversation can be with another school, college, university, third party, or a team member from S.P.A.

I genuinely believe that working together schools can achieve more than they can alone, offering more opportunities and experiences for students and staff.

S.P.A. has seen some really good practice in cross-sector working that shows just how much all schools can benefit from joint ventures. Partnerships of equals – such as the Southwark Schools Learning Partnership, which has heads from state and independent schools working together – will create a national movement for greater collaboration between schools in different settings, who share the same goal of a better experience of school (in itself and as a preparation for the future) for every child. I urge every school to join that movement!

Margaret Hunnaball is director of programmes and research at the S.P.A.

To learn more about the work of S.P.A., visit schoolpartnershipsalliance.org.uk

Educational disadvantage and the attainment gap: *A partnership lead's perspective*

John Smith explains how his school is endeavouring to tackle regional inequalities by directing its partnership provision towards pupils facing the highest levels of disadvantage

When building our partnership programme over the past few years, we have drawn heavily on what are understood as the four pillars of partnerships:

1. Mutual benefit
2. Sustainability
3. Impact evaluation
4. Tackling disadvantage

Each of these pillars is crucial, but I would like to focus on Royal Grammar School (RGS) Newcastle's approach to the fourth pillar, which can be all-too-easily forgotten in conversations around cross-sector partnerships. When building mutually beneficial, sustainable partnerships with local schools, it may seem easier to do so based on proximity, or perhaps pre-existing staff and parental links. But developing projects in this way may preclude those children most in need of the programmes, connections and opportunities.

It is worth starting with a simple question: how can we better understand our communities?

A huge amount of socioeconomic and attainment data is readily available at national level. Most recently, the **Sutton Trust's Opportunity Index** (May 2025) made stark reading for those of us working in the North East:

“Overall, East Ham in London is ranked as the top constituency for opportunity in England, with Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West ranked lowest...Between these two areas, there is a 30 percentage point difference between the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals achieving passes in English and maths GCSE, and a 45 percentage point gap in the proportion going on to sustained education or employment after GCSEs.”

At RGS, we direct the vast majority of our projects towards schools with above-average numbers of pupils eligible for free school meals. While this proxy for disadvantage is not perfect, it is easily accessible and, at the very least, gives a metric for comparison across different areas of our region.

If we take our ambitious vision statement seriously – *to raise attainment and access to opportunity in the wider region* – then we have a better chance of reaching those children in greatest need by using data in a granular manner, alongside more qualitative conversations with staff in partner schools on the ground.

As the Sutton Trust report tells us, *“Young people who had received free school meals in East Ham are also over three times more likely to reach the top fifth of earners, compared to those in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (20% compared to 6% respectively).”*

There is a great deal of work to do – but we can only bridge such attainment gaps if we put egos to one side and “gang up on the problem, not on each other”. This phrase is a favourite of Katrina Morley and Sean Harris, of Tees Valley Education, with whom I had the privilege of collaborating on **Tackling Disadvantage and Poverty in Schools** (Bloomsbury, 2025). (I urge you to buy a copy for your staff CPD library – all profits go to charities working on poverty reduction in the Tees Valley). We have worked with Tees Valley Education on ‘Leadmeets’ and roundtables, bringing school and system leaders together to leverage the power of the network to benefit all children in our locality, rather than restricting our expertise to the school boundary fences and within larger school groupings.

Cross-sector partnerships can be powerful levers for change as part of a rich educational ecosystem in the UK, but only if we are targeted and robust in our approach.

John Smith is director of partnerships at RGS Newcastle



BOOSTING PUPILS' SELF-BELIEF

COASTAL SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP

The Coastal Schools Partnership (CSP) was established in 2014 by Eastbourne College and three neighbouring secondary schools with a shared goal: to create initiatives that would inspire and empower young people across Eastbourne and beyond.

Now with 12 members, CSP pools resources to develop innovative projects addressing educational inequality. Collectively, the group is able to engage with organisations and generate funding that no school would be able to access alone.

Being Our Best Selves (BOBS) is a programme developed and delivered by **Culture Shift**, an organisation founded in 2011. It enables young people who are faced with emotional, social, and educational inequalities to develop self-confidence and resilience by enhancing communication and teamwork skills. It sets out to improve mental health and wellbeing and, crucially, raise aspirations and support future planning.

Culture Shift was commissioned by CSP in November 2024 to deliver a six-week pilot course at **Hailsham Community College (HCC)** to 53 Year 11 students who had been identified by HCC as having "limited self-belief and aspirations and poor attendance and motivation in lessons".

Through a series of six two-hour creative and reflective sessions, the programme re-engaged students by offering a safe, supportive space to explore identities, aspirations, and future plans.

Of the students involved, **97.3% rated their experience 5 out of 5 and 73% reported a clearer understanding of their future goals.**

Many shared that they had opened up in ways they never had before, felt free from judgement, and gained a new perspective on mental health and everyday life.



Teaching tomorrow: The power of AI innovation

Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer a futuristic vision for schools; it's changing how teachers work and how pupils learn, argues Amanda Akien

From streamlining administration to shaping learning, AI can transform classrooms. Yet, with opportunity comes risks and questions about bias, data, workload, and teachers' roles.

The real story lies not in AI itself, but in how schools choose to use it. Independent schools, with their freedom to innovate and collaborative culture, are placed to lead the way. By trialling AI and sharing what works with state schools, they can help shape an environment where technology supports teachers and benefits every student.

Workload reduction

A McKinsey study suggested technology could handle 20 to 40 per cent of teacher tasks. In 2024, the Education Endowment Foundation published *ChatGPT in Lesson Preparation: A Teacher Choices Trial*. Forty-six per cent of teachers reported that ChatGPT saved time on admin and marking.

Tools such as automated marking, learning analytics, and **ChatGPT for lesson planning** enable teachers to focus on teaching. Ofsted's 2025 report on **early AI adopters** highlights similar findings. As Laura Knight, CEO of Sapio Ltd, explains, "AI is most powerful when it takes away the time-consuming and repetitive jobs that drain capacity. AI lightens the load of tasks, such as adapting resources, generating draft feedback, planning sequences, and analysing data. That frees teachers to do what really matters: spending more time with pupils, noticing the small things, and bringing learning to life."

Personalised learning

AI enables personalised learning by tailoring content to students' strengths and areas for development. Adaptive platforms adjust lessons to each pupil's level, while automated marking gives instant, detailed feedback. AI can identify knowledge gaps and recommend resources, helping teachers target support where it is most needed. High-quality feedback enhances attainment. **Hattie's research on visible learning** recognises feedback as a key factor in student achievement. When used responsibly, AI tools enable timely, personalised, and actionable feedback.

Pupils can also access personalised dashboards showing progress, strengths, and areas for improvement. This supports self-reflection and independent learning. According to the Department for Education's (DfE) *Technology in Schools Survey*, over two thirds of school leaders reported that technology in education boosted pupil attainment.

Improved accessibility

AI helps teachers adapt tasks for mixed-ability learners. For pupils with English as an additional language, AI-powered tools can ensure inclusive communication through instant translation.

AI offers accessibility features, including speech-to-text and adaptive learning platforms, which support learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Teaching assistants and teachers can customise resources, creating reading texts on the same topic at different levels, rewriting instructions and suggesting scaffolds or extension activities.

Insights from the **AI in Education Hands-on Series** (March 2025) prove how AI can enhance staff practice and student learning in SEND. Applications included:

- Empowering support staff to differentiate content
- Assisting special educational needs coordinators by generating draft education, health and care plans
- Summarising the SEND code of practice

By using these tools, teachers can meet diverse learning needs without increasing their workload. This ensures that all pupils can access the curriculum in a meaningful and inclusive way.

Knight explains, "Accessibility is not only for a small group of pupils. When it's done well, it lifts learning for everyone. AI can support this by offering alternative formats, personalised scaffolds, and different routes into content." Yet alongside these advances, schools must also navigate the challenges that come with AI adoption.

AI in schools is not without risk. **Oxford University Press (OUP)** found that while 68 per cent of UK teachers saw the benefits, many are cautious.

Concerns about privacy, ethics, and dependence on technology loom large. As Knight puts it: "The barriers are rarely technical. They are about people, culture, and trust. Leaders are rightly concerned about safeguarding, privacy, and compliance."

Data privacy is paramount because AI systems often process sensitive pupil information. This creates potential vulnerabilities, including attacks by ransomware groups. For example, the breach at nursery chain **Kido**, where hackers stole children's details and safeguarding notes. Risks lie not only with AI firms but also with the robustness of schools' security protocols. Findings from the Information Commissioner's Office reveal that **students caused 57 per cent of data breaches** and cyberattacks.

Cheating and shallow learning

Misuse of AI can create opportunities for cheating. Inaccuracies or hallucinations (when AI gives incorrect but believable answers) can mislead both teachers and pupils. Learners must think critically and check facts. Teachers must verify outputs and guide students to question AI and spot errors.

Learning requires effort. Instant AI answers can reduce persistence and encourage taking shortcuts or academic dishonesty. AI relies on existing data, which can lead to shallow or copy-paste approaches. Over-reliance on AI may reduce opportunities to build traditional skills, such as problem-solving and reasoned judgement.

Creativity can also suffer; without support for independent thinking, pupils risk depending on ready-made ideas and not generating their own.

Bias and dependency

AI can reinforce biases and limit analytical thinking. Its lack of empathy means learners may miss out on the human side of problem-solving. A recent **MIT study** found that students writing essays using ChatGPT had reduced brain activity, weaker critical thinking, and signs of mental disengagement compared to those who didn't. Researchers also observed signs of dependency, addiction, and withdrawal.

Teachers need to use their professional judgement and check that what AI generates is accurate and appropriate; the final responsibility always rests with teachers.



While government policy is helping to lay the groundwork, independent schools are already turning strategy into practice



Digital divide

There is also a risk of deepening educational inequalities. Not all schools have equal access to technology, and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds may miss out on AI's benefits. According to OUP findings, **poor digital access** was the biggest barrier to digital learning, a problem identified by 68 per cent of teachers.

Teacher training also plays a role. The British Computer Society suggests that AI should be integrated into teacher training and the professional leadership qualifications of headteachers. A Sutton Trust report, *Artificial Advantage?*, shows that independent school teachers (45 per cent) were more than twice as likely to have had formal AI training as state school teachers (21 per cent).

Nick Harrison, CEO of the Sutton Trust, said: "It's startling how rapidly an AI digital divide is opening up in schools... If this isn't quickly tackled head-on, schools serving the most disadvantaged pupils risk falling further behind. If action isn't taken to close these widening gaps, access to AI risks becoming the next major barrier to opportunity for disadvantaged young people. The type of school you go to shouldn't determine your chances of benefitting from AI in education."

Responsible implementation, careful evaluation, and collaboration between independent and state schools are essential to mitigating these issues.

The government has signalled the importance of AI in education through a series of initiatives. Up to **£2 million** has been invested in **Oak National Academy** to develop AI tools for teachers, including Aila, an AI-powered lesson assistant, to reduce teacher workload.

A **£3 million 'content store'** pilot aims to train AI to be more reliable, supporting marking and lesson planning, alongside **£1 million in innovation grants** awarded to 16 edtech companies.

To evaluate impact, an **edtech evidence board** will assess AI tools in teaching and learning, while an **Ofsted study** tracks **early adopter schools** integrating AI into classrooms. Findings show schools are already using AI to reduce workload, personalise learning, and support staff and pupils while managing risks.



These initiatives show a clear commitment to understanding the benefits and limitations of AI. By encouraging innovation alongside evaluation frameworks, the government aims to improve teaching and learning outcomes without compromising safety or fairness.

While government policy is helping to lay the groundwork, independent schools are already turning strategy into practice.

Independent schools as pioneers

Independent schools are three times more likely to have a school-wide AI strategy: 27 per cent compared to 9 per cent in state schools. They are more likely to use AI for tasks, including writing reports (**29 per cent compared to 11 per cent in state schools**), creating assessments (**24 per cent compared with 14 per cent**), and marking (**12 per cent compared to 7 per cent**).

This positions independent schools as early testing grounds, piloting approaches that they can then scale and share across state schools. Independent schools lead on setting AI policies, dedicating staff to oversee use, and providing staff training. Their freedom to trial approaches, not always available in the state sector, enables them to test AI in various subject areas and share best practices.

David Horton, chair of the ISC Digital Strategy Group and deputy head of Hanford Prep, says: “A number of schools are developing in-house AI tools for teachers, with the more entrepreneurial then releasing them as products, such as RileyBot from Caterham School. Online webinars, publications, and case studies allow independent schools to share learning with state partners, supporting sector-wide adoption and best practice.”

Innovation and collaboration

The **AI in Education charity**, established in 2023 by Epsom College and the Bourne Education Trust, bring the independent and state sectors together to explore how AI can drive innovation. The charity’s AiEd Certified framework offers a structured approach to AI integration, guiding schools through a phased roadmap from Explorer to Innovator. This framework emphasises ethical, inclusive, and pedagogy-driven AI use. As Alex Russell, CEO of Bourne Education Trust, wrote in *School Management Plus*, AI has the potential to reduce workload and personalise learning. By collaborating with independent schools, his trust has piloted adaptive tools, customising resources.

Schools are also monitoring AI in practice. Horton notes: “Some schools are using amnesties and anonymous surveys to better understand how AI is being used. With some international partner schools, AI is more embedded and seen as less problematic. Closed AI systems can constrain use and protect sensitive data.”



By working together and sharing best practice, all schools can navigate the AI landscape



By collaborating across sectors, independent schools such as Epsom College advance their AI capabilities and support the government’s mission to embrace AI in education. These partnerships exemplify a model of shared innovation, pooled resources, and a focus on improving learner outcomes.

Cross-sector examples

The **AI in Schools Initiative (AISI)** pairs Eton College with large multi-academy trusts, including Star Academies, Harris Federation, Inspiration Trust, and Outwood Grange Academies Trust. Over a year, schools tested AI tools, from ChatGPT to custom edtech, aiming to boost attainment, cut workload, and support pupils with extra needs. The results show how independent schools can share expertise to benefit the whole system. Star Academies noted that their involvement, brokered through AISI, fed into the DfE Generative AI in Education programme, linking independent-school innovation to national policy.

Impact and next steps

By combining independence with cross-sector collaboration, initiatives like AISI show how independent schools can innovate while supporting teachers, pupils, and the wider education system.

Knight says, “The future of work will not be defined by how well people compete with machines, but by how well they bring meaning, imagination, and purpose to what they do. AI will take on many routine tasks, and entire sectors will shift. The old idea of stability through predictable roles will not hold in the same way. Schools need to let go of outdated proxies and narrow measures of success.”

She highlights the importance of strengthening human qualities such as critical thinking,

creativity, empathy, resilience, and ethical reasoning, saying: “Education in the age of AI is not about producing people who can follow instructions more efficiently than a machine. It is about cultivating people to use technology in ways that genuinely improve lives.”

AI has the potential to transform teaching and learning, but its benefits must be balanced with safeguards. It’s easy to think there is a huge divide between the independent and state sectors, but all schools face many of the same pressures and challenges. By working together and sharing best practice, all schools can navigate the AI landscape. And ensure that technology enhances, not replaces, the human heart of education.

Amanda Akien is a freelance writer

UNITING TO ADVANCE AI EDUCATION

KING'S SCHOOL ROCHESTER



This year, **King's School Rochester** achieved the AI Bronze Award from the Good Future Foundation, recognising its structured and responsible approach to embedding artificial intelligence in an educational setting.

As part of this work, the school has built AI awareness into its termly INSET programme. All teaching staff have received an introduction to the topic, including practical sessions on effective prompt writing, limitations and risks, safeguarding, and data privacy.

In the classroom, AI has been piloted in computing and several other subjects to explore how it can enhance student learning. Teachers have begun using AI to support lesson planning, create tailored learning materials, and provide assessment feedback. In addition, the school's director of digital strategy worked with four local primary schools (**Higham, Horsted, St William of Perth and Troy Town**) at executive and teaching level, offering guidance on the safe, ethical and appropriate use of AI. They also helped to draft AI policy documents and identify how the technology could be implemented within CPD programmes.

Staff training at the partner schools included sessions on prompt engineering, optimising text instructions to guide a generative AI model. This was followed by an interactive, multi-school event hosted at King's, which brought schools together to explore additional AI tools and register for a trial of TeachMate, an AI-powered assistant. A deputy head involved in the programme described it as "very valuable", noting that they now use AI to support assembly planning, data analysis, and administrative tasks.

Looking ahead, King's aims to engage parents with information evenings and include governors in training sessions on AI policy and practice.

BREAKING SILOS, BUILDING SAFETY

CLIFTON COLLEGE



Recognising the universal online safety challenges educators are facing, **Clifton College** created a free, in-person conference to enhance understanding of the digital world and how children are engaging with it. Collaborating with partners such as **South West Grid for Learning, Avon and Somerset Police, and filtering and monitoring provider Smoothwall**, the school established a relationship with **NW24**, a teaching and learning partnership representing **24 primaries in Bristol**, culminating in the hosting of a child-focused conference.

As part of its commitment to the wider community, Clifton College ensured the conference supported networking and included diverse voices. The school prioritised pupil perspectives and brought in experts to lead sessions, which included opportunities for Q&A. Pupil-created videos on safety, devices, and social interactions enriched the conference by providing insights directly from children, aligning with the expert presentations on trends and safeguarding actions. The success of the event led to the creation of a further conference that was pupil-specific, which was attended by 300 children from 18 schools.

The safeguarding team at Clifton College, supported by their established networks, led the organisation of the conference. Attendance grew from 70 professionals in the first year to 100 in the second. The conferences have improved knowledge among both adults and pupils, facilitating the sharing of expert advice on issues like engaging with parents and making referrals. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with **96% of attendees finding the event useful** and **100% stating they would return and recommend it to colleagues**.

This collaborative environment has led to ongoing partnerships with local schools, ensuring that best practices are shared and implemented across the region.

Safeguarding in the digital age: Independent schools and the responsibilities of online safety

Luke Ramsden outlines the challenges schools face in keeping children safe online, and explains how cross-sector partnerships are key to advancing best practice and equipping young people with digital responsibility



The online world now shapes childhood as surely as family, school, or community once did.

For today's pupils, life is lived as much through screens as in classrooms or on playing fields. This offers opportunities for creativity, learning, and connection, but it also brings unprecedented risks. The challenges of safeguarding children online are no longer peripheral matters of filtering or monitoring: they are central to their wellbeing, to the values schools seek to instil, and to the kind of society we hope to build.

Schools cannot ignore this reality. As educators we are asked not only to prepare pupils academically but also to help them navigate the moral, social, and psychological terrain of a digital world that is often indifferent to their welfare. For independent schools in particular, with their greater resources and their ability to act with agility, there is both an opportunity and a responsibility to lead.

Misinformation, disinformation, and the challenge of truth

One of the most pressing dangers facing young people is the erosion of trust in knowledge itself. Generative AI has made it simple for convincing falsehoods to be

produced at scale. Pupils now live in a world where images can be fabricated, voices cloned, and news reports faked with professional polish. This challenges the very heart of education, which rests on distinguishing between truth and error.

Teaching students to question sources, verify information, and understand the mechanics of how digital content is produced has become as essential a skill as essay-writing or long division once was. Independent schools can support this by embedding critical digital literacy across the curriculum. It is not enough to run a single assembly on 'fake news': pupils must learn, in English lessons as they analyse texts, or in history as they weigh evidence, that discernment is a lifelong intellectual habit. Partnerships with universities, tech companies, and state schools can help share resources and expertise, ensuring that this essential skill does not become the preserve of a privileged minority.

Toxic influencers and the shaping of identity

If misinformation is about truth, the rise of toxic online influencers is about identity. Figures like Andrew Tate attract millions of

young people, especially boys, with a message that combines materialism, misogyny, and hypermasculinity. Even when schools block access to their content, the ideas seep in through playground conversations and viral memes.

At St Benedict's, we have found that confronting these influences head-on is far more effective than banning discussion. We encourage student-led debates, tutor-time conversations, and workshops that explore healthy masculinity and respectful relationships. These approaches do not silence young people but allow them to test ideas in a safe environment, guided by staff who can challenge harmful assumptions and model alternatives.

Independent schools can play a leading role here. With the freedom to design programmes that address values as well as academics, we can experiment with formats that respond quickly to cultural trends. Importantly, these initiatives should not be kept within our own walls. By sharing resources with local schools or hosting joint events, we can ensure that countering toxic online culture becomes a communal effort rather than a competitive advantage.

Grooming, exploitation, and the shadowed corners of the web

The risk of children being groomed or exploited online has grown with the expansion of social media platforms and messaging apps. Young people can be drawn into abusive relationships or exploited through the sharing of indecent images, often before they fully understand the risks themselves. This is an area where schools' safeguarding systems are being tested daily. At St Benedict's we use monitoring software across our digital infrastructure, flagging concerning words or phrases and alerting safeguarding staff. Yet technology alone is never sufficient. What matters most is creating a culture in which pupils feel able to speak when something is wrong. That requires trust, built slowly through pastoral care, consistency, and visible action when concerns are raised.

Here independent schools, often with more generous staff-pupil ratios, can lead in developing best practice. But this should not be about complacency. We are acutely aware that the very independence that allows us to innovate can also leave us exposed if we act in isolation. Working closely with local safeguarding partnerships, police, and children's services is vital. We have a responsibility not only to protect our own pupils but to contribute actively to the safeguarding ecosystem of our local communities.

Digital addiction and the struggle for balance

Perhaps the most insidious online risk is also the most familiar: simple overuse. Phones and social media are designed to be addictive, and the impact on sleep, concentration, and mental health is increasingly well documented. Independent schools often wrestle with how to manage devices. Some take a hard line, banning phones altogether during the school day; others allow more freedom but attempt to educate pupils into moderation. Each approach has its supporters. Advocates for stricter control argue that pupils need clear boundaries if they are to resist the pull of the algorithms that seek to keep them scrolling late into the night. Proponents of greater freedom point out that young people must learn self-regulation if they

Partnership is not optional

are to thrive beyond school, and that over-restriction risks cutting them off from the digital tools that will shape their adult lives.

A related debate centres on the use of 'brick phones' – simple devices that allow calls and texts but remove access to the internet. Some families see these as a way to reduce the temptations of social media while still giving children the safety of being contactable. Others worry that forcing pupils onto such devices may isolate them from peer groups whose interactions are increasingly online.

At St Benedict's we are trialling a new app called Blackout. It allows pupils to set times when their smartphone locks down distracting features, while still permitting essential functions such as calls home. The idea is not prohibition but supported choice, helping students to experience the benefits of digital restraint without cutting them off altogether. Early feedback has been encouraging, and such initiatives underline the point that online safety is not just about shielding children but about equipping them with strategies they can carry into adult life.

The wider responsibility of independent schools

Independent schools are often accused of being insulated from wider society, but online safety is a field where this stereotype does not hold. Digital risks do not respect school boundaries or fee structures. A harmful trend on TikTok sweeps through the classrooms of state and independent schools alike. A manipulated image or abusive message can spread across boroughs in minutes.

This is why partnership is not optional. Independent schools can use their resources to pilot safeguarding technologies, run staff training, and fund research, but the impact is greatest when these efforts are shared. There are many

such examples of schools like St Benedict's working with local state schools, for instance we have opened our AI safeguarding conferences to local state schools free of charge, ensuring that innovations in data use, monitoring, and pastoral support are accessible to all. Other schools are finding different ways to contribute, from joint workshops with local youth services to collaborative curriculum design. By working together, schools of all types can push back against the narrative that young people are inevitably at the mercy of digital dangers. Instead, we can show them that resilience can be taught, that character can be formed even in online spaces, and that their wellbeing matters too much to be left to chance.

Looking ahead

Online safety is now inseparable from wider education. It shapes how young people learn, form relationships, and understand themselves, and the risks it carries are directly tied to their wellbeing. Independent schools have particular scope to respond with robust pastoral care, carefully designed programmes, and the flexibility to adapt quickly to new challenges. But this role is most effective when it is outward-looking. Working with state schools, local authorities, and families ensures that the approaches we develop do not remain confined to our own pupils but contribute to the safety of young people more broadly.

The reality is that there are no permanent solutions in this area: technologies evolve, risks shift, and harmful trends emerge with little warning. Our responsibility as schools is to stay alert, to keep refining our practice, and to ensure that pupils are not only protected in the present but also equipped with the habits and resilience they will need for the future.

Luke Ramsden is senior deputy head and director of safeguarding at St Benedict's School

The future of teacher training?

SCHOOLS, SCITTS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Rob Bastin reflects on the challenges facing teacher recruitment and retention – particularly in shortage subjects. Drawing from his own experiences at Dulwich College, he explores how cross-sector partnerships are helping to train up the next generation of educators, enriching the lives of children in the process

The national shortage of teachers continues to present challenges for all schools, with low retention rates (around 50 per cent of maths and physics teachers leave the profession within five years), contributing to an ever-widening gap between demand and supply. Due to a mismatch between teacher salaries and high-paying private sector jobs, there is a lack of teachers entering the profession, and high rates of attrition – particularly among early career teachers – have led to a long-standing shortage in recruitment over more than a decade. Under-resourced departments and increased teacher workloads further fuel burnout and retention issues. This creates a cycle where existing teachers are overburdened, non-specialists fill vacancies, and the overall quality of education suffers in all schools, particularly those in more disadvantaged communities.

Since 2018, Dulwich College has developed an initial teacher training (ITT) network across London and the surrounding counties to help address these challenges, hosting hubs for the National Modern Languages & National Maths and Physics SCITTs (school-centred initial teacher training) and working with the University of Roehampton as a lead partner for four other shortage subjects.

School-based training programmes offer an alternative route into teaching for graduates and career changers, with expert subject-specific training and experienced mentors. This work is actively supporting the UK government's mission to increase the number of teachers, particularly in subjects where recruitment targets for initial teacher training have been consistently missed. In 2024-25, only 62 per cent of the overall secondary postgraduate recruitment target was met. The problem is particularly acute in subjects like physics, where only 31 per cent of the target was reached,

modern foreign languages (33 per cent), and business studies (15 per cent).

To combat this, the government has implemented a range of strategies, including financial incentives such as tax-free bursaries of up to £29,000 and scholarships of up to £31,000 for trainees in high-priority subjects like maths, physics, chemistry, and computing. By offering tailored, school-led routes that provide a direct pathway into the classroom, these programmes are a critical part of the national strategy to recruit specialists and reduce the reliance on non-specialist teachers in schools.

These holistic programmes blend academic theory with hands-on classroom experience. In our case, trainees spend one day a week at the college, deepening their subject knowledge and professional skills, while the rest of the week is spent in their placement schools, supported by a dedicated mentor who also benefits from leadership training through the programme.

Over the past seven years, Dulwich College has seen a steady stream of dedicated and inspirational trainees graduate, with over 200 teachers trained. Encouragingly, these new teachers have almost a 100 per cent retention rate, mostly in state and independent schools in South London. An additional benefit to placement schools is the potential for early recruitment. Many of our partner schools have recruited from within the trainee cohort; Dulwich College has hired 14 teachers directly from the training programmes.

In some areas, the landscape is becoming increasingly challenging, and nationwide, placing trainees has become problematic, with some providers withdrawing trainee placements due to a lack of school partners, especially in modern foreign languages. We are grateful to our network of partner schools who support our trainees and are lobbying for a more cohesive

approach to placement schools to give those who wish to train to teach the opportunity to do so.

Recruitment has been exceptionally strong this year, and for 2025-26, Dulwich College looks forward to welcoming its largest ever cohort of 44 trainees, comprising:

Modern foreign languages	15 trainees across a wide range of languages
Maths	10 trainees
Physics	7 trainees
Biology	4 trainees
Business and economics	4 trainees
Chemistry	2 trainees
Computing	2 trainees

I direct the SCITT programmes at Dulwich College because we need teachers to inspire the next generation coming through the school system; it was actually a core part of why I joined Dulwich College as a member of staff. After time in physics research and finance, I worked as a head of physics in a number of HMC schools. The aspect of this role I always enjoyed the most was supporting colleagues at all stages of their careers and seeing the impact these excellent teachers had on their students. When the opportunity at Dulwich College became available to support physics and maths

training, I saw it as the next step in supporting ITT development and making a wider impact across schools.

One of the benefits we have seen across our schools is the ability to retain more experienced teachers who want to take on additional responsibility without becoming a head of department. The mentoring role is key to the ITT trainees' experience, and ultimately the development of the next generation of teachers.

When we conduct observations of our trainees in their placement schools, pupils and colleagues often go out of their way to say how much they appreciate the impact their teacher is making. The feedback is a powerful testament to the value of the school-based training model, which places trainees directly into the classroom from day one. As highlighted above, in many subjects, including maths, modern languages, and the sciences, all schools have problems with the recruitment and retention of excellent teachers. This makes the contribution of our trainees even more critical.

Our trainees are making a vital difference across London and the South East, acting as a crucial pipeline of new talent. Their presence provides a much-needed boost to school departments that are often stretched thin due to teacher shortages, becoming a 'net positive' within a very short time. By bringing enthusiasm, up-to-date subject knowledge, and





I joined the National Maths and Physics SCITT (Engineers Teach Physics course) at the Dulwich hub in 2022, coming from a background in engineering and a career in environmental policy in the charitable and public sectors. ”

Being able to confirm the location of my placements in advance helped me fit the programme around family life, and NMAPS organised a subject knowledge course to reconnect me with physics.

NMAPS trainees are able to join a placement school from the very start of the new academic year. I felt like a part of the staff team at St Saviour's and St Olave's from the start, attending INSET days and watching experienced colleagues meeting classes and setting expectations. Walking into a classroom to teach for the first time was far out of my comfort zone, but my excellent mentor was able to break down the art of teaching into achievable targets, so that I could see week-on-week progress.

My classroom practice was balanced by weekly training at Dulwich, where we had access to subject and pedagogy experts and to the well-equipped science labs, with Rob expertly guiding us on how to get the best from the practical and demo equipment.

Having completed my ECT locally at Kingsdale Foundation School, I have now joined the NMAPS mentor team in the hope that I can help new trainees have a similar positive experience, as well as the opportunity to continually appraise and improve my own practice.

Ruth Coward, a former trainee and current science teacher at Kingsdale Foundation School, reflects on her experience with the NMAP SCITT

a fresh perspective, they are not only filling vacancies but are also helping to raise the standard of teaching and learning for thousands of students, ensuring they receive the specialist subject support they deserve.

The persistent shortage of specialist teachers, particularly in high-demand subjects, is more than a logistical problem; it is a profound challenge to the very foundation of education in the UK and globally. The rise of school-based training programmes, such as the network centred on Dulwich College, represents a philosophical shift in how we cultivate educators. Rather than viewing teaching as a purely academic pursuit, these programmes embrace it as a craft, honed through direct experience and collaborative mentorship. This approach is not merely about filling vacancies; it is about nurturing a new generation of professionals who are deeply connected to the daily reality of the classroom. The retention rates and tangible impact of these trainees underscore a vital truth: the future of teaching lies in forging a more sustainable path for the profession to enhance the lives of students across the country.

Rob Bastin is director of SCITT and hub lead (NMAP Dulwich Hub)

If you would like further information on our SCITT programmes, please email traintoteach@dulwich.org.uk

HEADS TOGETHER

BEDALES PREP SCHOOL

Bedales Prep School has become a dynamic hub for collaboration among local state primary schools, including Steep, East Meon, West Meon, Froxfield, Langrish, Buriton, and Sheet. At the heart of this partnership is a shared commitment to professional development and educational enrichment, with Bedales serving as the central meeting point for staff and leadership across the network.

Bedales hosts regular termly meetings for headteachers of the Small Schools network, providing a space to exchange ideas, share resources, and explore best practices in curriculum design, pastoral care, and school leadership.

Staff from all partner schools benefit from joint training sessions and collaborative events, many of which are facilitated at Bedales Prep.

Bedales also welcomes pupils from the local primaries for enrichment days in areas of the curriculum, such as music, art, outdoor work and sport. These gatherings not only enhance



student learning but also deepen the professional ties between teaching teams.

In addition, Bedales Prep supports the wider educational community by hosting the East Hampshire District Heads meetings three times a year, accommodating over 25 school leaders from across the region – further reinforcing its role as a trusted centre for educational dialogue and development.

This collaborative environment has led to ongoing partnerships with local schools, ensuring that best practices are shared and implemented across the region.



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TRAINING TEACHERS, CODING FUTURES

YARM
SCHOOL



The Microbits Teaching Programme, developed by Yarm School, delivers high-quality STEM education in primary schools where specialist computing teachers are often in short supply. In collaboration with local primaries and businesses, the programme provides engaging, high-impact coding and physical computing workshops to children across the Tees Valley, helping them develop essential digital skills from an early age.

Led by computing expert Les Foggett, the initiative centres around the BBC micro:bit, which is a small, programmable device that enables pupils to explore computing in a creative, hands-on way. Each partner school receives a tailored three-hour workshop, designed to align with their curriculum or extend beyond it, according to their specific needs. While children engage in activities that spark curiosity and build confidence, teachers benefit from working alongside an expert, developing skills and ideas they can apply well beyond the workshop.

In 2023-24, the programme reached 165 pupils across five schools, delivering more than 770 hours of computing education. Demand continues to grow, with the number of schools participating rising to eight in 2024-25, engaging over 400 pupils and providing more than 1,000 hours of hands-on digital learning.

Looking ahead to the 2025-26 academic year, Yarm School is expanding the programme further. A new partnership with **Handelsbanken Teesside** has helped fund the cost of specialist teaching provision, and a generous donation from **TÜV Rheinland** has enabled the purchase of new equipment.



Schools in motion

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

in tackling inactivity

For many young people, sport and physical activity are fading from daily life. Ruby Deevoy explores how schools and organisations are coming together to help turn the tide

The importance of physical activity among young people has fallen by the wayside somewhat over the past couple of decades. Perhaps it's because getting outside, climbing trees, having races and making up dance routines has been replaced by gaming, gadgets and indoor activities, meaning it's harder to whip up enthusiasm. But it's our job, as educators, parents and leaders, to know the truth about physical education. Yes, exercise is essential for physical health. But the benefits actually go far beyond that, and the detriment from not making movement a priority equally so.

Did you know that cardiovascular exercise not only builds stronger muscle and endurance, but it also improves attention and memory? Aerobic fitness improves heart and lung health, and it also reduces risk of depression. The positive effects of physical activity are holistic, and it's up to us to prevent inactivity from becoming the norm, to pave the way for happier, healthier lives, habits and hobbies for kids even long after they've left school.

Chris Dossett, head of the Professional Association of Directors of Sport in Independent Schools (PADSIS), concurs, saying that the benefits of physical exercise (and risks of not doing it) are far-reaching.

"The negative impact can be wide-ranging: reduced fitness, increased anxiety, lower concentration in lessons and diminished social skills," he says. "However, most pupils in independent schools are fortunate to benefit from excellent physical activity programmes. Independent schools often lead the way in setting high standards, with strong timetabled physical education, a wide range of co-curricular sports and purposeful opportunities for active play built into daily life. As a result, pupils in our schools not only avoid the negative effects of inactivity but instead thrive – gaining health, resilience, confidence and character through their engagement in sport and physical education."

There are many factors that contribute to inactivity in children, but one that often gets overlooked is the influence of adults around them. The inactivity crisis isn't only prevalent in children; it's being seen in all ages. Recent figures revealed that in England more than 11 million adults do less than 30 minutes of physical activity in a week (a far cry from the recommended minimum of 30 minutes a day). Children watching their parents and guardians live this way are following suit: the same study showed over 50 per cent of children and young people do less than 60 minutes a day (the chief medical officer's guidance) and 30 per cent do less than 30 minutes per day.

Dossett says there's strong evidence that parental influence plays a crucial role. "Independent schools recognise this connection and increasingly involve parents in the culture of sport – through family activity days, fun runs, taster days and community fitness events. Where it's possible for families to enjoy exercise together, the benefits are enormous. It not only supports health and fitness but also strengthens family bonds and creates shared memories.

This doesn't have to mean structured sport; it could be as simple as a family walk, a cycle ride, a kickabout in the park or even joining in a child's playground game."

He stresses that introducing activities can start small – parents don't need to be elite athletes! "The key is consistency, enthusiasm, and showing children that movement is fun and valued. When parents and schools work together to model these positive behaviours, we build a culture where young people see physical activity not as a chore, but as a natural and joyful part of life."

Of course, there are plenty of reasons why it might not be possible for a family to exercise together, and this perhaps highlights the value of schools and sports-focused organisations joining forces to tackle this inactivity crisis in children. After-school clubs that give young people access to sports and other fun, sociable physical activities can (and do) change lives, while sharing sports facilities and setting up collaborative PE lessons can broaden opportunities and spark inspiration among both the facilitators and participants.

"Independent schools are at the forefront of collaboration, and they're able to use their resources to widen access and raise participation," explains Dossett. "Many already share sports facilities with local communities, run festivals and tournaments for partner schools and host after-school clubs that extend opportunity beyond their own pupils. These initiatives not only boost activity levels but also promote inclusion, confidence and enjoyment of sport. By leading in this way, independent schools create a ripple effect that benefits young people far beyond their own gates."

We all know that undertaking physical activity can be tough (most of us will know the gruelling discomfort of trying to push through to the end of a run or gym session), but this type of challenge helps build resilience – a life skill all children need to learn. Completing something hard boosts happiness too.

According to **Sport England**, happiness scores are down in children in Years 3-8. The largest drops in individual development (those who 'keep trying' when they find something hard) are seen among those in Years 5-6 and 7-8. New research by **AdventureMind** has found that physical activity which sparks the adventurous spirit in children – through activities such as climbing, cycling, wild swimming, high ropes courses and water sports – can be even more profound, helping them to feel physiologically energised and able to cope. The report explains that this will undoubtedly serve them well in life when faced with future challenges and reduce the likelihood that they will feel anxious and overwhelmed, supporting them to live with good mental health.

A decline in physical play and a rise in screen time is leading to loneliness, as well as sedentary lifestyles. "Without active play, children miss out on the sense of belonging and

The key is consistency, enthusiasm, and showing children that movement is fun



“SCHOOLS ARE USING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING”

achievement that sport brings,” says Dossett. There is hope though – although the rise in device use has inevitably reduced the amount of spontaneous outdoor play, children in independent schools do still play and informal activity is actively encouraged: “Independent schools have been proactive in recognising this shift and leading the response. By embedding a culture that prioritises movement, through timetabled physical education, daily games, co-curricular activities and free play, our schools ensure that pupils continue to develop healthy, active habits. Schools are creative in the way they use their facilities to allow children to play, explore and move freely. From open access to fields and courts, to structured playground activities, independent schools ensure that pupils have multiple opportunities to be active, social, and imaginative throughout the school day.”

Sharing these ideas, activities and facilities in the wider community helps to re-establish these important connections and habits. This is needed more than ever since the mandatory Covid lockdowns, which instilled a sense of anxiety and isolation in many young children.

“Independent schools responded to the problems presented during lockdown with energy and innovation: offering online physical education lessons, family activity challenges, and ‘return to play’ programmes that helped restore joy in movement,” says Dossett. “Since then, there has been a determined effort across the sector to re-establish positive habits, with schools using physical activity not just to rebuild fitness but to strengthen community and wellbeing.”

So, where do we go from here? Recognising that we have a problem is step one. Step two is understanding that it’s down to us to encourage young people in our schools and the community to not only take part in more activity, but discover that it can be joyful too. Alongside the inactivity crisis, we are facing a mental health crisis and an obesity crisis in children, which present hurdles to achieving ideal physical activity goals. But they can be overcome. The more variety in physical activity offered to children the better, as this will help them

see that while they might not enjoy one sport, something else equally nourishing and healthy is available to them. Gentler things, like gardening programmes, should not be discounted. Jobs such as raking, weeding, digging and planting provide great, moderate exercise, while being out in nature and sunlight provides further mental wellbeing benefits. Fortunately, gardening school programmes are increasing in popularity, and studies have shown this type of course can also help create meaningful change in children’s eating habits.

Swimming is another sport worth pushing to the forefront, not only for fitness but also as a safety measure. The aforementioned Sport England report found that children who are now in Year 7 are less likely to be able to swim 25 metres unaided than older children previously could at this age. This is partly due to underfunding, higher costs and staff shortages, but efforts to increase participation are growing. Initiatives like Swim:ED’s pop-up pools and funding from **Swim England**, **Sport England**, and other organisations are supporting improved access, teacher training, and resource development for inclusive programmes, so far resulting in a 160 per cent leap in 25-metre proficiency. Other initiatives are also helping to make swimming a particularly inclusive sport. One such initiative, led by the Youth Sport Trust in partnership with Swim England, focuses on creating more opportunities for children with special educational needs and disabilities to participate in swimming and water safety activities. Other organisations like the **Royal Life Saving Society UK** and the **Black Swimming Association** are also addressing barriers to participation for black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities.

Moving forward, why not consider how you can bring a little more physical activity into your own life, and if you have children, how you can make that a family affair? By working together to increase access to movement both in and out of school, we can raise our youngest generations to be happy, healthy, brave and resilient adults, for a brighter future for all.

Ruby Deevey is a freelance writer

TEAMING UP

ABINGDON SCHOOL

Abingdon School’s Primary Multisport Club, planned and run by Abingdon students at the school’s athletics ground, promotes physical activity and social development in 10- and 11-year-old children whilst also cultivating leadership and coaching skills in those running the course.

The weekly coaching sessions are open to children from four local primary schools, providing them with a diverse range of sports activities, including cricket, tag rugby, and hockey. This programme was developed in response to a need for free clubs in the area, particularly for wider access to sport. This year, over 20 primary school children have benefitted from the programme along with 12 Abingdon student coaches.

The student coaches undergo comprehensive training in key coaching skills, with a strong emphasis on safeguarding to ensure a safe and supportive environment. The weekly sessions they go on to run give children access to regular physical activity, foster social interaction and new friendships, promote teamwork through collaborative activities, and encourage continued participation. The programme has proven a success, with **100% of attendees saying they would recommend the club to a friend.**

The Primary Multisport Club isn’t the only sports partnership programme Abingdon has to offer; the school also provides coaching, supports local swimming lessons, and collaborates with the Abingdon Primary Partnership and charities to expand opportunities for children to be more active.





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STICKING TOGETHER

IBSTOCK PLACE SCHOOL

Ibstock Place School has recently expanded its successful Spencer Lynx project, now named Ibstock Community Hockey. This initiative tackles inactivity among children and young people by offering free weekly hockey sessions for pupils from local state schools, including Alton School, Heathmere Primary and Roehampton Church School.

Sessions run after school every Monday, with free transport, healthy snacks, and all equipment provided. No previous experience is required, and the club aims to remove barriers to participation by covering every cost.



Originally founded in 2023 in partnership with Spencer Hockey Club, the project quickly gained national recognition, winning the England Hockey National Diversity and Inclusivity Award and the Connecting Wandsworth Award for its impact in increasing physical activity and building community links. Ibstock Place School is now taking full responsibility for the programme, ensuring its long-term future.

The programme currently engages 30 mixed-age pupils from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the rich diversity of the local Roehampton and Wandsworth community. It is supported by Ibstock's head of hockey, PE staff, and sixth form volunteers, and is co-funded through the Wandsworth Grant Fund, the Alton Community Fund, and the Roehampton Parish Trust.



Recent parent surveys show that 93.8% of children reported improved confidence and 81% enjoyed being part of a team. Over 75% highlighted increased physical activity and improved wellbeing, and parents praised the accessible transport, free equipment, and supportive coaching environment.

From cutbacks to comebacks: Championing the arts through partnerships

Across the country, schools are coming together to breathe new life into music and arts education. [Ruby Deevoy](#) finds out more

For much of human history, art has been a primary method of recording historical events. From the Egyptian tomb paintings, the Bayeux Tapestry and Banksy's iconic street art, to Grandmaster Flash documenting urban poverty through hip hop in the 1980s and Brecht's Political Theatre – the importance of the arts throughout human evolution and culture cannot be overstated.

But somewhere along the way, many of us have forgotten how essential these mediums of expression are, to the point that the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) – a performance measure for English schools – excludes the arts entirely. Critics of the EBacc have campaigned against this for some time, arguing that omitting drama, music and art from what are considered to be the core subjects devalues imagination and creative education. One result of this is a **42 per cent decline** in expressive arts GCSE entries over the past 15 years. This is something which could not only repress some of our country's most brilliant young minds (particularly those who might not excel at other more academic subjects), but rob future generations of great masterpieces, the likes of which we and many before us have been endlessly inspired and taught by.

Fortunately, movements are being made by the UK government to improve access to the arts for all young people. Efforts include the development of a National Centre for Arts and Music Education. This has been designed to support the delivery of high-quality arts education through a new online training offer for teachers; and promote opportunities for young people to pursue their creative interests in school with initiatives like the government's network of Music Hubs and partnerships between schools and cultural providers.

Steven Berryman, senior deputy head at Sir William Perkins's School and a music and arts educator, believes the benefits of providing a dynamic music and arts programme for children are vast.

"We see quieter students flourish as they discover their talents through artistic endeavour, and those shy to collaborate find others to connect with and perform with. We should also recognise there are compelling works of art worth sharing with young people, but we should not deny that arts are a human practice that are worth engaging with practically and not theoretically alone," he says. "There's increasing evidence of



“

When we work together, we can achieve bigger and bolder projects

Opening children's eyes to the potential of music-making can change lives

”

the health and wellbeing benefits of engaging in arts and music, and many schools see the value of communal singing, for example, as a way of bringing the community together.”

There are, admittedly, some hurdles to offering the broad scope of arts education that would be ideal, particularly for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or from marginalised communities. Many schools, especially in deprived areas, have felt the need to reduce or even cut art subjects due to budget constraints, staff shortages, limited resources and less opportunity to offer extra-curricular activities. The fact that the arts are not core subjects according to the EBacc, and the high cost of equipment such as instruments and art materials, mean these are often the first to go when the pressure is on. In addition, children from disadvantaged groups often do not see themselves represented in curriculum content, teaching staff, or art institutions which can lead to lower engagement and feelings of exclusion. This is also reflected in **creative industries**, with 43 per cent of classical musicians having attended an independent school, and Bafta-nominated actors being five times more likely to have attended an independent school than the UK population.

However, independent schools are in a position to help expand opportunities for all, widening their own pupils' access while also supporting state schools and other local organisations.

Berryman has found that when schools collaborate, they are able to pool not only physical resources such as instruments and spaces, but expertise too.

"Arts teachers have a range of different skills and experience. When we work together, we can achieve bigger and bolder projects," he explains. "Schools can work together on shared concerts, exhibitions, and other performances as well as a range of creative ventures such as hosting workshops for a group of schools, or rehearsing together. The possibilities are vast and should always be driven by what a group of schools and other organisations can do that fits well with their individual and collective needs, alongside work that is genuinely impactful for students."

Throughout his years teaching the arts and holding a deputy head position, Berryman has noticed that all schools have something to offer, and it's important to recognise that.

“There are so many wonderful examples of schools working together to achieve something distinctive and meaningful for all schools involved. In the City of London, the family of schools (independent and state) worked with artists from a conservatoire to devise music involving musicians from all schools collaborating on one new composition. Creating something new that celebrates what makes each school special in a partnership works well, ensuring all schools feel they can bring their best and not feel in anyway competitive.” When these collaborations succeed, students and staff feel a genuine sense of achievement and joy, Berryman says. “They can sometimes spark new friendships and create longer-term relationships between schools that can branch off into other areas, leading to more sharing of resources and expertise from other parts of school life.”

Issues surrounding arts funding and the prioritisation of teacher training and curriculum time all largely stem from the idea that creative endeavours are of less value than EBacc subjects. But a growing body of research into how music, art and drama are subjects not only vital in and of themselves, but supportive of all learning and development in general, might help change that perspective. Students in schools with more arts education have been found to have higher empathy, better engagement with school, fewer disciplinary issues and improved writing test scores (Arts Access Initiative, Houston). Many teachers and psychology experts also believe that the arts offer a safe space for self-expression, belonging and connection ([Moar et al, British Educational Research Journal](#)).

Research exploring the use of art therapy for children supports this, reporting that children given access to this sort of programme generally feel emotionally safer and less stressed ([Moula et al. The Arts in Psychotherapy](#)).

Some studies have shown even greater relative benefit for disadvantaged children, underscoring the cruciality and significance of collaboration between independent and state schools.

Sue Hannam, headteacher at Lichfield Cathedral School (LCS), says that teaching the arts brings a bit of magic into children’s lives. But she emphasises that creative education isn’t just about performance or visual art – it’s about developing the ability to think deeply, solve problems from multiple angles, and appreciate the richness of the world around us. “The arts help our pupils become culturally enriched, thoughtful individuals, who want to make a positive impact in their world,” she explains. “As a cathedral school, we are well aware of the transformational power of music. At LCS, we’re incredibly fortunate to nurture creativity in all its forms, whether it’s pupils rehearsing Shakespeare, sculpting in clay, or performing in the school orchestra. The arts give our young people the space to flourish, express themselves, and grow in confidence.”

Hannam says that at Lichfield Cathedral School, the arts are not an add-on; they are an educational backbone that supports students in learning to communicate with confidence, think critically, perform under pressure, and collaborate effectively. “As an independent school, we have the ability to support the creative process through our curriculum design, and to provide opportunities for pupils to try new things,” she explains. “Ensuring that art, design and technology, dance, drama, singing, music and music technology are built in from Nursery to Year 9, and also available at GCSE and A level, means that our students understand their importance to their own personal development, as well as being practical routes forward through higher education and beyond.”

Through MusicShare, LCS’s singing programme for schools, Hannam and her colleagues have brought music into the lives of more than 30,000 children and young people across the West Midlands in primary, secondary and special schools, as well as pupil referral units. “We teach new repertoire, we train teachers on how to teach singing, and we provide free resources – licence-free songs, sheet music, backing tracks, lyric sheets, online teacher training – to enable the music-making to continue long after our visits,” she explains. “We bring schools together for massed choir concerts for parents. We run five weekly community choirs for people of all ages, including a choir for those seeking sanctuary in our city. These activities are fundamental to who we are and why we teach. Headteachers have reported improved concentration, listening skills and team spirit in pupils, as well as the profound impact of such a magnificent collective achievement in the glorious surroundings of the cathedral. Opening children’s eyes to the potential of music-making can change lives.”

To further equip teachers and schools to be able to provide the arts education our children so clearly need, ring-fenced funding such as grants and bursaries specifically for arts CPD accreditation would ideally be created. A report by the [Child of the North/Centre for Young Lives](#) has called for a £150 million arts fund to train primary school teachers, supported by the University of Sheffield. Accessible training options, such as online and flexible CPD modules, might also open up opportunities for more teachers to train in the arts. But of equal importance is partnership – between schools and local artists, galleries, museums and cultural institutions. And peer support groups for teachers, like Art Teacher Connect – a programme designed to provide art and art history teachers a wider support network.

Despite the challenges schools face, Berryman believes there is hope. “I think we see the value of these subjects more than ever. If schools can recognise the holistic worth of the arts in the distinctive contribution it makes to school improvement generally, there is strong justification to invest well in arts teaching.”

Ruby Deevoy is a freelance writer

PARTNERS IN PERFORMANCE

CLAREMONT SCHOOL

Claremont School is spreading the joy of theatre to local primary and prep schools through a partnership programme called Shakespeare on Your Lawn. The school has brought its workshops and performances of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to these schools directly, setting up in their spaces and bringing energy and storytelling to their pupils and teachers.

Over the course of a week, a cast of Year 9 and 10 students from Claremont School toured the schools, working with younger pupils on a series of collaborative workshops. These involved Shakespearean language exploration exercises, improvisations, choreography and script work, which were key to making the story of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* accessible for all.

The pupils, along with the cast, had the opportunity to perform extracts from the play, learn dance routines, and conjure their very own fairy kingdom spells. Then, they watched their new friends from Claremont School perform an abridged version of the play.

The shared time between the audience and cast brought benefits to all involved. The younger pupils enjoyed getting involved in the workshops and developing their drama skills, while the Claremont students learned how to adapt to a variety of performance spaces. Following the success of this year’s event, and the overwhelmingly positive feedback from partner schools, the Shakespeare on Your Lawn tour has become a permanent fixture on Claremont School’s partnership calendar.



NEW SKILLS, FRESH BEATS



EMANUEL SCHOOL

An innovative DJing partnership developed by Emanuel School is providing high-quality, structured musical opportunities to pupils in communities facing high levels of deprivation and educational disadvantage. Critical factors for success include sustained weekly engagement, access to professional-standard equipment, industry partnerships, and a final public performance opportunity.

This partnership was born in September 2024 following initial meetings with headteachers and music leads at Westbridge, Falconbrook and Griffin primary schools in Wandsworth.

The opportunity was identified through a recognition of the transformative impact of creative experiences on pupil engagement, confidence, and aspiration – particularly in schools where access to co-curricular activities is limited.

The DJ course runs weekly across a 10-week programme, using Emanuel's school facilities for delivery. The project – which

culminates in a live showcase at XOYO nightclub in Shoreditch – involves 8-10 pupils from each school. Together, they learn core DJ skills such as mixing, equalizing, looping, and performance preparation. Pioneer DJ, one of Emanuel's industry partners, has committed to providing funding support, equipment and expertise to ensure the longevity of the project.

ABRSM, the exam board of the Royal Schools of Music, has introduced a new DJ grading award and these children are among the first in the country to take their Grade 1. The pupils achieved a 100 per cent success rate, with all receiving a distinction.

Assessment has been ongoing throughout, gathering feedback from pupils and staff, and through formal submission of pupils' recorded mixes for the ABRSM exam. Alongside learning technical DJ skills, pupils build confidence on stage and gain a deeper understanding of music structure and genres.



The silent struggle: Addressing the children's **mental** **health** crisis



Ruby Deevoy explores the mental health challenges facing young people today, and the ways in which communities are coming together to provide invaluable support

With over a quarter of a million children still waiting on mental health support and a steady rise in mental health issues in young people over recent years, it's more important than ever that schools and communities work together to keep vulnerable young people safe.

Even as adults, most of us can feel that the weight of world is somewhat heavier than it used to be. Daily talk of war, conflict and the climate crisis in the news often filters through to even the youngest members of a family unit. There's also the impact of social media on developing minds and the effects of social isolation during lockdown. Many of the problems young people face today are unprecedented. For example, it was only in the last year that the term 'addiction', which has typically defined behaviours related to substances, was revised by the World Health Organisation to include the

widespread, problematic use of gaming and popular platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok. **A first of its kind study**, conducted on 32 teenagers by the UCLA, found that just 12 minutes of use of an Instagram-like app significantly impacted the brain's reward circuitry – an area of the brain that is particularly sensitive during adolescence. This has been linked to potential 'de-sensitization' and raised tolerance levels to chemicals such as dopamine, which means that, just like an addiction, the more we use things like social media, the more we'll need to feel happy. Teenagers in the UK and US have been found to spend an average of five hours a day on social media.

Understanding the impact of social media and gaming on young people is absolutely key when making plans to improve mental health in children – but it's only one piece of the puzzle. A 2021 **UNICEF UK** report found 95 per cent of 10- to 17-year-olds were concerned about climate change, while a 2025 **Greenpeace UK** survey indicated 78 per cent of primary-aged children are worried. On top of this, academic pressure, which pupils might have previously taken in their stride, is now too much for a high percentage of children. Multiple studies show that many young people believe that school in general, particularly homework and exams, has a negative impact on their mental health, citing fear of failure, overwhelm and stress.

Chances are that most people reading this will already have some idea of the struggles our children are facing with their mental wellbeing. Perhaps also the problems with underfunding, long wait lists and staff shortages when it comes to delivering a framework of support that can actually meet the rising prevalence of mental health issues (and, on the positive side, a greater willingness to seek help). But it's not all doom and gloom. While it's true that we are in the midst of a global mental health crisis, among children and adults alike, the efforts of groups, schools and individuals to support the UK government's pledge to boost mental health provision are making an enormous difference. In some cases, it's saving lives.

Tim Street, project manager for UOK?, a new programme for young people launched by the Mental Health Foundation, is very familiar with the mental health needs of children and young people. "Across the UK demand for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has increased exponentially over recent years. A community-based approach, where health and social care services, education settings, family and caregivers work collaboratively and openly to support the needs of

young people, is vital," he says. "Academic pressure remains the same as past years and can cause children and young people to experience stress and anxiety. But the current environment for students brings particular additional complexities to bear.

A community-based approach, working collaboratively to support the needs of young people, is vital

"Mental Health Foundation studies have noted the impact of Covid and found that young people were one of a number of groups in society whose mental health was disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and there's a growing body of research indicating that smartphone usage – particularly to access social media feeds and short video content – is making it more difficult for young people to concentrate for any significant length of time, which has a negative impact on the ability to study."

One very current example of such research is a national study published by **Fluid Focus**, which found that the average student will use a smartphone for 5.5 hours per day (eventually resulting in 25 years of their life spent scrolling), and 70 per cent of the 2,842 students surveyed said they believe their current usage is unhealthy and harms their



academic performance. This increase in phone use and internet activity has also inevitably led to a rise in cyberbullying, with research showing that **27 per cent of children between the ages of 8-15** who use some form of social media have experienced this specific form of abuse. One study found that 9 in 10 people experienced bullying while playing video games online, and one in five children in 30 countries have skipped school due to cyberbullying, which appears to be **significantly higher among girls than boys**.

Referrals for mental health support for young people have shot up in recent years. Because of this, many are left waiting for support for three years or more, with some reaching the 3-year mark and then being told that no help is available. This puts schools and teachers in a quandary: how can we provide mental health support to children if CAMHS is over-run?

Together to Thrive is one example of a project that has been set up in response to the overflow of children who are on the neurodevelopmental assessment waiting list and are in need of interim support. One of the project locations in Dundee has seen a 400 per cent increase in referrals over the past four years.

Jacqueline Patton, project manager for Together to Thrive, says, "Our project provides timely, needs-led support delivered in familiar, community-based settings where children feel safe and understood. The innovative initiative helps stave off more complex challenges for children, increased family stress, and strained relationships. While not replacing the critical role services play, the collective understanding and drive to play a role in raising awareness of mental health issues helps break down barriers and stigma that has existed around talking about mental health."

There are other routes available too, through charities like Barnardos, who deliver 12 Mental Health Support Teams across England and offer a wide range of resources, training programmes and support for adults working in the education community. They also offer additional support for education staff, 78 per cent of whom say they are stressed (Education Support, Teacher Wellbeing Index 2024). However, external support isn't all that's needed. Some simple lifestyle changes that can easily be upheld by schools, particularly when working collaboratively with neighbouring schools and organisations, and parents, can make an enormous difference.

"Being in good physical health; eating a balanced diet and getting regular exercise; having time and freedom to play, indoors and outdoors; being part of a supportive family; going

When we all communicate and work together, young people feel safe and understood

to a school that looks after the wellbeing of all its pupils and taking part in local activities are all things that can help keep children and young people mentally well," says Tim Street.

The father/son football club created at Sancton Wood School is one great example of an independent school stepping up to the task of improving mental wellbeing in children by increasing activity in children and improving bonds in families, too. Jennifer Moore, Sancton Wood PE teacher and PSHE coordinator, says that the Supporters Club gives fathers and sons a chance to connect through a shared experience, which helps to open conversations while getting bodies moving. "It's been amazing to see boys growing in confidence, dads understanding their children better, and stronger relationships forming at home. It's also helped students feel more supported emotionally, both by their families and the school."

Research indicates that children who are close to their fathers are significantly less likely to experience depression, teen pregnancy, or involvement with the justice system, suggesting there's room for schools to create events and opportunities for parents to spend more quality time with their children.

The knowledge that good mental health depends on teamwork between parents and schools is partly what led Sancton Wood to set up the simple – but incredibly effective – initiative. "When we all communicate and work together, young people feel safe and understood. At Sancton Wood, we make wellbeing part of everyday school life, from our pastoral care to programmes like this. We want to build a caring community where pupils can thrive," Moore explains.

"Children's emotional wellbeing is just as important as their physical health. Good mental health helps them develop the resilience to cope with whatever life throws at them and grow into well-rounded, healthy adults," says Street. "Adults can and should play an important role in modelling emotionally healthy behaviour, showing young people in their lives how to successfully navigate the ups and downs of life that can have an influence on the level of our mental health."

Many of the challenges young people face with their mental health are unfamiliar; the world isn't the same as it was for most adults growing up. But it's up to the adults – teachers and caregivers – to ensure that children feel supported. This is the foundation for all good mental health, and by working together we can learn to understand what our kids are going through, and how we can help.

Ruby Deevoy is a freelance writer

PUPIL VOICE IN ACTION

QUINTON HOUSE SCHOOL



Every year, a team of students at **Quinton House School** organises and hosts an inter-school conference called **For Students By Students (FSBS)**. The project was initially founded after a young boy in the local community lost his life following a knife attack. The then head boy posed the idea that pupils across Northampton, from both state and independent schools, come together to tackle important issues like knife crime through education. Since then, FSBS has explored themes such as harmful sexual behaviours, county lines, toxic masculinity, and most recently, mental health.

The aim of this year's conference was to destigmatise the conversation around mental health and equip students with coping mechanisms and techniques to share with their peers. The day entailed several talks from mental health professionals, the Samaritans, and other local charities such as The Lowdown, followed by interactive workshops with Sport in Mind, Action for Happiness and the Frank Bruno Foundation. Together, pupils explored 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' functions of the brain, overcoming periods of mental health crisis, and how sport and movement can foster a positive mental outlook. Throughout the conference, teachers had the opportunity to network and gather new teaching material for PSHE lessons.

The event was a resounding success, with 200 attendees from 14 schools taking part. Pupils said they would be using the techniques they had been given to relieve anxiety in their day-to-day lives, particularly in the lead-up to exam season.

Preparations for next year's conference are already underway, with the team at Quinton House School hoping to reach a record-breaking 250 student delegates.



From working solo to forming a generous community: The online school partnerships network

Graeme Lawrie explains how a WhatsApp group is transforming collaboration – bringing partnership leads together to exchange resources, insights, and support for the benefit of their communities



Partnerships work is joyful, but it can be lonely if you're the only person driving it in your organisation.

When I first started out in school partnerships (over 15 years ago now), I was largely on my own. Much of the work happened after hours, during holidays and weekends, and I was building it as I went. Partnerships were not a 'thing' and there weren't many colleagues running them as a specific school role, it was seen as more of an ad hoc and extra commitment. When I spotted brilliant ideas online from others – concerts, science days, community projects – I found myself wondering: *What did their risk assessment look like? Who did they book? How much did it cost? Which venue worked, and why?* I remember thinking how helpful it would be to have a place where people doing this work could ask practical questions, share real documents, and jump on a call to talk it through. As partnerships

have grown across the UK and beyond, that idea has now become a reality.

Today, the online partnerships community is a trusted, moderated WhatsApp network open to colleagues in independent and state schools, MATs, charities, universities and industry. It's deliberately simple: you ask a question, and peers who've done it before share what works – often within minutes. Alongside the chat, we share documents such as model memorandums of understanding, safeguarding and risk templates, budget planners, transport options, evaluation tools and case studies. We of course also share gifs, birthday messages, congratulations and other general chat among community members. The golden rules are clear: no sales, always be generous and kind, credit others' work, and feed back improvements so the whole community gets better.

The results are tangible. Many school projects have grown from a seed of an idea into a fully fledged yearly event, with schools all over the UK and beyond jumping on board to recreate the things that work. Quite a number of partnership activities across schools have also sprouted up out of this shared practice. A single thread can produce a venue plan, kit list, comms copy, safeguarding checklists and introductions to demonstrators, with an almost 200-strong hive mind of professionals living in this space daily. Time and again, I see colleagues avoid pitfalls, accelerate delivery and make partnerships genuinely mutual – benefitting pupils and staff on both sides. The network also offers various other perks such as free coaching courses and qualifications, as well as access to counselling, financial and legal advice and wellbeing support through a shared employee assistance programme, all completely free. There is no contract and people are free to come and go as they please for as long as they are involved in school partnerships.

This community offers immediate peers, practical tools, and honest advice from people who have tried, failed, iterated and succeeded. If you lead or support school partnerships – state or independent – or you're a charity, university or industry partner working with schools, you're warmly invited to join us.

Scan the QR code to request access to our WhatsApp group. Before anyone is accepted, we do the due diligence to make sure you are from the



education sector and involved in partnerships – but once approved by several of our admin members, you can get involved. Let's keep raising the bar together: saving each other time, strengthening relationships, and, most importantly, widening opportunity for children and teachers.

Graeme Lawrie is partnerships director at ACS International Schools



The partnership WhatsApp group clearly reflects the strength of our wider community, demonstrating how collaboration benefits children across all educational sectors. By sharing ideas, experiences, and insights into impact, we ensure that partnerships remain meaningful in widening opportunities and enriching learning experiences

JOHN SPARKS,
DIRECTOR OF PARTNERSHIPS
AT RADLEY COLLEGE

For those of us working to support cross-sector partnerships the WhatsApp community has been a brilliant barometer for gauging challenges and sharing successes

CHRISTINA ASTIN,
A PARTNERSHIPS CONSULTANT



Changing lives: The schools transforming SEND education

AS DEMAND FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES (SEND) SUPPORT CONTINUES TO OUTPACE CAPACITY, SCHOOLS ARE WORKING TO CLOSE THE GAP THROUGH INNOVATIVE AND INCLUSIVE PROVISION. ADI BLOOM FINDS OUT MORE

But seriously, what's in it for you?" This is the question that Michelle Catterson, executive headteacher of Moon Hall School in Surrey, is asked on a semiregular basis.

Seventy per cent of the children who attend Moon Hall – an independent dyslexia specialist school – have education, health and care plans. Many come from a state sector background, their fees paid by their local authority.

"The children who come to Moon Hall are the lucky ones whose needs are met and who are understood and who no longer feel different," Catterson says. "I'm very acutely aware that that's not the case in every classroom and every school.

"So I want to give back to the local community, to offer that help and that support for those children who might need it, as well as their parents and Sencos."

Moon Hall runs its own assessment centre every Saturday on the school premises. There, the school's speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and educational psychologist – as well as a handpicked group of trusted external professionals – diagnose conditions such as speech and language difficulties, visual stress, autism and ADHD. The assessment centre is open to everyone, and the cost of the assessment is means-tested: some families receive theirs entirely free of charge. The waiting list for an assessment is around eight weeks.

To understand why this is so valuable – why incredulous parents ask Catterson what's in it for her – it helps to look at the context in which the assessment centre operates.

The notion of special educational needs and disabilities was introduced in the 1944 Education Act. The Act considered the education of children with differing categories of need for the first time, proposing the idea that schools could specialise in catering to them. More House School, for example, was originally established to educate "delicate children".

The National Audit Office now estimates that, as of January 2024, around 1.7 million schoolchildren have been identified as having special educational needs. But though the categories have changed somewhat since the 1940s, in many ways the understanding of special needs remains cut to that early template. "There's almost a subconscious expectation that, if you have SEND, you're working at a lower cognitive level," says Jonathan Hetherington, head of More House School, an independent special school in Surrey, educating 510 boys between the ages of eight and 18.

"A lot of our pupils have been told that they shouldn't expect to access GCSEs, and that their future looks very bleak."

He pauses.

"All our boys sit a range of GCSEs and post results above the national average. The majority do A levels or BTecs and go on to university or apprenticeships. This year, we sent one of our boys to Oxford to read engineering, and another to music conservatoire."

Despite lingering notions of deficit, the SEND system has been tweaked, tucked and altered over the years. Most recently, in September 2014, education, health and care plans (EHCPs) were introduced, replacing statements of special educational need.

Since 2015, demand for EHCPs has increased by 140 per cent, according to the National Audit Office – in 2024, 576,000 children had EHCPs. There has also been a 14 per cent increase in the number of school pupils receiving SEND support, to 1.14 million.

Some argue that this dramatic increase is symptomatic of a snowflake generation desperate to pathologise normal aspects of childhood. Some believe it reflects our improved ability to recognise and diagnose need, yet others say that there has simply been an increase in the number of children with SEND.

"Whether that diversity is new or not is irrelevant," says Margaret Mulholland, SEND and inclusion specialist at the Association of School and College Leaders. "The idea that we're overdiagnosing or overpathologising is in our perception and conception of difference. We think only a few people should be different, when in fact many people are."

It is also easy to blame overdiagnosis and an increase in numbers for the troubles that the SEND system has experienced since 2014. In fact, Mulholland says, the problem is the broader context – a context that makes it almost impossible for the system to function as intended.

That context is a shortage of funding. Despite a 58 per cent real-terms funding increase between 2014-15 and 2024-25, local authorities lack the resources to meet pupils' needs. And so cash-strapped local authorities are rejecting parents' requests for SEND assessments or EHCPs.

In many areas, an assessment by a local authority education psychologist comes with a waiting list of several years – most of the parents coming to Moon Hall's assessment centre would otherwise be waiting two years for their children to be assessed. Private assessments, meanwhile, cost anything between £1,000 and £4,000.

A two-year wait can have an enormous impact on a vulnerable child, says Michelle Catterson: "The longer you're waiting for an assessment, the longer that child is without any support in the classroom. And by the time the child has the assessment, they're often suffering mental health issues or not wanting to come into school.

"The damage to a child of having to cope in a mainstream classroom without any support is really significant."

One educational psychologist in the Midlands speaks about working with a non-verbal Year 1 child. The child found the school environment overwhelming, and was often dysregulated – which emerged as behaviour that staff found challenging.

The upshot was that the child was excluded and ended up attending a pupil referral unit. "It should never have come to that point," the educational psychologist says. "With guidance and support from an educational psychologist much earlier on, it may not have got to that point.

"But the number of educational psychologists employed by local authorities is falling. The money's running out and the need has gone up. Increasingly, it all feels like a crisis. We're just firefighting all the time."

And even reaching the top of the waiting list is no guarantee of a full EHCP assessment: local authorities can – and do – refuse requests for assessment. "Often, families need to go to two tribunals: one to get the child assessed and one to get the child placed in an appropriate setting," says Barry Huggett, chair of the ISC SEND group.

"The system is biased in favour of those who can afford to employ a solicitor and a barrister to represent them at tribunal. It's a mess."

This is not hyperbole: the system is biased in favour of those with the education, time and financial ability to navigate it. The number of appeals recorded with the Special Educational Needs and Disability First-Tier Tribunal is increasing dramatically year on year: between 2022-23 and 2023-24, there was a 54.5 per cent rise in appeals, according to the Special Needs Jungle website.

Only 150 of the 11,157 appeals that went to a full hearing in 2023-24 were upheld in favour of the local authority – equivalent to 1.3 per cent. So, in 98.7 per cent of cases, the tribunal found in favour of the parents. By contrast, 53.8 per cent of first-tier tribunal cases related to Universal Credit found in favour of the claimant.

In total, there were 21,106 appeals in 2023-24: more than six times the number of appeals registered in 2014. Almost two thirds of those appeals were about the content of an EHCP; 35 per cent were in order to secure an assessment or plan.

In 2023-24, this process cost £165 million of public money. But it also costs parents dearly: many are remortgaging their homes or cashing in life savings in order to cover the costs of the tribunal process. Others are giving up their jobs, because taking the appeal to tribunal requires all their time and mental energy. (Of course, many will have already given up work, because the long wait for assessment means



“

I want to give back to the local community, to offer that help and support for those children who need it

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It can be useful for families who are finding things challenging to meet other families at the same point in their journey

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that their children have been excluded, or are refusing to attend school.)

And these are only the immediate costs. Half of all offenders in UK prisons have difficulties with literacy and numeracy. “You can see how that story takes them to offending,” says Catterson. “They start acting up in school; they’re excluded; they drop out – because they’ve never had their needs met.

“If they’d had the right support at school – if they weren’t labelled naughty or disengaged or the one who can’t sit still – they wouldn’t have ended up where they were. There’s a lack of awareness about that at government level: if you put early interventions and support in place, you stop that cycle happening.”

It is not new that schools such as Catterson’s have a role to play in this system. Many parents of children with EHCPs argue at tribunal that their children’s needs can only be met in the independent sector. Of the 510 pupils at More House, for example, 390 have their places funded by 29 different local authorities. In total, 132,500 pupils in independent schools receive local authority SEND support.

But the endemic flaws in the assessment system mean that not all pupils who need specialist support will be allocated a place at a specialist independent school. So, increasingly, schools such as More House and Moon Hall are offering their expertise more widely.

As well as running its weekly assessment centre, Moon Hall provides termly workshops, which are free to users, and open to any Senco in the state or independent sector. “A lot of them are the only Senco in their school,” says Catterson. “That can be quite isolating when there are changes to legislation or EHCP processes. So we’re also giving them the chance to make connections with other Sencos.”

The school also offers free access arrangement assessments to local secondaries, assessing and evidencing any additional support that children may need during exams. And it has partnered with a local teacher training provider, arranging for trainees to come to the school and observe specialist SEND teaching in practice. “There’s a high percentage of children with SEND in the mainstream classroom,” says Catterson. “Hopefully, this will help new teachers feel more confident in dealing with any issues that arise.”

Moon Hall also runs family events, again free of charge and open to anyone. Staff are on-hand at these sessions to give advice, and senior leaders and specialist providers deliver workshop sessions. “A lot of the time, when a parent has a child with SEND, you see traits and don’t know where to turn, where to go for advice and support,” says Catterson. “So much on the internet can often be overwhelming. So it’s nice to

have that expert voice – to find out how to work in partnership with their child’s school, in order to get the best outcomes for their child.”

Approximately 100 parents attend each event. “Again, it’s about making connections with each other,” says Catterson. “It can be useful for families who are finding things challenging to meet other families at the same point – or further on – in their journey. It’s a support network for the EHCP process.”

At More House, too, staff are aware that they have knowledge and expertise that could help improve the experience of many pupils – and their parents – in the state sector.

Many pupils join the school acutely aware of their own weaknesses: they will introduce themselves with “I have the worst handwriting” or “I’m not very good at sitting still.” And yet they all leave with qualifications to their names.

Rather than tailoring support to individual pupils’ diagnoses, More House offers support for a range of cognitive difficulties common to all pupils, whatever their diagnosis. So staff support language, attention, working memory and processing (abbreviated to the acronym LAMP). For example, teaching staff help all pupils to follow instructions or complete a task. The four areas of focus receive equal attention across the curriculum: as much in visual arts or design and technology as in English and maths.

“We’re very much of the opinion that if it works for us, it will work for other people, too,” says Hetherington. And so More House put together a series of self-directed online courses, explaining their LAMP model for mainstream teachers who want to better support the pupils in their class with SEND. The price of each course is capped at £10.

Hetherington also delivers INSET-day training to mainstream independent and state schools, as well as half-termly webinars for Sencos and teachers. Last year, these webinars looked at how to apply LAMP across the curriculum; this year, they will focus on the different elements of LAMP. The school also holds conferences on adaptive teaching, again attended by staff from both sectors. As with Moon Hall, the aim is to ensure that teachers in mainstream settings are able to manage the increasing SEND needs in their classroom – and that children are not left flailing, overwhelmed and alienated from education.

“What is it we do?” says headteacher Hetherington. “Can we even bottle it?”

“We want to look at why we might have some of the answers to the government’s SEND crisis at the moment. We want to be able to help with solutions to that.”

Adi Bloom is a freelance writer

Creating Deeper, Meaningful Partnerships – Helping 100% of Children to Thrive

A bold, sector-wide initiative to improve the life chances of every child in the UK

Our Moonshot Ambition

At E-ACT, the Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust, and HMC, we believe partnerships in education should benefit every child – not just a fortunate few. By adopting a “moonshot” mentality, we are committed to helping 100% of children thrive, regardless of background, school type, or postcode.

Our Three Pillars for Transformational Change

Reading for Life

Every child leaves school reading at or above their chronological reading age.

- Develop a sector-wide reading toolkit.
- Leverage mentors, resources, and institutional support.
- Establish robust, trackable metrics (e.g. NGRT, SATs, phonics screening).

100 Things Before You Leave School

Every child accesses a broad range of enrichment opportunities.

- A curated list of cultural, sporting, and career experiences.
- Enhance school engagement and attendance.
- Encourage co-delivery with families and communities.

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Every child receives high-quality careers and higher education guidance.

- Mentoring, interview prep, and personal statement support.
- Collaborate with universities and employers.
- Explore a unified bursary framework for transformational access.

Next Steps

- 1** Multi-academy trusts, independent schools, and universities co-create and trial the three pillars
- 2** Funders and philanthropists support scalable pilots and national rollout
- 3** Policy leaders help remove barriers and promote collaboration



E-ACT



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MAKING WAVES

WIMBLEDON HIGH SCHOOL GDST

Wimbledon High School GDST (WHS) has formed a new partnership with Melrose Primary School to give pupils access to the full PE curriculum, including swimming.



Melrose School offers specialist provision for pupils aged five to 16 with social, emotional, and mental health needs. Mainstream education is challenging for these students, and Melrose provides a safe and nurturing environment, as well as tailored support for young people with additional speech, language and communication needs and autism spectrum disorder. The specialist needs of the students mean they require sole use of a pool, which proves challenging for the delivery of swimming as part of the national curriculum.

Between seven and 10 students attended weekly swimming lessons at WHS throughout the summer term. Lessons were delivered by two specialist swimming teachers, provided by Wimbledon High, and members of the PE department. Whilst the pupils were hesitant at first, their confidence steadily grew – both in the pool and in their interactions with staff. One student was especially nervous to put his face in the water during the first session; by the final lesson, he was proudly jumping from the blocks into the deep end, completely unaided. His sense of achievement, pride and joy was so profound that he asked WHS staff to take photos to share with his mum.

Following its successful launch, planning is underway to bring Wimbledon High students into the programme for 2025–26. These collaborative activities are designed to help build the confidence of Melrose pupils and support their next steps of reintegrating into mainstream education.

Adventure, skills, and service: A closer look at the benefits of CCF



Julian Money explains how school cadet forces can support students' personal development and prepare them for the future

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our school's Combined Cadet Force (CCF) has a very impressive history, dating all the way back to 1900. Can you tell us more about its origins, and how it's evolved over time?

Our CCF was originally formed on 30 May 1900 as an Officer Training Corps, well before the Combined Cadet Force was formally introduced in 1948. Over time it evolved from a post-war unit focused on preparing young men for service into a modern, inclusive organisation that develops leadership, resilience and teamwork for boys and girls through an Army section.

This year we proudly celebrated its 125th anniversary with a special parade.

Can you give some examples of activities your recruits get involved with?

Cadets get involved in a wide range of activities, from parades, first aid and field exercises to adventure training, shooting and even parachuting in the Lower Sixth. We also run a shooting team that competes at regional and national level, recently finishing third in the Ashburton Fours at Bisley.

This term, cadets are preparing for the Village Remembrance Parade and have just had the privilege of marching alongside the Coldstream Guards Band.

What are the main benefits you see in your pupils in terms of their skills, development, and future outcomes?

The CCF helps pupils develop key skills such as leadership, teamwork, resilience, and self-discipline. They gain confidence, problem-solving abilities, and practical experience through activities like field exercises and adventure training.

These skills and experiences prepare them well for future education, careers, and life challenges. When speaking to alumni, some of their best memories of school have involved the CCF.

How does your involvement with the CCF support your own personal and professional development?

Having been involved with the CCF for 20 years and as a former soldier, I've developed strong leadership, teamwork, and resilience. It's taught me to stay calm under pressure and take responsibility – skills that benefit me personally and will be invaluable in any future career.

The government has announced it will invest £70 million into expanding cadet forces, with the aim of increasing capacity by 30 per cent by 2030. Why do you think this should be a priority for the government and schools?

Investing in cadet forces should be a priority because they provide young people with opportunities to develop leadership, teamwork, resilience, and practical skills that schools alone often can't fully offer.

Expanding capacity means more pupils can benefit from these experiences, which support personal development, community engagement, and future employability. By equipping young people with confidence, discipline, and a sense of responsibility, cadet forces help prepare the next generation to contribute positively to society.

What advice would you give to other schools interested in setting up a Combined Cadet Force?

I would advise getting in touch with your local Cadet Expansion Officer and building strong support from both leadership and staff. The most important people in a CCF are the senior cadets, who develop leadership skills by delivering lessons and mentoring others, so it's best to start small and build a solid senior base.

Offer a wide range of activities and foster a culture where cadets feel challenged but supported, while taking full advantage of the unique opportunities that are only available through the CCF.

Julian Money is director of outdoor education and CCF Contingent Commander at Cranleigh School



JOINING FORCES

DENSTONE COLLEGE

A partnership between **Denstone College** and **JCB Academy** sees pupils coming together each week to participate in shared CCF activities.

Every Thursday, around 15 students and two members of staff from JCB join Denstone's contingent to parade and take part in various military drills and exercises. The pupils also benefit from hands-on sessions delivered by external partners. For example, in June this year, members of the Derby Mountain Rescue team visited Denstone to demonstrate how their specialist equipment is used in real-life rescue missions. Cadets from

both schools had the opportunity to explore how rescue teams locate lost hikers using high-tech drones, and how similar technology is used by special forces to detect threats such as booby-trapped buildings.

The pupils involved also take part in field trips and other excursions beyond the school gates. This summer, eight JCB students and a member of staff

joined Denstone's cadets at Altcar Training Camp in Liverpool, where they enjoyed a packed week of assault courses, water sports, paintball, and military scenarios.

By joining forces, the two schools are maximising the sharing of resources and opportunities, bringing like-minded students together to cultivate skills that will benefit them for life.



Constituent Associations

Girls' Schools Association, The Heads' Conference
Independent Association of Prep Schools, Independent Schools Association
The Society of Heads, Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools
Independent Schools' Bursars Association

Affiliated Associations

Boarding Schools' Association, Council of British International Schools
Scottish Council of Independent Schools, Welsh Independent Schools Council

Independent Schools Council
First Floor, 27 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9BU
020 7766 7070
www.isc.co.uk



Schools Together

www.schoolstogether.org

Celebrating and encouraging partnership projects

Schools have been engaged in partnerships for many years. The main motivation is a desire to collaborate with other schools in the local community for mutual benefit.

The Schools Together website demonstrates the excellent work that is already going on and helps and inspires more schools to get involved.

web@isc.co.uk