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Suspending Disbelief

*The Costs and Consequences
of Reducing Suspensions
in English Schools*

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Cambridge Circus Research

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Executive summary

The current moment is an inflection point for English education: Labour is roughly two years into their term and visibly trying to put their own stamp on English schools. This can be seen in the development of the report card reforms, the worrying policy developments inside the attendance and behaviour hubs, and now a Schools White Paper setting the tone for significant changes to the scale at which England's schools suspend. Any political party seeking to reform education in England after the current Labour government will inherit inspection frameworks, a data architecture and an education research ecosystem designed to centre the outcomes of the most excluded pupils. Whitehall belief in 'Inclusion-at-any-cost' promotes policies which are at times actively at odds with the outcomes of the vast majority of children educated in England, and may even be degrading the outcomes and life chances of well-behaved pupils, some of them with high-needs. At the same time as this particular vision of Inclusion has been elevated, reducing suspension rates has become a major priority of the Department for Education.

This drivetrain has the potential to damage educational outcomes for everyone. Labour Education Secretaries and ministers in the Department for Education gesture at explanations for this but then make policy and issue guidance that presents current levels of suspension as a problem in and of themselves. No serious thought has been given to what causes these suspension rates to be at such high levels, or to address these in the ways that we know are effective. Instead, improvement initiatives are delivered at local level by working groups and training providers who are actively at odds with the practices and policies of schools which get the best results in England in some of the most challenging circumstances.

Only by confronting the primary problems of England's secondary education can indicators like suspension rates be organically improved. The English system seems under Labour leadership to be embarking on a project to make suspension rates structurally certain to fall regardless of the state of behaviour in schools. In Scotland, which is most acutely affected by its own artificial reduction of suspension rates for political convenience, this has been a developing disaster for 20 years. England's education system need not be a repeat experiment, especially when the system is performing, according to international rankings, very well.¹

This report finds that the particular vision of Inclusion pursued in England creates a tunnel vision problem around the outcomes of the most suspended pupils. Instead of focusing on the outcomes of one type of child or the other, schools should be given the tools to promote high standards across the board, and Inclusion policy should help students to meet those standards and provide calm, safe environments with clear consequences for poor behaviour. Data analysis within this report has shown that there may simply be a harder core of repeatedly suspended pupils since the pandemic, and for this reason schools should not be pushed into artificially reducing what may, for some time, be structurally higher rates of suspension. Inspection frameworks should be adjusted to reflect the potential impact of forcing down suspension rates on those schools with the most challenging intakes and a larger number of persistently suspended pupils. **Pushing down suspensions for its own sake across the board by shifting what behaviour warrants suspension risks undermining, as it has in Scotland, school cultures where all children do their best.**

At present there are significant gaps already identified by the Timpson Review around in-year transfers or so-called managed moves, for which national records have only recently begun to develop.² Although it will now record these transfers, DfE systems do not at present monitor managed moves outside of inspection time. This undermines high standards when schools use them to mask their own failure and that of policy set in Whitehall. If schools are at present incentivised by performance measures to dodge responsibility for the exam results of students they have failed or are likely in future to fail, those measures should be altered in ways which close those avenues off. **There should be as detailed a picture as possible of the outcomes of DfE policy, and it should not be up to school or multi-academy trust heads to compensate for poorly conceived policy out of Whitehall.**

Core findings

- **DfE and Labour policy almost exclusively use pre-pandemic levels of suspension as a baseline against which current figures are judged.** This assumption functions as and aims to achieve the effects of a target that no Labour Secretary of State for Education has ever been asked to defend. Reducing to these levels would lead to reintroduction of poor behaviour into classrooms without new ring-fenced funding for internal exclusion provision.
- **Headline progress measures cannot show us whether lower suspension rates for the most disruptive pupils have come at the cost of the academic performance of pupils who were hardly ever or never suspended at all.** Suspension criteria are being adjusted in ways that make the interaction between these two groups statistically pertinent and it is at present unrepresented in publicly available data.
- **Justifications for cuts to suspension rates in England on grounds of improved attainment are overwhelmingly derived from statistically very unusual schools** undergoing considerable changes to their governance and school policies; they cannot be attributed causally to the act of lowering suspension rates alone, leaving the justification for driving them down in England evidentially weak.
- **Labour policy, DfE guidance and changes to Ofsted frameworks risk radically shifting suspensions onto internal exclusion provision** that children's charities repeatedly conclude is in a dire state nationwide. Recent funding increases earmarked for Inclusion Bases are ring-fenced specifically to prevent their use as part of behaviour policy.
- **The present way headline progress and attainment measures are assembled and distributed to schools incentivises schools to move pupils on,** and disincentivises schools which genuinely might offer a second chance from taking on a pupil.

Recommendations at a glance

1. Publish distinct performance data, at school-level, for the most frequently suspended and least frequently suspended pupils.
2. Ofsted and the DfE should no longer treat pre-pandemic suspension levels as the baseline against which current levels are judged.
3. The Department should identify the peer effects of persistent disruption as an Area of Research Interest and collect class composition data — restricted to English, Maths and Science — for large-scale academic research.
4. The Department should audit the effectiveness of training providers and local authority working groups involved in delivering school improvement initiatives and survey both pupils and staff during all stages of the evaluation processes.
5. School performance measures, including but not limited to Progress 8, should be adjusted to reflect the number of days a school was responsible for a child subject to an in-year transfer.
6. The Department should publish statutory guidance on the use of internal exclusion, and record and publish its usage and capacity as part of national data down to at least regional level.

1. School suspensions in context

What is suspension?

A suspension in the English education system is the removal of a child from school for disciplinary reasons so they cannot attend or be on the premises for a set number of days, after which they return. It can also cover parts of a school day (such as lunchtimes) and does not need to be continuous. These were previously referred to as fixed-period exclusions before 2022. An exclusion in the English system is a permanent removal of a child from a school's roll. This is much rarer, happening to fewer than 10,000 pupils across the English system in 2024/25, the latest available year in DfE data.³

Before 1997, England had no coherent national policy on exclusion and suspension from school. Permanent exclusions had risen sharply through the early 1990s — the Conservative government's introduction of league tables and local management of schools had created strong incentives for headteachers to exclude disruptive pupils who threatened their school's published results. Exclusions roughly trebled between 1990 and 1997, with the sharpest rises in secondary schools.⁴ The pupils being excluded were disproportionately those from the most deprived backgrounds, with special educational needs or those eligible for free school meals.

The incoming Blair government characterised rising suspension rates as both a school standards problem and a social and equalities issue. The Social Exclusion Unit's 1998 report on truancy and exclusion set the tone for the rest of his decade in office: exclusion was reframed as a symptom of school failure rather than a management tool, and the pupil referral unit system — the main repository for excluded children — was widely regarded as warehousing the most vulnerable in the worst-resourced provision.⁵

The response to this was to introduce numerical targets to reduce permanent exclusions. Inspection guidelines from Ofsted at this time were careful not to explicitly penalise suspensions where it believed they were legitimate, but the criteria under which such suspensions would be judged were sufficiently ambiguous to prompt schools to game their headline suspension rate.^{6 7} Children would be shuffled in an effort to disappear them from school performance data which might shine a harsh and unflattering light on a school's ability to improve the outcomes of their most vulnerable pupils.

From as early as 2005 up to the moment when the Gove reforms began to mature, England had been through a significant and arguably artificial reduction in suspensions; Contextual Value Added (the predecessor to Progress 8) was locking in low expectations for England's most challenging schools and explicit targets for bringing down permanent exclusion were undermining cultures of clear consequences. The government which had swept to power on 'Education, education, education.' had lost its way and been replaced by something that worked, and more importantly gave the public the tools to show it had worked.

More recently, Ofsted and the Department for Education have become wiser to many of the games schools play with regard to managed moves, especially those which risk children falling out of the system entirely. The Timpson Review of School Exclusion (2019) and the Centre for Social Justice's 2024 report *Suspending Reality* have been embedded into the accountability framework through Ofsted inspection criteria. Statutory guidance

has been revised and has largely eliminated the more dangerous school practices with regard to off-rolling.⁸

The election of a Labour government in July 2024 did not, this time, arrive on the back of widespread discontent with the state of secondary education in England, or the supposedly historic highs in suspensions in English schools. Education policy received almost no coverage outside of sector publications, and even house journals like *Schools Week* covered suspension or exclusions only on the release of the latest set of figures for 2022/23. The high numbers characteristic of the post-pandemic period made a useful contribution to the narrative of Britain in crisis but did not offer an opportunity for Labour to set out why or how it should reduce them.

Recent policy failure

Within a few months of Labour taking office, Ofsted was beginning its implementation of a longstanding Labour commitment to introduce a 'report card' style system instead of the supposed 'single word judgement' which had previously characterised inspection reports. The existing framework, including the single word judgement, was under quite significant attack in the wake of the tragic death of Ruth Perry, a primary headteacher. Ofsted's Big Listen that followed, and the response that emerged in September 2024, made clear that Inclusion would be a key part of the new inspection criteria. The November 2025 framework brought five others.⁹

While the focus on the scrapping of the single word judgement dominated coverage, adding Inclusion as a category in and of itself was a change that headteachers will have understood meant high suspension rates for SEND and vulnerable pupils would now appear as a named, graded liability on a school's report card. The Inclusion area assigns a judgement on schools for the achievement and belonging of disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND, the groups most likely to exhibit behaviour leading to suspension and permanent exclusion. This was not reported as a policy intervention which would place downward pressure on suspension rates, but inside the sector its implications were entirely legible, and according to the termly breakdown for this data we can see how schools adjusted accordingly in the Summer of the 2024/25 academic year — a summer-to-summer change of -17.5%.³ A later Easter cannot explain the way in which schools seemed to be adjusting dramatically to the signalling around framework changes and the commentary around the future and appropriateness of suspension as a tool. Secondary suspensions began falling in the Autumn of the 2024/25 academic year, immediately after the Big Listen response signalled Inclusion as a judgement area, and the decline accelerated through the year. Adjusting for the later Easter, which lengthened the 2024/25 spring term and shortened the Summer term, secondary suspensions per teaching day fell by around 3–4% in autumn and spring, and by around 9–12% in summer.

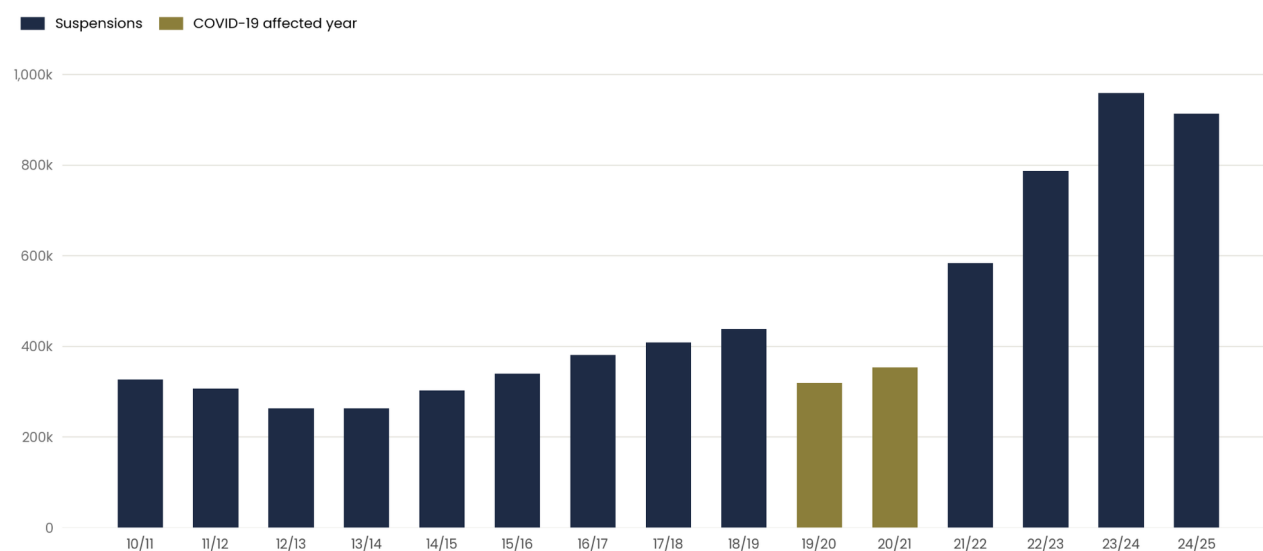
What did not exist at this point was a coherent behaviour strategy to address post-pandemic trends of poor behaviour in the vast majority of schools. In March 2025, Early Education minister Stephen Morgan MP told TES the Department was still "thinking through" its behaviour policy.¹⁰ The early phases of downward pressure on suspensions emerged first, before any attempt to settle on the behaviour policy changes the Government thought might reduce the behaviour crisis it had made much of inheriting. This also arrived at a time when the published research and progressive think tanks were raising alarm bells about the levels of suspension.

Neither Ofsted nor the DfE has broadcast exactly the sort of rates they expect suspensions to come down to, but the core assumption behind the policy priorities since July 2024 is that post-pandemic levels of suspension are far too high even in a system undergoing a behaviour crisis. Government policy, the strategic priorities of the DfE and the Ofsted framework changes have set firm expectations about the reduced role suspensions will play in school behaviour policies. They expect suspensions to be "used proportionately and appropriately" and that low-level disruption be "dealt with, so that it is uncommon and does not disrupt lessons". The lowest grade in the Attendance and Behaviour judgement, Urgent Improvement, is triggered where "sanctions, suspensions and/or permanent exclusions are used inappropriately".^{11 12} Labour is arguably trying to achieve the effects of an explicit target to bring suspensions down to pre-pandemic levels without the political responsibility associated with setting it. Doing so explicitly would force the government to set out and defend why it is using pre-pandemic as a working assumption. Currently, the evasive way in which pre-pandemic levels of suspension are used as a baseline reference point by which subsequent levels are measured points everyone in the sector towards a target which is axiomatic but never explicitly set.

It is important to say that schools are not to blame for the consequences of a drivedown. Headteachers, school leaders and the governors overseeing their decisions are rationally optimising for the underlying assumptions behind the new inspection framework, DfE guidance and Labour policy pronouncements.

Suspensions by academic year

Total suspensions across all state-funded schools in England, 2010/11–2024/25.



Source: Department for Education, Suspensions and Permanent Exclusions in England (Accredited Official Statistics).

Figure 1. Suspensions by academic year.

It's clear that the more informal methods of pushing down suspensions have not significantly brought down the numbers in England to pre-pandemic levels. What is less clear is whether the DfE still believes the high levels of suspension are representative of genuinely chronic increases in disruptive behaviour, or rather — in the formulation preferred by then Secretary of State Bridget Phillipson — indicative of schools using the sanction too readily in a way that 'devalues' it. In the face of failure to dramatically drive down post-pandemic suspension rates under two Labour education secretaries, the Department is now reaching for more blunt policy instruments to achieve this objective. In

January 2026, the DfE briefed its guidance on suspension and exclusion in stark terms, providing statements to outlets such as the Guardian and Schools Week which questioned the very basis of external suspension as a tool. The Schools White Paper holds that suspension is a serious sanction and is to be reserved for the most serious cases, and Inclusion is treated as a principle that should shape provision from the outset rather than a remedial addition.¹³ The support-and-challenge architecture, including the attendance and behaviour hubs announced in 2025, channels improvement effort towards schools with high absence and high suspension rates.¹⁴ The signal across the sector is that a lower suspension rate is a better one in essentially all cases, whether behaviour improves or not.

Guidance on suspension and exclusion does not list Persistent Disruptive Behaviour in its example categories, despite consistently making up half of suspensions, which puts an additional question mark around the extent to which either Labour or the DfE believe it is ever an appropriate sanction in this case.¹⁵ Schools are expected under the new guidance to shift suspensions for persistently disruptive behaviour into internal exclusion facilities.¹⁶ It is impossible to estimate how many of these suspensions will simply be transferred into internal exclusion, or worse, result in no serious sanction at all. It is probable, given multiple reasons can be listed for suspensions, that some of these will be categorised differently to produce a suspension, but this will come with greater Ofsted attention and leaves schools much more vulnerable to the accusation of inappropriate use than they have been up to now.

2. What's wrong with the current direction of Labour policy?

In order to determine whether or not this developing area of Labour policy is likely to be effective, it is necessary to have a clear picture of the basis on which a suspensions drivedown might be justified. This section will argue that the evidential basis for pursuing such a policy is dubious at best, and that the Labour government is embarking on a project which has little chance of producing better schools for that reason.

Are suspensions actually high?

The DfE's 2024/25 release recorded 913,000 suspensions across all phases, the latest in the current national series, which runs from the 2006/07 academic year onwards. The current measurement, based on termly individual-pupil-level data, was only extended to cover all schools after 06/07 and exclusion statistics were only designated National Statistics from the 1999/00 publication onward.¹⁷ The 'historically high' suspension rates of the post-pandemic period mean the highest in 19 years of comparable data, not highest in any longer historical sense, a distinction the DfE's own methodology documentation supports but that press coverage and Labour policy around suspension rates often buries.

The 1990s saw permanent exclusion treble and fixed-period exclusion (the old language for suspensions) was barely collected in any systematic way, so there is simply no reliable baseline against which to judge whether the current figures are elevated by historical standards or roughly normal. Tom Bennett has argued that the current permanent exclusion rate — around 0.11–0.12% of all children — represents a modest absolute number that presents as alarming mainly because of percentage-change framing against the pandemic dip.¹⁸ These are the highest figures in the period for which good comparable data exists. Whether they are historically high cannot be established at all.

Can a suspensions drivedown be justified on performance grounds?

The assumption at work in the current policy debate is that fewer suspensions and higher attainment are causally inseparable. This claim is regularly made but rarely tested. This section tests that assumption directly against the available data for pupil and school performance. If driving up standards is the stated purpose of suspension rate reductions, it's important to assess whether academic results are meaningfully linked to suspension rates.

The sector's language falls into a fairly consistent pattern: two variables — falling exclusions or suspensions and rising attainment — get placed next to each other repeatedly, in headlines, funding criteria, and case-study narration. The causal relationship between them has never actually been demonstrated. The IPPR's own framing is the most direct: "reducing lost learning is, therefore, central to improving school standards and raising attainment", stating the link as if it were established fact. The joint funding round with the Henry Smith Foundation goes further, building the assumption directly into a grant programme's structure — the title itself pairs "reducing exclusions, improving school engagement and raising attainment" as though these were one connected outcome rather

than three separate things that happen to be tracked together.¹⁹ The EEF/Youth Endowment Fund's 2022 "safe, positive place to learn" programme does something similar at the institutional level, listing "reducing exclusions" and "improving attainment" as parallel child outcomes and asking grant applicants to supply a theory of change connecting the two — which quietly presupposes the connection is real enough to be theorised about, rather than something still in need of demonstrating.²⁰

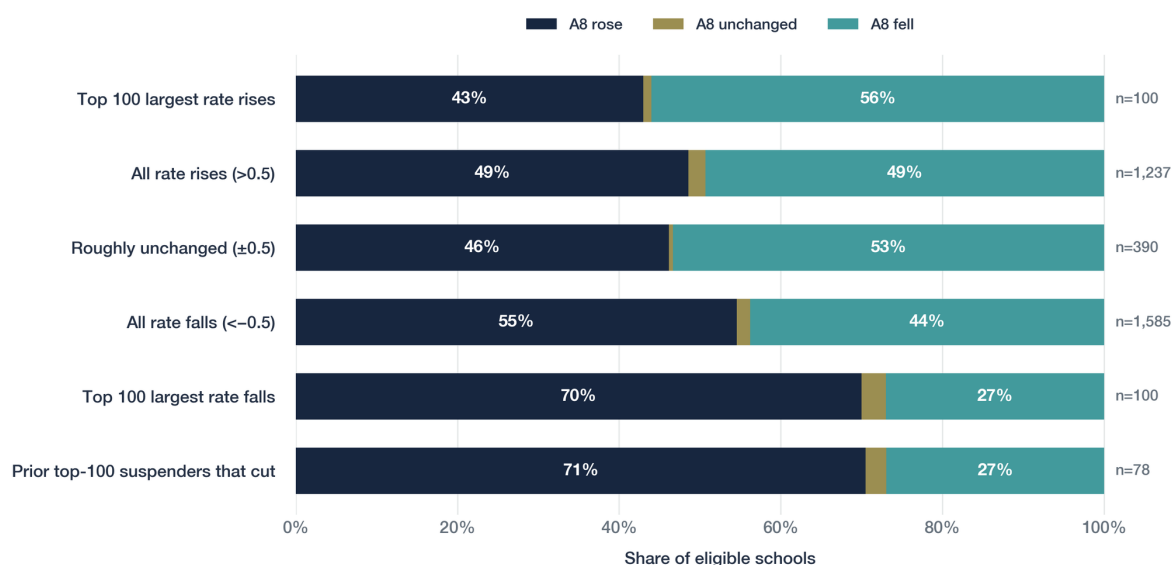
The other recurring pattern is the celebratory case study, where a school or local authority's exclusion figures and attainment figures are simply narrated side by side, letting the reader supply the causal story themselves. The Children's Commissioner's *They Go the Extra Mile* report (2013) profiles schools where "exclusions have fallen significantly and are now low" and sits directly beside a note that students are making good progress; Glasgow's education leadership under Maureen McKenna was praised in 2018 because "exclusions have fallen dramatically, and there have been rises in both attendance and attainment"; Gwen Gilmore's paper asking "reducing exclusions and improving attainment — how can that be?" dates to 2012.^{21 22 23} This causal framing cannot therefore be dismissed as a recent, opportunistic response to the post-pandemic suspension surge: it was already fully established as a meme within the sector five to ten years before that surge began. The current post-pandemic rise in suspensions has not generated a new argument so much as given longstanding education sector truisms a more dramatic backdrop.

The school-level data does show some association between falling suspension rates and rising attainment. But its most eye-catching results come from schools that are least representative of the wider group making cuts. In the year pair 2023/24 to 2024/25, 1,585 secondary schools in the Attainment 8 data reduced their suspension rate by more than 0.5 suspensions per 100 pupils. Attainment 8 rose in 865 (54.6%) and fell in 694 (43.8%). Among the 1,237 schools whose suspension rate rose, Attainment 8 rose in 48.6%. Across all eligible schools, the correlation between suspension-rate change and Attainment 8 change was -0.119 , explaining about 1.4% of the variation. The broad relationship is weak, and in an already noisy non-cohort-adjusted dataset, offers little basis for predicting what will happen to attainment at a school *instructed* to bring its suspension rate down.

Each end of the distribution looks different. Attainment 8 rose in 70 of the 100 schools with the largest suspension-rate falls. Of the 100 schools with the highest suspension rates in 2023/24, 78 subsequently made a qualifying cut; Attainment 8 rose in 55 of those 78 (70.5%). Those results invite a compelling before-and-after story. They also show why the story cannot be inferred from the wider population of schools cutting suspensions.

Attainment 8 direction by suspension-rate change

State-funded secondary schools · 2023/24 → 2024/25 · top-ranked rows are subsets of the rise/fall groups



Source: DfE school-level suspensions and KS4 performance tables; matched by GIAS links. A8 flat means exactly equal published scores.

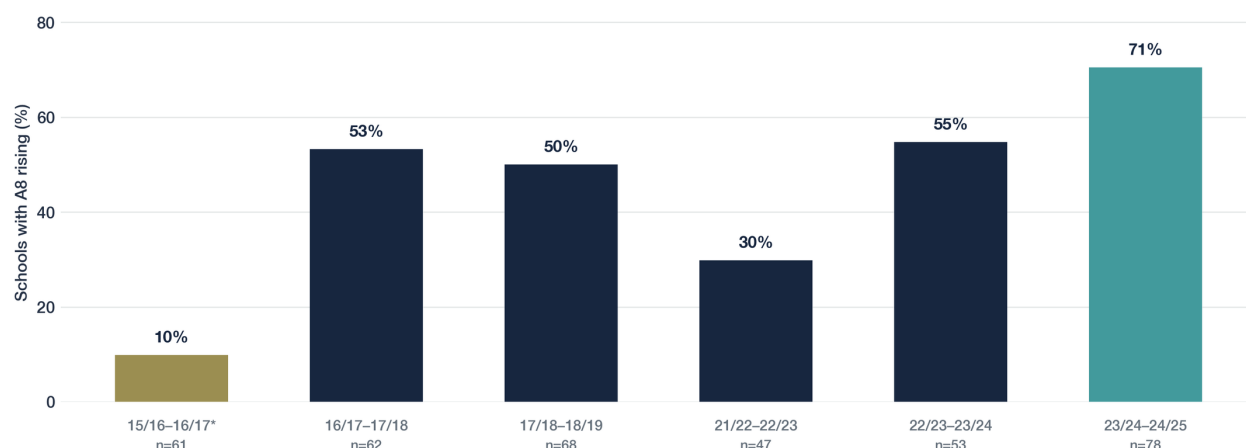
Figure 2. Attainment 8 direction by suspension-rate change.

The high-suspending schools that cut their rates recorded a mean Attainment 8 gain of 1.59 points, compared with 0.07 points among the remaining eligible schools. The difference between those group averages is statistically detectable. But the schools began with a mean Progress 8 score of -0.595 : they were already performing well below expectation. A sharp subsequent improvement could coincide with visible changes in leadership, staffing, intake or school practice, regression to the mean, or simply many thousands of small decisions by leadership and classroom teachers associated with initiatives right across the spectrum of school improvement.

Among schools whose suspension rates barely moved, the standard deviation of year-on-year Attainment 8 change was still 2.46 points. Across six valid year-pairs and 18,582 school-year comparisons, the correlation between suspension-rate change and Attainment 8 change was -0.096 , explaining less than 1% of the variation. The apparent success rate of high suspenders who cut also varies markedly between year-pairs. Its first comparison crosses GCSE grading changes and should be interpreted with particular care.

Cutting suspension rates does not reliably raise Attainment 8

Share with A8 rising among each year's prior top-100 suspension-rate schools that cut their rate by >0.5 per 100



* The first pair crosses the 2017 GCSE grading reform; compare its direction with caution.

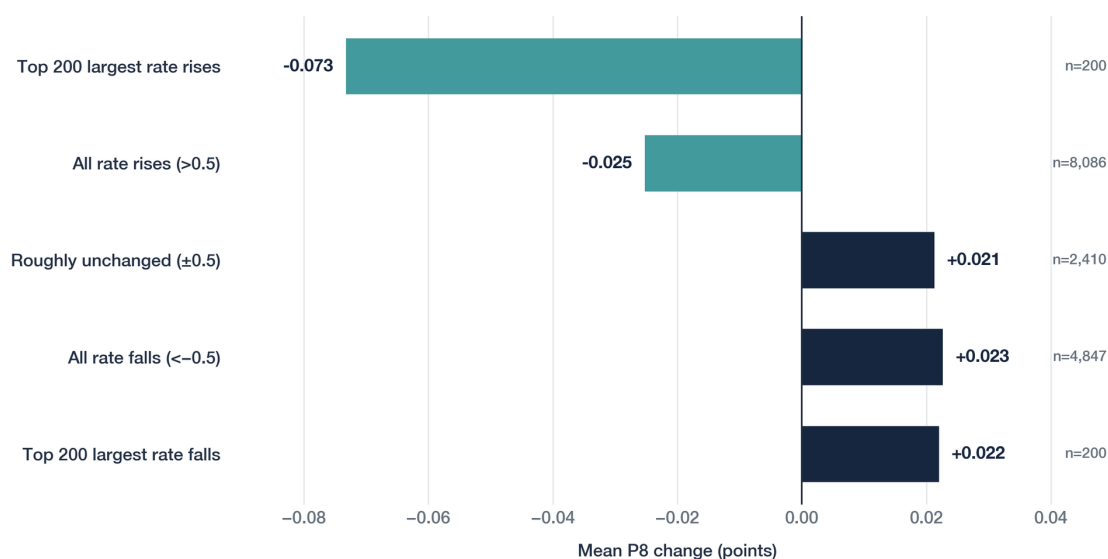
Source: same eligibility and top-100 ranking as Figure 2. The final bar equals Figure 2's last row.

Figure 3. Attainment 8 among high-suspending schools that cut their rate.

Progress 8, which adjusts for prior attainment, gives a further check on the long-run pattern. Across five valid year-pairs and 15,343 school-year comparisons, the annual correlations between suspension-rate change and Progress 8 change ranged from -0.052 to -0.101 . Pooled across those comparisons, mean Progress 8 change was $+0.023$ among schools whose suspension rate fell and -0.025 among schools whose rate rose. The relationship points in the same direction, but its average size is small. Progress 8 is unavailable for 2024/25, so it cannot check the latest Attainment 8 result.

Progress 8 change by suspension-rate group

Mean school-level P8 change · five adjacent year-pairs, 2015/16–2023/24 · top-200 pooled tails



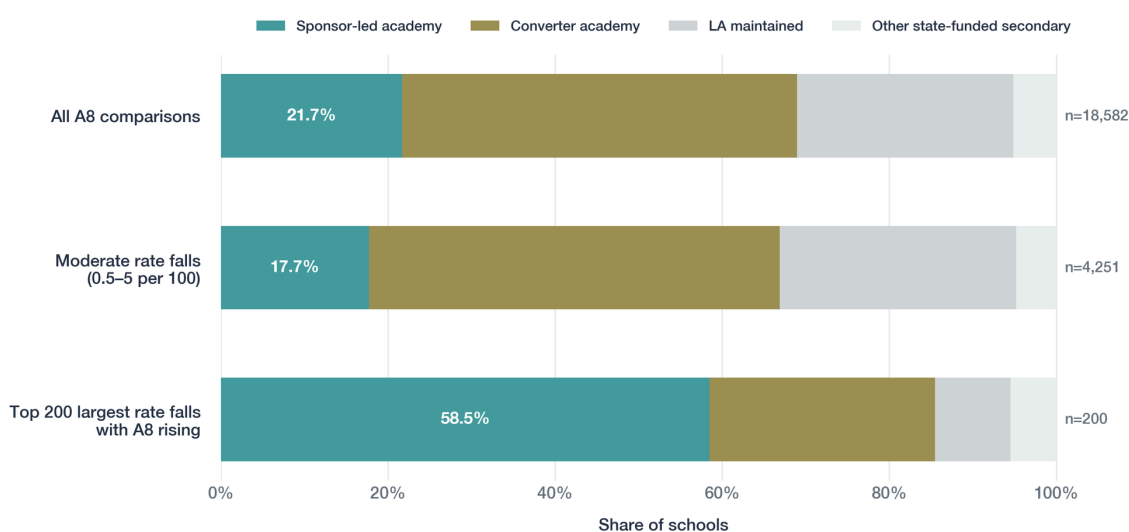
Source: DfE suspensions and KS4 performance tables. Each eligible school may contribute in multiple year-pairs.

Figure 4. Progress 8 change by suspension-rate change group.

The decisive question for the shiniest examples is who occupies the tail where a large suspension rate cut and an attainment gain occur together. Sponsor-led academies made up 21.7% of the full Attainment 8 comparison sample and 17.7% of schools making moderate suspension-rate cuts. They made up 58.5% of the 200 largest rate falls selected from schools whose Attainment 8 also rose.

The extreme faller tail is unusually sponsor-led

School type at the beginning of each A8 year-pair · tail restricted to the top 200 rate falls where A8 also rose



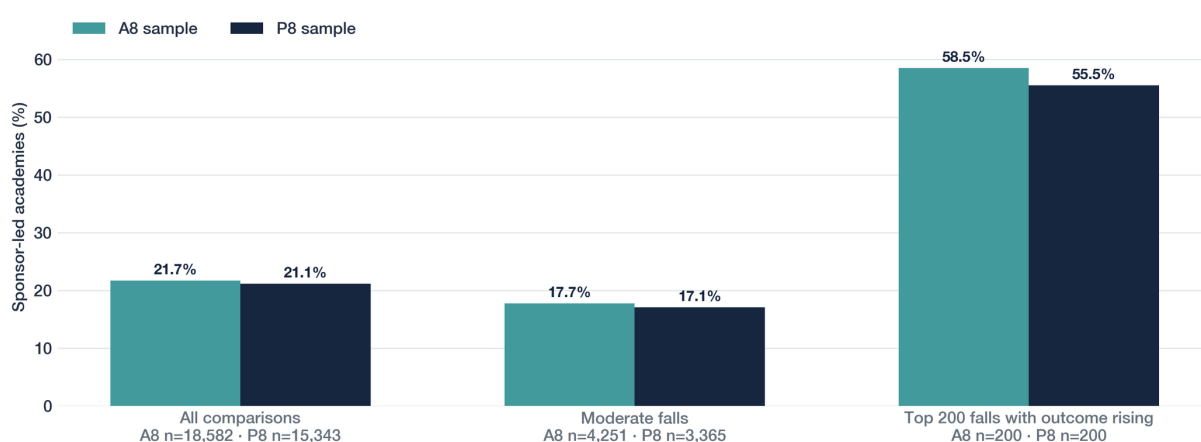
Source: linked school-year panel. Moderate fall means a reduction of at least 0.5 but less than 5 per 100 pupils.

Figure 5. Attainment 8's suspension rate movers.

This is a concentration in the precise group used to illustrate the policy's success. The same concentration holds in reverse: sponsor-led academies made up 58.0% of the 200 largest suspension-rate rises paired with a falling Attainment 8 score. Whichever direction these schools move, they move further than other schools on both measures at once. Part of this is arithmetic. Sponsor-led academies start from suspension rates roughly double those of other school types (Figure 7), so they have far more room to move either way. Part of it is circumstance. These schools are more likely to be going through changes of trust, leadership or policy that shift suspensions and results together. Neither explanation makes them a guide to what an ordinary school would achieve by cutting its rate. Yet these are exactly the schools whose before-and-after figures are held up as evidence that cutting suspensions raises attainment.

Two outcome measures show the same extreme tail

Sponsor-led share at the start of each pair · A8 and P8 use separate eligible samples and outcome-rising tails



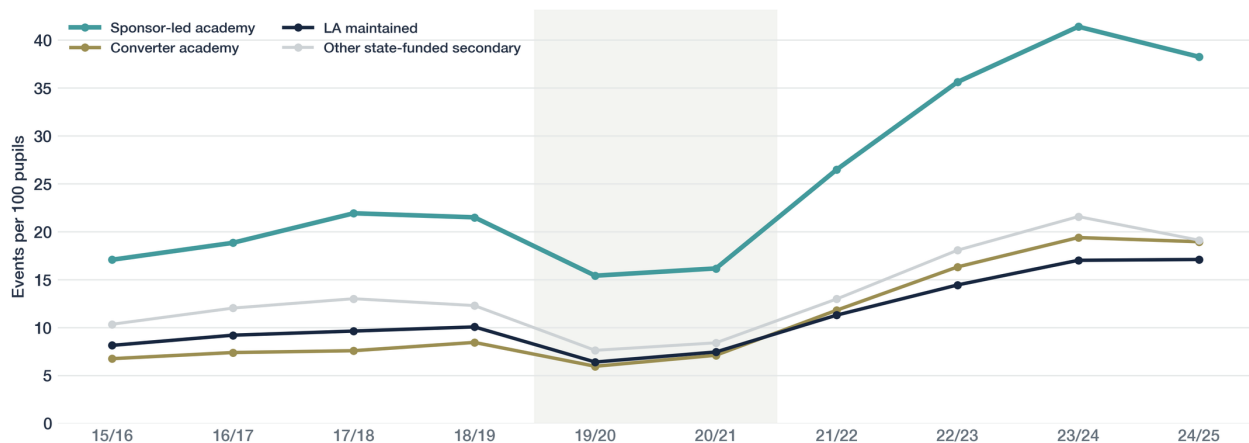
Source: linked panel. The top-200 tail is selected separately for A8 and P8, conditional on that outcome rising.

Figure 6. Sponsor-led share of the largest falls and rises.

In data concerning the cohort-adjusted measure, Progress 8, sponsor-led academies made up 21.1% of the full sample and 17.1% of moderate fallers, but 55.5% of the 200 largest suspension-rate falls selected from schools whose Progress 8 also rose. The two school performance measures select different samples, yet both put sponsor-led schools at the centre of the most persuasive-looking examples. The rise tail confirms sponsor-led academies made up 58.0% of the largest Attainment 8 rises-tail and 58.5% of the equivalent Progress 8 group — strongly resembling the falls-tail figures of 58.5% and 55.5%. Whichever direction the suspension rate moves, and whichever academic outcome measure is used, the same schools appear.

Suspension rates by school type

Unweighted mean school suspension events per 100 pupils · state-funded secondary · 2015/16–2024/25



Source: DfE school-level suspensions, with school type recorded in each year. Shading covers 2019/20–2020/21.

Figure 7. Suspension rates by school type.

These figures do not show that sponsor-led status caused either the suspension cut or the attainment gains so much as they show schools displaying both large shifts are statistically and institutionally unusual. Their results are particularly exposed to explanations involving what else changed at the school. A case study that names only its suspension and attainment figures is burying the information needed to assess its causal claim. The wider school-type comparison reinforces the need to examine starting conditions. Sponsor-led academies had higher mean suspension rates than the other main school types throughout the series. Schools starting from different rates, and operating in different institutional circumstances, should not be treated as interchangeable examples of what an ordinary school could achieve solely by lowering its rate. There are too many other variables in the most dramatic examples to justify this as a policy.

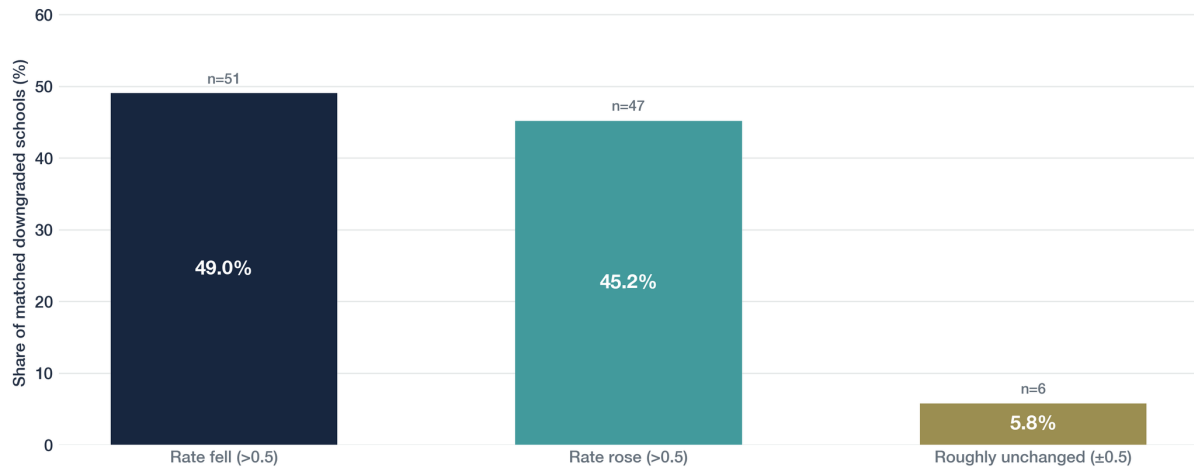
Sponsor-led academy conversion is the observable shock, because it is coded and dated in DfE records. It is very unlikely to be the only one. An Ofsted downgrade without conversion, a headteacher's departure, or a new trust taking over a struggling school plausibly produce the same signature: a large suspension-rate movement and a large attainment movement in the same window, driven by a shared cause rather than one driving the other. None of these events are captured in a single administrative flag the way sponsor-led conversion is, so the true confound is likely broader than the sponsor-led share alone can show.

An Ofsted downgrade is one possible institutional shock, but the inspection comparison does not establish that it explains the extreme movers. Among 104 matched schools downgraded in an old-framework inspection in 2023/24, suspension rates fell the following year in 51 (49.0%), rose in 47 (45.2%) and were roughly unchanged in six. Co-op Academy Grange provides a useful check against putting a school on a pedestal because its suspension change is dramatic. Its suspension count fell by 1,198 between 2023/24 and 2024/25, one of the largest reductions in England, while its Attainment 8 score fell from 30.5 to 29.1. That does not establish that the reduction harmed attainment. Equally, a school with an attainment gain after a large reduction does not establish that the reduction

produced the gain. Both kinds of case need more evidence than the two school-level numbers so often causally linked by those who object on principle to suspension rates they perceive as high.

Suspensions after an Ofsted downgrade

2023/24 graded downgrades, previous inspection for the same school form · rate movement in 2024/25



Matched sample: n=104. Change measured in suspension events per 100 pupils.

Source: Ofsted 2023/24 school inspection events joined to DfE school-year suspension rates.

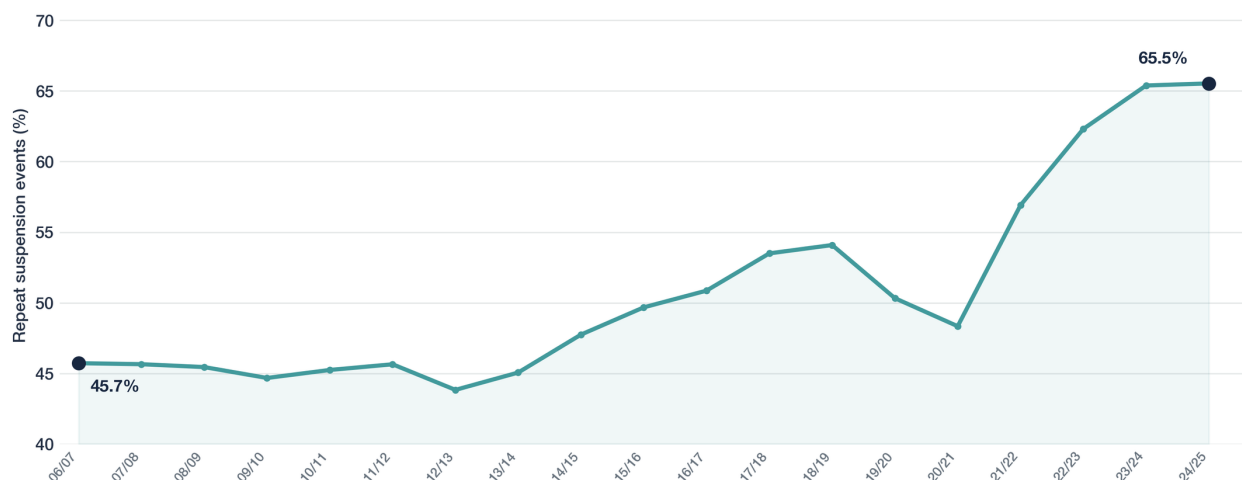
Figure 8. What happens to suspension rates after an Ofsted downgrade.

These comparisons can only measure what happens around a visible inspection event and do nothing to throw light on the standing effect of Ofsted's presence on schools that are not being inspected in a given cycle. A regulator does not need to have just finished reporting on a school for its expectations to shape that school's behaviour. The possibility of inspection, under a framework whose changes have been signalled for some time, operates continuously. Measuring it only around inspection events risks understating Ofsted's influence on the sector as a whole.

Because a large cut in suspension rates and a boost in attainment is exactly the statistical success mode on which significant reductions are hung, use of these showcase examples should be treated with corresponding scepticism. Advocacy from charities and foundations — such as Impetus citing a 74% suspension reduction alongside an attendance boost, IPPR stating plainly that reducing suspensions is necessary to improve attainment and the Commission on Young Lives' broader Inclusion push — draws its persuasive force from case studies and headline statistics that sit in exactly the part of the distribution the data shows is least trustworthy as causal evidence.^{24 25 26} EPI's own paper on primary exclusions, which much of this advocacy cites, explicitly states it cannot rule out unmeasured confounding.²⁷ Current published, whole-school-average data cannot demonstrate that driving suspension rates down improves attainment or progress — and the specific forms of evidence typically used to make that case like dramatic school-level case studies are the ones least able to survive scrutiny once basic confounds are checked.

The repeat-suspension share has risen

Share of suspension events beyond a pupil's first suspension in the same academic year · secondary schools



Source: DfE school-level suspension events and pupils suspended at least once, 2006/07–2024/25.

Figure 9. Repeat suspension events in secondary schools.

The actual composition of who is now suspended also complicates the claim that cutting suspensions will not lead to the reintroduction of persistent disruption into a classroom. A rising repeat-suspension share alongside rising overall totals until 23/24 points to a hardened core of pupils for whom the school's ordinary sanctions ladder has already failed within the same year. This leaves the driven-down only two routes to a lower headline number: genuinely changing this core's behaviour; or suppressing the count by redirecting these same pupils into internal exclusion or into the classroom. The more entrenched the core becomes, the more implausible the first route is on the timescale ministers expect, meaning any near-term fall in the top-line figure is more likely evidence of displacement than of resolution — and displacement, as internal exclusion capacity analysis later shows, lands hardest on the schools least equipped to absorb it.

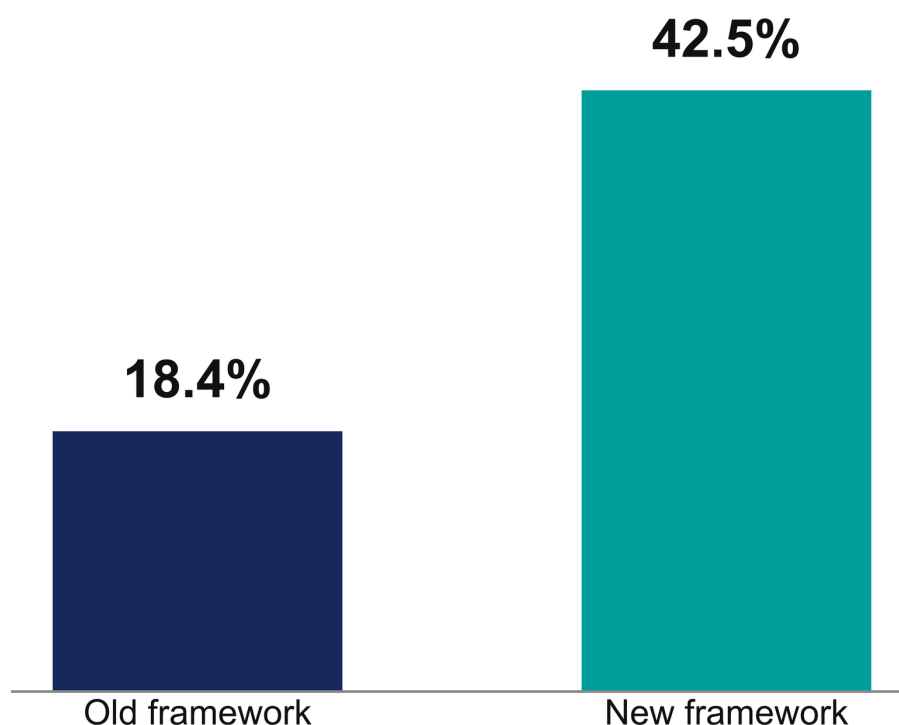
New framework inspection reports speak positively of suspension rates even when schools are performing poorly

The praise a school receives for its downward suspension trend does not actually predict whether anything else about the school's attendance and behaviour culture would pass muster at inspection. Among secondary reports where the suspension-specific text had been coded for tone against the separate Attendance and Behaviour grade, of the schools which had their current suspension record framed positively, usually noting that they were falling, reducing, "used appropriately." 76% were nonetheless rated Needs Attention or Urgent Improvement, which covers attendance, low-level disruption and general behaviour culture.

At the level of the case study, Alsop High School, inspected in February 2026, shows the pattern at its most stark: suspensions were framed positively for both whole-school and SEND pupils in a report whose grade for Attendance and Behaviour was nonetheless Urgent Improvement, driven by findings on unaddressed disruptive conduct and unreported discriminatory language.²⁸ Priory City of Lincoln Academy was inspected in

December 2025 and inspectors read "suspensions are high, though reducing" as a positive trajectory — while its Attendance and Behaviour section, graded Needs Attention, notes that "some staff feel unsupported in managing pupils' behaviour... so low-level disruption and apathy in lessons are not consistently challenged." ²⁹

Suspensions Are Mentioned More Than Twice as Often Under Ofsted's New Inspection Framework



Share of secondary school reports mentioning suspension/exclusion at all, same 499 schools inspected under both frameworks

Figure 10. Suspension mentions across the two frameworks.

Schools whose suspension record was flagged as a concern did no better — all of the schools in that group were also rated Needs Attention or Urgent Improvement on the broader standard. So a school's suspension narrative, whichever direction it points, carries almost no information about whether Ofsted's own broader behaviour judgement will be favourable or not. Ofsted itself, under the new framework, seems to be able to maintain the extraordinarily dissonant position that low or falling suspension rates are worthy of praise even in schools with a persistent or worsening behaviour and culture problem.

Ofsted's November 2025 framework for inspections and reporting also, structurally speaking, significantly increases the likelihood that suspension will be featured as an issue in the final report, from 18.4% of old framework reports to 42.5% of the same schools under the new framework. This increased prevalence of suspension and exclusions in inspection reports is exactly the sort of subtle pressure that brings suspension rates down.

What would actually be required to get suspensions down to pre-pandemic levels?

As we have seen, the pre-pandemic level of suspensions is never stated as a target, but it is the reference point against which every subsequent figure is compared unfavourably. It is worth establishing, therefore, what meeting it would actually require. In secondary schools, returning to pre-pandemic levels means removing around 422,000 suspensions a year: the difference between the 779,642 recorded in 2024/25 and the 357,715 recorded in 2018/19. This would represent a reduction of 54%, against the 6% fall achieved in the most recent year of data. At that pace it would take more than twelve years. To arrive by the end of this parliament would require suspensions to fall by around 18% a year, every year until 2028/29.

Almost none of that excess lies in the categories where a school has little discretion about what it records. Since 2020/21, schools have been able to record more than one reason for a suspension, and secondary suspensions now average 1.12 reasons each, so raw counts overstate growth since 2018/19. On the raw counts, suspensions citing persistent disruptive behaviour have grown by a factor of 3.8. Scaled for multiple-reason recording, the factor is around 3.4. On the same basis, suspensions citing verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult have grown by a factor of around 1.9, and physical assault against a pupil by around a third. Every other recorded reason combined (assault against an adult, bullying, racist abuse, sexual misconduct and the rest) is slightly below its pre-pandemic level.³⁰

The growth in the two softest and most discretionary categories accounts for almost the entire gap on its own. Persistent disruptive behaviour and verbal abuse against an adult sit around 436,000 above their pre-pandemic levels on the raw counts. Allowing for multiple-reason recording, the figure is around 390,000, more than 90% of the total gap of 422,000. Whatever has changed in English secondary schools since 2018/19, it has been recorded overwhelmingly under the two reasons where schools have the most options, and only marginally under the reasons where headteachers have little room for manoeuvre.^{31 32} Scottish data, while not a straightforward comparison, throws some light on the degree to which big shifts in the totals are driven primarily by infractions over which headteachers have the most room for manoeuvre.³³ Troublingly, the suspensions which cite reasons over which headteachers have the most leeway are also the most classroom-specific infractions, where reintroduction poses real risk to lost learning time. Outside of these totals, the Scottish comparative example shows that there is a point beyond which suspensions for certain categories cannot be lowered.

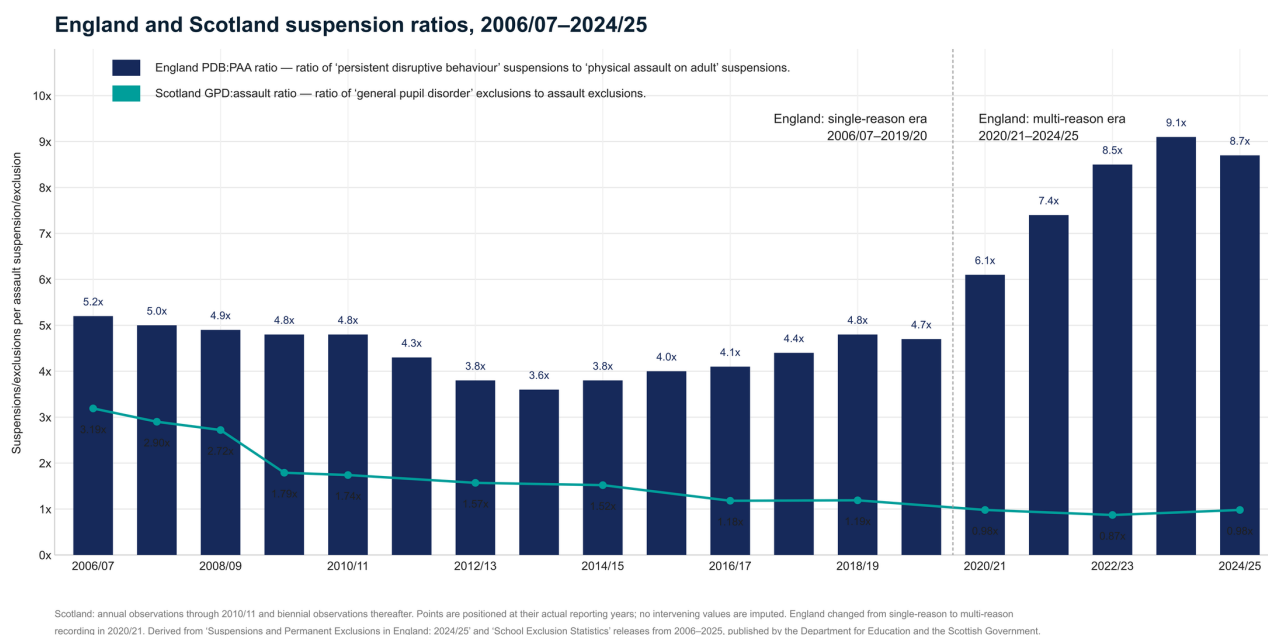


Figure 11. The nearest Scotland-England comparison shows there is a point beyond which even the softest, most discretionary reasons for suspension cannot be reduced.

Persistent disruptive behaviour is therefore the only category large enough to close a gap of this size. Returning it to its own pre-pandemic level would mean the number of secondary suspensions citing it falling by around 74%, from 496,868 to roughly 131,000. If the reduction were spread proportionally across every category instead, it would still have to fall by 54%; if it fell on persistent disruptive behaviour alone, by 85%. It is not plausible to suggest that you can pursue a policy of significant reductions in suspensions without significantly cutting the rates for the most commonly recorded reason for suspension in England.

Significant drops in suspension rates risk straining internal exclusion provision

Using DfE's own 2024/25 figures for state-funded secondary schools—779,642 suspensions across 3,462 schools, at an average length of 1.915 days derived from the underlying school census data ($1,492,990$ suspension-days $\div$ $779,642$ suspensions)—the capacity implications of a reduction on the scale required can be estimated directly. There are only three ways such a reduction can be delivered. Behaviour can improve, so that fewer incidents warrant a sanction at all. Incidents can be recoded, so that the same conduct is recorded under a different reason or handled without a formal suspension. Or, pupils can remain on site, with the sanction served as internal exclusion (IE). Only the first requires any change in pupil behaviour. Only the third imposes a measurable cost on schools. At present, nobody is measuring which of these three mechanisms is responsible for any observed reduction.

Assuming that half of the required reduction is absorbed on site—a midpoint chosen precisely because there is no national evidence on internal exclusion capacity from which to derive a better estimate—secondary schools would absorb approximately 211,000 additional internal exclusions each year. That is around 404,000 additional IE-days, or between 2.02 million and 2.63 million IE-hours (assuming a five- to six-and-a-half-hour

school day). A reduction delivered mainly through recoding would impose a considerably smaller burden than this; one delivered predominantly through internal exclusion, a considerably larger one.

Secondary schools account for around 85% of all suspensions despite educating well under half of England's pupils, so this burden would fall overwhelmingly on them. Spread across 3,462 state-funded secondary schools, an average school would see roughly 61 additional redirected suspensions each year, equivalent to around 117 additional IE-days, or between 583 and 758 additional IE-hours depending on whether break and lunch supervision is included. Across a 190-day school year, that is equivalent to almost two thirds of an additional pupil in internal exclusion every day, drawn from a school's most persistently disruptive pupils.

Nation/Region	Suspensions Redirected	Additional IE-days/yr	Additional IE-hours/yr (5hr/6.5hr day)
Secondary Total	~211,000	~404,000	2.02m–2.63m
Average secondary school	~61	~117	~583–758
North East	~95	~178	~891–1,158
North East (75th percentile)	~138	~259	~1,294–1,682
North East (90th percentile)	~274	~516	~2,579–3,353

Figure 12. Additional internal exclusion strain estimates for different school settings and their suspension level.

English suspensions, however, are geographically very uneven. The North East remains the region with England's highest secondary suspension rate, at 37.08 suspensions per 100 pupils compared with a national secondary rate of 21.24. The average secondary school in this region therefore faces a gap of 189 suspensions against the pre-pandemic benchmark, compared with 122 nationally. Under the assumptions used here, that equates to approximately 95 additional redirected suspensions each year, around 178 additional IE-days, or between 891 and 1,158 IE-hours. The distribution within the region is heavily skewed. The median North East secondary school faces a gap of 107 suspensions, while the school at the 75th percentile faces 276 and the school at the 90th percentile 549. At the 90th percentile, a school would absorb around 274 redirected suspensions, 516 IE-days and up to 3,353 IE-hours—the equivalent of nearly three additional pupils in internal exclusion every day of the school year.

These school-level estimates use URNs and GIAS predecessor-successor links to match 3,206 of the 3,462 secondary schools recorded in 2024/25, including 186 matches across a change of URN. The remaining 256 unmatched schools had a substantially higher mean 2024/25 suspension rate than matched schools (39.54 compared with 21.90 suspensions per 100 pupils), suggesting that the matched-school distribution is likely to understate the scale of regional variation. A benchmark based on the pre-pandemic period therefore asks comparatively little of some parts of England while requiring substantially larger reductions in regions whose schools already face the greatest behavioural pressures. These figures are based on the assumption that a redirected suspension becomes an internal exclusion of equivalent length. Because we have no national data on this, it is difficult to say whether in practice these are longer or shorter, but in any case it underlines the degree to which more comprehensive national data is needed on school use of IE.

Any new strain on IE capacity, in general, imposes new burdens on the lowest-paid staff in a school. High-needs pupils are far worse served inside IE than in the classroom because schools often use TAs and support staff, or senior members of staff without a regular classroom teaching role in the provision of internal exclusion.³⁴ In a system which is principally interested in the welfare and outcomes of those with the highest needs, it is easy to see how a backflow phenomenon of reintroducing persistently disruptive behaviour into classrooms could be the likely outcome of much greater strain on IE. With suspension increasingly constrained as a tool to preserve learning, unaddressed pupil behaviour cycling back into classrooms is essentially mechanically certain at current levels of IE capacity. DfE guidance for Inclusion Bases — for which new funding is available — states clearly that funding issued cannot be used to support provision of internal measures if they are issued as a sanction.³⁵ Without clear guidance on best practice and ring-fenced funding for IE alongside Inclusion Bases it is difficult to characterise the policy as anything other than an attempt to move policy failure off the books.

The rationale behind much of the behaviour improvement strategy is dubious

The Attendance and Behaviour hubs are channelling support to 5,000 schools and approximately 600,000 pupils the DfE believes to be in need of the most dramatic improvement, but much of what is taking place under the banner of standards-improvement has a dubious basis in research.³⁶ In the survey that accompanied the review into the Attendance and Behaviour Hubs, 52% of schools reported that their school had shifted towards Restorative & Relational Practice (R&RP) in a survey of teaching staff working alongside the hubs where the DfE is targeting attendance and behaviour improvement measures.³⁷

The efficacy of such a strategy is far more difficult to demonstrate. The best research available on restorative practice as a strategy in mainstream education is RAND's controlled trial across state-funded schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.³⁸ Among those pupils aged 11-14, academic outcomes worsened even where suspension rates had not moved, and for African American students and predominantly African American schools, both suspensions and achievement fell together — there are many variables at work in a school but the possibility that removing disruptive pupils from the room was preserving the learning of their peers is worth considering. Teachers and pupils diverged sharply in their assessment of what had happened: staff reported improved safety and management, while pupils reported the opposite. That gap recurred in the DfE's own interim evaluation of the Attendance and Behaviour Hubs programme, where staff reported positive behavioural change while pupils in the same schools reported behaviour had got worse.³⁹

Training around Restorative & Relational Practice therefore seems to create a learned blindness about outcomes. Training delivered and marketed as standards-improvement moves the goalposts around greater fairness and improved academic outcomes without actually driving up standards. The UK's own accrediting and training body performs this conflation directly in its core public description of the practice: it describes restorative approaches as "value-based and needs-led," part of a "broader ethos," and then, one paragraph later with no evidential bridge, states that "becoming a restorative school has many benefits, including increased attendance, reduced exclusions and improved achievement" — asserted as settled fact, with no citation and no acknowledgment of the contested research base.⁴⁰ Closer to home, in Scotland, where the SNP's education system has gone all-in on Restorative and Relational Practice, the response to the repeat

failure of the policy on both academic outcomes and teacher-surveyed behaviour metrics for ten years has been to accuse the profession of being insufficiently committed to the project.³³ Again we see the extent to which this belief system seems to inoculate its proponents against the evidence which might suggest it was failing.

In R&RP settings, outcomes claims are often elided with fairness and positive culture claims in ways which are as much a convenience for proponents as they are a hindrance for those who have taken part in the training to accurately perceive the results. This also goes some way to explaining the staff/pupil divergence running through the evidence: in RAND's Pittsburgh trial, pupils rated their own classroom's management and peer respect worse even as teachers, trained in the approach, rated classroom management and school safety as improved. In the DfE's hub evaluation, the divergence was measured at whole-school level, with staff reporting positive change while pupils' overall rating of school behaviour fell. In both cases, those trained in the framework had been given the vocabulary to describe a worse environment as progress, so their self-reporting may be accurately capturing that the process now feels fairer without demonstrating that it drives up standards. Pupils had no such vocabulary and consistently reported their environment, classroom or school-wide, as worse. Before the final report was published in January 2026, teachers were given two more rounds of surveys to submit their views. The DfE had picked up and run with the data that told them it was working, and declined to repeat the experiment of asking pupils their view.³⁷

Tom Bennett himself has argued that sanctions are essential components of any effective behaviour policy, not alternatives to relational approaches, and has suggested that examples of restorative practice used effectively as a whole-school strategy in a genuinely challenging environment are a “unicorn”.⁴¹ There is a significant risk, then, that the imperative of building good relationships with pupils and maintaining a positive school culture becomes, in practice, a substitute for the harder work of building that culture in the first instance — a way of layering intentionality onto an already weak and inconsistent system rather than fixing it.

A school that already lacks consistent enforcement is a school least equipped to run restorative practice well, requiring ‘follow-through’ that a failing school is shortest of, so the intervention is most likely to be successful where it is needed least, and least likely to produce success stories where it is adopted most.

Peer effects and the burden of proof problem

Classroom teachers possess extensive practical knowledge about the effect of severely disruptive pupils on the learning of their peers. This knowledge is systematically excluded from the formal evidence base as anecdotal and therefore necessarily incorrect. The gap between what practitioners observe and what the data can show corresponds precisely to what has and has not been compiled in public DfE data.

In the current policy environment, the burden of proof for this effect sits entirely with those who argue exclusion is frequently necessary, and that classroom disruption stemming from those pupils who are frequently excluded has measurable — though perhaps not decisive — effects on their peers. This side of the argument is asked to demonstrate harm to the majority from reduced suspension rates using data not designed to capture it. Those who argue for reduced suspension rates are never asked to demonstrate the absence of harm. The allocation of that burden reflects the prior assumptions embedded in the measurement framework. This imbalance in focus on those children who are regularly

suspended and those who are not, alters the priorities of the DfE to the point where removing suspension as a valid response to persistent disruption appears the best available solution. This constitutes a radical experiment the full outcome of which we do not presently have the instruments to monitor.

The data required to measure the effects of this vision of Inclusion on non-excluded pupils exists in principle but has not been assembled as public data. The available data on individual pupils kept by the DfE in the National Pupil Database is rich and comprehensive and the lack of interest from academia cannot therefore be reflective of a barren DfE data landscape. It is likely that research that brought into focus the welfare of non-suspended pupils as its primary unit of concern might be dismissed as promoting policy outcomes which were not immediately concerned with Inclusion. The fact remains that the research priorities of the EEF & ESRC as they stand are designed to centre the child who is suspended, or is statistically more likely to be suspended because of identified needs. In practical terms, this means that a child which may have disadvantages of their own which do not present in poor classroom behaviour is moved down the list of priorities for academic research. This child, trying their hardest in circumstances where peer behaviour ought to have triggered suspensions but did not, is not centred in academic research.

The funding architecture of English education research is principally concerned with the welfare of disadvantaged pupils and the provision and effectiveness of Inclusion measures. Systematic gaps in the research base fail to account for whether and to what extent those least frequently suspended are underserved by the whole-sector focus on those who are frequently suspended, or whose SEND status makes high levels of suspension more likely. NPD data is accessible only through the window of the priorities of academia, and the disruption peer effects field as it relates to English data lacks the same richness of academic work around disadvantaged pupils and Inclusion.

There is also a tension in incentives for the individual school whose headline Progress 8 figure is mildly affected by disruption. A school's residual can be much more acutely altered by the significant underperformance of highly excluded pupils than it can by the effects of disruption diluted across 29 other children. This imbalance in the measurement of the outcomes of the most suspended children in a school compared to those who are not suspended results in policy that is non-transformative for the vast majority of pupils. It is often said that classroom disruption is not as significant a factor as intake composition, resource allocation and teaching quality. However, treating any of these as siloed factors which influence pupil outcomes underplays the degree to which the very highest quality teaching is only possible in environments with extremely low levels of disruption, and that calm classrooms are the places where children with the highest needs succeed the most.

3. How should policymakers respond?

Start by measuring the consequences of this policy for everyone

Despite DfE policy being intent on reducing suspensions, at present it does not have derived variables assembled from data in the NPD to detect whether or not the policy is organically improving suspension rates, or whether those lower rates are coming at the expense of the majority. Exactly how such a measure could flag concerning drops in the outcomes beyond the core of most frequently suspended pupils is detailed in the Appendix (Figure 13). Progress 8 alone is ill-equipped at present to shed light on the results of the experiment the DfE is currently embarking on, and there should be substantially greater transparency around the achievement of pupils rarely if ever suspended at all.

Neither headline measure with regard to academic performance distinguishes between the outcomes of pupils with significant exclusion histories and the outcomes of pupils without. The data architecture for suspensions and the academic research ecosystem which analyses it were built entirely around the welfare and academic progress of frequently suspended pupils. The non-excluded pupil's experience of sharing a classroom with persistently disruptive peers is essentially invisible in academic research and pupil-level data. The justification behind an Inclusion policy with its own new elevated place in Ofsted inspection frameworks has not been rigorously tested at a national level.

Some studies of secondary schools in England, notably the recent work of Oppedisano & Thompson has attempted to identify the peer effects of learning alongside persistently disruptive pupils, but the research base lacks both breadth and depth in ways which raise questions about where academic research funding in the education space is allocated.^{42 43} Published research using National Pupil Database records has examined the relationship between exclusion and subsequent attainment, NEET status, and alternative provision outcomes. No public data disaggregates school-level Progress or Attainment by suspension days to show what school performance looks like with and without the most excluded pupils in the calculation. Every one of the most frequently suspended pupils had peers whose educational experience was shaped by persistent disruptive behaviour before, during, and after each suspension event. Those peers do not appear as a headline figure which can be scrutinised. This prevents us from estimating the effects of falling suspension rates on the attainment of non-suspended pupils, and the effects of more time in the classroom with pupils who may otherwise have been suspended under harsher school policies.

Build a national 'early warning' system for managed moves within DfE and Ofsted

Any policy shift away from the historically high levels of suspension in the post-pandemic period must be accompanied by significant reform to the transparency and school performance measuring regime around managed moves. The pressure to keep pupils off formal suspension statistics creates a perverse incentive to shuffle students from mainstream school to mainstream school without addressing the poor behaviour that leads to suspensions in the first place.

Despite the Timpson Review identifying managed moves as a key area of concern, ripe for greater transparency and monitoring, the DfE still lacks adequate tools for monitoring these outside of the intense scrutiny schools undergo during inspection. The DfE must be equipped with instruments which aid in the actual monitoring of transfers now that they have data points available in the 26/27 school census to scrutinise voluntary transfers. Monitoring this issue on a statistical basis is clearly complex and the variations across the sector of different geographical contexts, school sizes and levels of deprivation complicate any measure designed to scrutinise inappropriate use of managed moves. Nonetheless, the Government has committed to trying to reduce the number of managed moves across the system, and so ought to have tools to analyse which schools are conducting managed moves at levels which give cause for concern.

A school with high levels of deprivation will over-select for students who are more likely to be suspended on average. It will have higher rates of SEND, students on Free School Meals, EHCPs and Looked After Children. All of these are factors which massively increase the likelihood of a child being suspended, and therefore by extension being ‘managed out’ on a voluntary transfer. Measures such as the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) are already used for calculating Pupil Premium, and contextualising school performance. It, along with other measures, can and should be used to assist in measuring managed move outflows and increasing accountability for schools too reliant on them relative to their particular deprivation context. An example mechanism (EMMO) has been detailed in the Appendix.

Make sending schools accountable for pupils subject to managed moves

As well as having no reliable central record of managed moves — how many occur, which school sends, receives or when in a pupil’s career this takes place — the lack of continuous statistical accounting for managed moves in the English system creates a number of perverse incentives for schools which initiate moves. For Progress 8 purposes, responsibility for a pupil’s result is generally determined by which school they are recorded as attending at the January Year 11 census. A pupil who moves before that point will therefore normally contribute to the receiving school’s Progress 8 score, regardless of how much of their Key Stage 4 education they completed at the sending school. Even receiving schools have been identified as playing games with the timing of managed moves around the Spring census in order to delay registration of children until after the cutoff.⁷

Under the current system, a school willing to offer a pupil a fresh start can acquire responsibility for that pupil’s entire Progress 8 outcome if the transfer takes place before the January Year 11 census, despite having had responsibility for only part of their Key Stage 4 education. The receiving school therefore bears the same performance-measure consequence for a pupil arriving late in Year 10 as it does for a pupil educated there throughout Key Stage 4.¹⁵ Studies into managed moves have never properly identified a distribution curve for the number of days of suspension accumulated prior to a transfer, and have instead focused on age at time of move, or whether they had at least one suspension on record in the 12 months prior, so it is difficult to say exactly where any threshold should sit in an early warning system for suspended pupils being moved on for the convenience of schools. This is, however, a significant issue for which continuous monitoring systems need to improve.⁴⁴

Once managed moves are visible and categorised within the system, shifting and redistributing the accountability for them would require an alteration to the way that the Progress 8 scores for these pupils are represented in figures. The Centre for Social Justice has in the past called for a separate mandatory record in the schools census of the outcomes of pupils subject to managed moves, but this does little to confront the incentives problem for the sending and receiving school.⁴⁵ In addition to this measure, it should be the case that if a child is subject to a managed move at any point during the final three years of their secondary education, the number of days they were on roll between Year 9 and Year 11 is taken into account in the allocation of Progress 8 residuals. One possible method for how this could be allocated is detailed in the Appendix.

Contextualise what policies are necessary, not behaviour expectations

Recent commentary around Ofsted inspections and briefing from the DfE would suggest that changes to the November 2025 framework are coming, and that greater attention should be paid to school context. This is worrying because the education and children's charity blob are together contextualising precisely the things which risk undermining school standards the most. Deprivation is important contextual information when inspecting a school, that is not controversial even among critics of Labour policy past and present. All too often, however, context is omitted from the assessment when judging what type of behaviour policy, suspension rate, or sanctions system may be appropriate to ensure the calm, safe running of schools. Where intake is most challenging, that may well mean more rigid and uncompromising school policies, and consequently a suspension rate potentially well above the national average. This is, however, rarely considered by critics of rigid school behaviour policies.

Ofsted and local authorities ought to judge a school's use of sanctions by whether the school delivers good academic outcomes for children. What a school should never do is use context to alter its expectations for outcomes or behaviour. Paying too much heed to 'context' in this way would risk exactly the sort of return to the bad old days prior to Progress 8 where schools which routinely failed pupils were writing off their own failure as a consequence of who they were teaching. A child failed by a school in South Bradford, inner Portsmouth or Newcastle is no more acceptable because of where they call home. Instead, schools should be given broad powers to suspend at the rates they believe are necessary to maintain calm, safe learning environments and cultures of high expectations, or to recover them where at present they do not exist. In addition to this, the Department for Education should take seriously its responsibility to shield schools from vexatious complaints and brigading if it judges that school to be performing well under the frameworks that exist for this purpose.

It is untenable for the DfE to simply sit back and issue messages of support while allowing schools to be subject to 'punishment by procedure' of the kind seen in Hackney against Mossbourne Victoria Park Academy.⁴⁶ The DfE should push a much firmer line on the vexatious use of mechanisms like Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews than it, at present, has shown itself willing to do. This lever is a significant vulnerability within the current system and will doubtless be used again in the future against schools with the firmest approaches to behaviour.

In practice, this means the Department should state plainly in statutory guidance that Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (LCSPRs) exist solely to learn from cases where a

child has been seriously harmed and agencies may have failed to work together, rather than becoming embroiled in adjudicating disputes over a school behaviour policy which is plainly lawful. Where a complaint concerns a policy consistent with the Department's own Behaviour in Schools guidance, the presumption should be that it falls outside the scope of safeguarding review and is routed through the existing complaints process.

The DfE should also be prepared to intervene directly when a local safeguarding partnership strays into territory that properly belongs to inspectors, and to give schools facing sustained campaigns practical support, whether legal advice or help with communications, rather than leaving headteachers to absorb the cost and distraction alone. Schools that genuinely harm children should be held to account, of course. But if LCSPRs are more regularly abused in this way, the future for schools with more challenging catchment areas is a system in which those doing most to transform the life chances of disadvantaged pupils are exposed to attrition by process. In this scenario, the safest available option could well be lowering their expectations, and that would be a poor outcome for the children who need these schools the most.

Conclusion

The case for a rapid, sector-wide reduction in suspensions rests on a reckless, faulty assumption of a causal link: that fewer suspensions and higher standards are one and the same thing. Analysis of six pairs of Attainment 8 and five pairs of Progress 8 data since 15/16 shows no relationship between falling suspension rates and improved outcomes robust enough to bear the weight the DfE, Ofsted, and the children's charity sector have placed on it. Where a relationship does appear, it cannot be separated from the wider institutional changes that the schools showing it are disproportionately likely to be undergoing. The dramatic case studies so often used to sell the policy to the sector and the public are precisely where the link looks strongest and is least able to bear a causal reading.

The July 2026 statutory guidance omits what is consistently its largest single reason for suspension year after year from the list of example reasons for suspension. The DfE's own briefing suggested that **most of those suspensions will now be expected to be dealt with through internal exclusion — which is entirely unmeasured at national level, frequently under-resourced, and explicitly excluded from new ring-fenced Inclusion Base funding.**¹⁶ This is exactly what has happened north of the border under the disastrous policies enacted under the SNP. Based on estimates of shifting suspension patterns using the Department's own figures, this amounts to new capacity strains landing hardest on the schools and regions already suspending most. A headline suspension count that falls because behaviour has moved to a statistically invisible room inside a school is scarcely evidence of a behaviour crisis resolved, and much more evidence of a data architecture built to notice only the harm to the education of a child who is suspended.

A government serious about school standards should stop treating a falling suspension count as evidence of success in its own right. It should build the statistical infrastructure to see the whole picture — internal exclusion capacity and outcomes, managed move flows, and disaggregated progress data for the most- and least-suspended pupils alike — before pressing further on a policy whose principal effect, on current evidence, is to **move the same problem out of view rather than to solve it.** Until that infrastructure exists, neither the Department nor the public can tell the difference between a school that has improved behaviour and one that has stopped recording it.

This report does not contend that suspension should remain at current levels for their own sake, nor that schools should be free of scrutiny for how they use it — that would be unnecessary and a waste of learning time. Labour policy, however, built to drive a number down without first establishing what that number represents is not a serious response to a behaviour crisis. The tools to monitor who bears the consequences already exist in principle but they have not been assembled, because the census architecture, research and policy ecosystem is oriented almost entirely around the welfare of the pupils being removed or likely to be removed from the classroom, and almost not at all around the welfare of those who remain in it.

The most crucial thing to note about the likely direction of Labour policy in education since July 2024 is that **we have done this all before.** If the Labour government's well-intentioned desire to bring down suspensions results in the kind of pressure exerted on schools between 1997 and 2010 then they risk undermining the progress made up to this point. **Any reform has to be weighed against the simple fact that English education is not broken.**

Recommendations in full

1. **Publish distinct progress and attainment statistics, at school-level, for pupils with ten days or more of suspensions in a given year, as well as disaggregated progress and attainment statistics for those pupils with no suspensions on record at all.** The absence of these derived variables within public data is a key transparency problem which undermines the ability of parents to make informed decisions in the best interests of their child.
2. **Ofsted inspection guidelines should make clear that a suspension rate significantly above national average should not by itself lead to a poor Inclusion or Attendance and Behaviour judgement.** DfE should cease to use pre-pandemic levels of suspension as a baseline and take into account how different school contexts can sometimes make suspension levels above national average necessary to maintain standards.
3. **The Department should identify the peer-effects of persistent disruption as an Area of Research Interest. They should collect class composition data for English, Maths and Science** currently held locally in school MIS databases but not utilised at national level, and make that data available for large-scale academic research.
4. **The Department should conduct a top-to-bottom audit of training providers and local authority working groups involved in the delivery of DfE school improvement initiatives.** At present there are warning signs that training providers place too great an emphasis on feel-good solutions to the behaviour crisis with dubious backing in research. Future evaluations of these DfE initiatives should maintain a pupil survey component at every stage.
5. **School performance measures, including but not limited to Progress 8, should be adjusted to reflect the number of days between Year 9 and Year 11 that a school was responsible for a child subject to an in-year transfer.** Pupils moving under these arrangements should confer a degree of accountability weighted with regard to the time they were in attendance at both schools during their Key Stage 4 education.
6. **Publish statutory guidance on the use of internal exclusion including staffing requirements, adult-to-child ratios and learning expectations for pupils.** The usage of Internal Exclusion and its capacity across the sector should be recorded and published as part of national data, down to at least regional level.

Methodology and scope

Geography

The report focuses specifically on England because education systems across the United Kingdom are devolved and England has its own guidance, rules and data architecture as it relates to suspensions, attainment and progress. The analysis brings together publicly available data on suspensions and exclusions, attainment and, where available, Progress 8. A focus on English education is also the best way of exploring the questions raised in this report, primarily because its data is so rich. England's is the only British system where pupil outcomes can be measured against primary school performance to derive anything like a true 'value-added' measure.

On a more detailed level, pupil and school-level performance data in England is rich and measured through two headline figures. The first, Attainment 8 (A8), is a pupil's raw exam-result score: their best eight GCSE results, with English and Maths counted twice. Progress 8 (P8) is the 'value added' school and pupil performance measure. Progress 8 for a pupil is the gap between what they achieved and the expectation based on KS2 SATs. The published P8 score for a school is the average of this gap across one Year 11 cohort. A positive score means pupils outperformed expectations on average and a negative score means they underperformed. It is the primary, headline measure of school-level performance used in league tables, by Ofsted, and by the DfE to judge school effectiveness.⁴⁷ P8 is useful primarily because it is designed to account for differences in pupil intake without creating a system of low expectations. The problem, however, for the analysis conducted in this report is that the 24/25 batch of school leavers (and the upcoming 25/26 batch) do not have a Progress 8 score available, and data for 19/20 and 20/21 was contaminated by the Coronavirus pandemic, school closures and the cancellation of two years of GCSE exams. The one consistent dataset we have is not prior-attainment adjusted. The DfE also holds pupil-level suspension records, but these cannot be linked to individual pupils' attainment outcomes outside a research setting with access to the National Pupil Database.

Phase

Secondary schools account for 85% of all suspensions in England despite educating well under half of the pupil population. A primary-inclusive analysis, therefore, would dilute the picture with a phase where suspensions are comparatively rare and the policy's relevance negligible. Restricting to secondary is also a precondition for discovering what, if any, justification there might be for lowering suspensions. Attainment 8 and Progress 8 are Key Stage 4 measures and do not exist for primary schools. Tracking the same schools across a suspension-rate change and a comparable outcome measure requires that measure to exist for every school in the sample; primary schools would have to be dropped from the outcome analysis, which would compromise the consistency of method.

Finally, the behaviour categories driving the current policy debate are themselves concentrated in secondary. Persistent disruptive behaviour, the category most implicated in Ofsted's Attendance and Behaviour judgements and in the driven-down itself, is overwhelmingly a secondary-age phenomenon in DfE's own published data. Additionally, the post-pandemic "behaviour crisis" framing that has shaped the policy response is in practice a secondary-school phenomenon even where the guidance is nominally written for all phases.

Notes on figures

Figure 1. Suspensions by academic year. Total suspensions across state-funded primary, secondary and special schools in England, 2010/11–2024/25. The shaded bars mark years affected by COVID-19 restrictions.

Figure 2. Attainment 8 direction by suspension-rate change. Share of matched secondary schools whose Attainment 8 rose, was unchanged or fell between 2023/24 and 2024/25. Suspension changes are measured per 100 pupils; “roughly unchanged” means a change within ± 0.5 . The top-100 rows are subsets of the rise and fall groups. The prior-year top-100 suspenders who cut comprise 78 eligible schools.

Figure 3. Attainment 8 among high-suspending schools that cut their rate. For each of six year-pairs, the share whose Attainment 8 rose among the previous year’s 100 highest suspension-rate schools that subsequently cut their rate by more than 0.5 per 100 pupils and had valid attainment data. The final bar is the same 78-school group shown in Figure 2. The first comparison crosses GCSE grading changes.

Figure 4. Progress 8 change by suspension-rate change group. Mean change in school-level Progress 8 across five valid year-pairs. The largest-rise and largest-fall groups each contain 200 school-year comparisons; a school may appear in more than one year-pair.

Figure 5. School type among schools with falling suspension rates and rising Attainment 8. Sponsor-led academies account for 21.7% of all eligible Attainment 8 comparisons, 17.7% of moderate suspension-rate falls and 58.5% of the 200 largest falls selected from schools whose Attainment 8 also rose. School type is recorded at the start of each comparison.

Figure 6. Sponsor-led share under the two school performance measures. The Attainment 8 and Progress 8 analyses use separate eligible samples. For each measure, the extreme group comprises the 200 largest suspension-rate falls where that measure also rose; it is not a sample of all large falls.

Figure 7. Suspension rates by school type. Unweighted mean number of suspension events per 100 pupils at state-funded secondary schools, 2015/16–2024/25. School type is recorded separately in each year, allowing for academy conversion during the period.

Figure 8. Suspension rates following an Ofsted downgrade. Among 104 matched secondary schools downgraded at a graded inspection in 2023/24, the share whose suspension rate fell, rose or remained within ± 0.5 per 100 pupils in 2024/25. This describes downgraded schools only; it does not estimate an effect of inspection.

Figure 9. Repeat suspension events in secondary schools. Percentage of suspension events beyond a pupil’s first suspension in the same academic year, 2006/07–2024/25. This is a share of events not necessarily the share of pupils suspended more than once.

Figure 10. Suspension mentions under two Ofsted frameworks. Share of reports mentioning suspension or exclusion among the same 499 secondary schools inspected under both frameworks: 18.4% under the old framework and 42.5% under the new.

Figure 11. Recorded reasons for suspension in England and Scotland. Ratio of suspensions citing persistent disruptive behaviour to those citing physical assault on an adult in England, alongside the nearest Scottish ratio of general pupil disorder to assault. Scottish observations become biennial after 2010/11; England moved from single-reason to multiple-reason recording in 2020/21. The reason categories are not identical across nations but they are the nearest equivalents. The relationship between their two respective reason-pairs is what is informative here.

Figure 12. Internal-exclusion capacity estimates. Estimated suspensions, days and hours redirected on site if half the reduction needed to return secondary suspensions to their 2018/19 level became internal exclusion. The North East rows use the regional average which is 1.88 days.

Figure 13. Illustrative school monitoring system. Simulated suspension rates and pupil-group outcome residuals show how a school might be flagged for further review. The schools and values are illustrative; flags are prompts to investigate, not findings about real schools.

Figure 14. Illustrative allocation of Progress 8 after managed moves. Worked example comparing the displayed school-level scores under the current allocation and a proposed method that divides two transferred pupils' Progress 8 contributions according to time spent at each school. The pupils, schools and scores are hypothetical.

Appendix I: Accountability mechanisms

Excess Managed Move Outflow

At present, there is no measure of how often a school moves pupils on, relative to what its intake would predict. A robust version of this measure would need to compare each school's managed-move rate against the rate typical of schools with a similar intake — deprivation, SEND prevalence, and the number of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan all raise the likelihood that a pupil is moved on, so a raw league table of outflow rates would simply be a league table of deprivation, not a measure of anything schools are doing wrong.

Any such model would also need to avoid two specific failure modes. First, a school with only a couple of hundred pupils on roll will see its outflow rate swing wildly from a single extra managed move, in a way a much larger school will not, raising alarm bells on small schools purely because their numbers are noisier, not because anything unusual is happening there. Second, schools within the same trust, or under similar local pressures, often move together in ways a purely individual-school model will not pick up.

Beyond deprivation and SEND, a workable version would also need to account for a school's size, whether it sits in a rural or urban area, and how many other schools are within realistic travelling distance — a managed move requires somewhere for a pupil to go, so a school's geography materially affects how many moves are even possible, independent of anything the school itself is doing. And because a single year's figures can be a blip — one difficult cohort, one local circumstance — the measure should be built from several years of data together, so that what's analysed is against a genuine pattern.

Managed Move Accountability Share

There is currently no mechanism for splitting responsibility for a pupil's results between a sending and a receiving school when a managed move happens in the years leading up to their GCSEs. Under current rules, a school that takes on a pupil before the January census in Year 11 carries their entire Progress 8 result, regardless of how little time it actually had to influence it. The sending school carries none of it.

A more equitable approach would divide responsibility for that pupil's Attainment 8 and Progress 8 outcome between the schools involved in proportion to the number of days each had them on roll, from the start of Year 9 to the end of Year 11. The window begins in Year 9 rather than Year 10 because many schools now start GCSE courses a year early, and in most cases will begin the serious work of getting children ready for exam-style questions. Year 9 and Year 10 are disproportionately the most common years for managed moves.

Under this method, a pupil who moves at the end of Year 10 leaves two thirds of their result with the sending school. A pupil who arrives at the start of the Year 11 summer term leaves around nine tenths with the sending school. The later a move takes place, the more of the outcome stays with the school that taught the pupil for longest, which closes off late moves as a route to shedding poor results. Because the window spans three years, a receiving school taking a late transfer carries only a small fraction of the result, and is not deterred from offering a fresh start.

Counting days rather than terms avoids cliff edges at term boundaries, and uses entry and leaving dates already recorded in the school census. This depends on a reliable national record of who was subject to a managed move, when, and between which schools, but this is soon to be recorded in the school census from 2026/27.

Appendix II: Tables and Visual Examples



Figure 13. An example system, using simulated school data, for monitoring the effects of suspensions on the non-excluded majority.

Illustrative scenario for two pupils who transferred between schools partway through Key Stage 4, comparing how each school's Attainment 8 and Progress 8 figures are affected under the current Department for Education method versus a proposed method based on days on roll at each school from the start of Year 9.

■ P8 below expected ■ P8 above expected



Figure 14. Managed Moves: current vs. proposed measures for allocating P8.

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