



State of Education

SURVEY REPORT 2017

Rising to the challenge:

Examining the pressures on schools and how they are responding

Join the debate

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Foreword

For this year's State of Education report, The Key held focus groups with a selection of our members to identify the challenges and opportunities they can see on the horizon for schools over the next two years. Armed with these headline findings, we used our annual survey to delve more deeply into these issues and what they mean for our education system. More than 2,000 school leaders and governors shared their views.

In the pages that follow, we uncover the real impact of funding constraints and explore how sweeping changes to assessment and accountability are affecting school leaders and pupils alike. We highlight an increase in examination stress and how this is affecting pupil wellbeing, and look at what a reported narrowing of the curriculum might mean for pupil outcomes and future prospects. We reveal, also, the passion and creativity of the education workforce, and the resourcefulness which underpins the sector's response to so many of the challenges it faces.

Our report champions solutions where the profession has found them. Readers will notice the entrepreneurial spirit of some school leaders, who are hosting weddings in their school grounds and running community fitness classes to raise funds and make the most of their resources. You'll come away with a sense of the compassion and dedication of school leaders, many of whom are fighting to support the mental health of the children they work with.



Let me now hand you over to the people leading our schools, so that we can listen to their voices and support the sector to learn from all those working within it.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fergal Roche". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.

Fergal Roche, CEO
The Key

1. CHALLENGES ON THE HORIZON

Budget pressure is set to be the biggest challenge for half of all schools nationally over the coming academic year. Among primary schools, managing teacher and school leader workload is second most likely to be the top challenge ahead, while in secondary schools it's teacher recruitment and retention.

51%

of school leaders expect budget pressures/lack of funding to be the biggest challenge for their school to manage in the 2017/18 academic year

Budget crunch unites schools across the country

Budget pressure tops the chart of demands on school leaders nationally for the coming academic year, with more than five in 10 (51%) expecting this to be their greatest challenge from a list of 16 options. This represents a significant increase on last year, when budget pressures/lack of funding was the top concern overall, but for three in 10 (31%) school leaders.

With mainstream schools set to experience an 8% real-term reduction in funding¹ between 2014-15 and 2019-20, according to the National Audit Office (NAO), it is not surprising that making ends meet looms large for so many school leaders.

Predictably, school business managers are feeling the strain most, with almost three-quarters (74%) citing budget pressure as their biggest challenge ahead. Nearly six in 10 (58%) headteachers agree – with the difference most likely down to the broader scope of their role.

While funding is the biggest challenge on the horizon across all school types, there are variances between those in multi-academy trusts (MATs) and standalone schools. More than four in 10 school leaders (43%) in MATs put budget pressure first, compared to just over half of their counterparts in single academies (53%) and maintained schools (52%) – perhaps a reflection of the flexibility within some MATs to redistribute funding between academies as needed.

What other significant challenges lie ahead?

Budget pressure unites primary and secondary leaders: it is the top challenge ahead for each phase (50% and 53% respectively). However, teacher and school leader workload is second on the list of challenges among primary schools (12%), while in secondary settings it's teacher recruitment and retention (15%).

We see a similar picture when looking at the results by location: budget pressure is the biggest challenge ahead for school leaders in both rural (55%) and urban (49%) settings, but views diverge geographically after this. Teacher and school leader workload is expected to be the biggest challenge for one in 10 (12%) rural settings, followed by teacher recruitment and retention (7%), whereas the order is reversed in urban schools (11% and 10% respectively).



Among school leaders in MATs, the challenge of teacher recruitment and retention appears to be more widespread, with 17% putting this top of their list.

Providing for pupils with special educational needs or disabilities is expected to be the biggest challenge for 5% of primary school leaders, compared to 2% of their secondary school counterparts.

What do you expect to be the biggest challenge for your school to manage over the next academic year (2017/18)?

Top five most-cited challenges:



Governor perspective

A lack of funding is also a concern for the majority of school governors. Eight in 10 (79%) governors expect budget pressure to be a challenge for their board to manage or oversee in the 2017/18 academic year. Monitoring school performance under the new performance measures, and managing staff wellbeing and morale, also rank highly as expected challenges for 59% and 47% of governors respectively in the year ahead.



What do you expect to be the biggest challenge for your school to manage over the next academic year (2017/18)?

Top five most-cited challenges by school status and location:



2. SCHOOL FUNDING

More than six in 10 schools will not be able to balance their budget next year without making savings, and less than one-fifth of school leaders believe the proposed national funding formula will make budget forecasting easier. Nevertheless, a creative and entrepreneurial spirit is taking root across the sector: where they can, schools are hosting weddings, opening nurseries, offering swimming pools up to the local community and partnering with local businesses to generate extra income. However, higher base funding rates and higher levels of special educational needs funding are the funding changes that school leaders say are really needed to make a difference.

64%

of schools need to make savings to balance their budget in the 2017-18 financial year

42%

are letting their buildings and facilities to generate additional income

29%

think higher base funding rates is the funding change that would have the most positive impact on their school over the next three years

Budget pressures mean making savings, but how much?

Across the board, more than six in 10 (64%) school leaders say they need to make savings to balance their budget in the 2017-18 financial year. The NAO reports that schools are facing the greatest cuts in spending power since the mid-1990s², so these findings are as expected.

The secondary phase is worst-hit: a quarter (26%) of secondary schools will need to cut more than 8% of their expected costs, alongside nearly two in 10 (17%) primaries. A further 23% of secondary and 16% of primary schools will need to make savings of 5-8%.

While the majority of school leaders in every region need to make some savings, one in four (25%) in the south east needs to cut more than 8% of expected costs, in comparison to just over one in 10 (13%) in Yorkshire and Humberside and the east Midlands. The impact of budget pressures is also more wide-reaching in coastal areas: 71% of coastal schools need to make savings in 2017-18, compared to 63% of those inland.

Financial autonomy and economies of scale: how are MATs faring?

Three-quarters (74%) of leaders in standalone academies need to make savings to balance their budget in 2017-18, alongside nearly two-thirds (65%) of those in MATs and just over six in 10 (62%) in maintained schools. Many schools in MATs, though, are having to make bigger savings: nearly a quarter (22%) need to cut more than 8% of their expected costs in 2017-18, compared to 20% of single academies and 18% of maintained schools.

While financial autonomy was the most-cited reason for academy conversion³ in a 2014 Reform/SSAT survey, there is clearly more to be done to help these schools stay solvent. Academy chains are expected to play a role: the government expects high-quality sponsors to deliver economies of scale and stronger financial sustainability⁴ – and with 97% of all academies which opened in 2015/16 now part of a MAT⁵, now is the time for sponsors to step up.

To balance the budget in the 2017-18 financial year, my school would need to make savings of:



For a MAT to be financially viable, however, current evidence suggests it needs to have at least 1,200 pupils on roll⁶ to cover just the essential costs, and around 5,000 pupils⁷ to begin reducing average costs across the trust. On 8 March 2017, fewer than half (47%) of MATs met the first criteria⁸, and just under 4% met the second, suggesting that existing MATs would need to grow considerably to solve the budget challenges school leaders are facing.

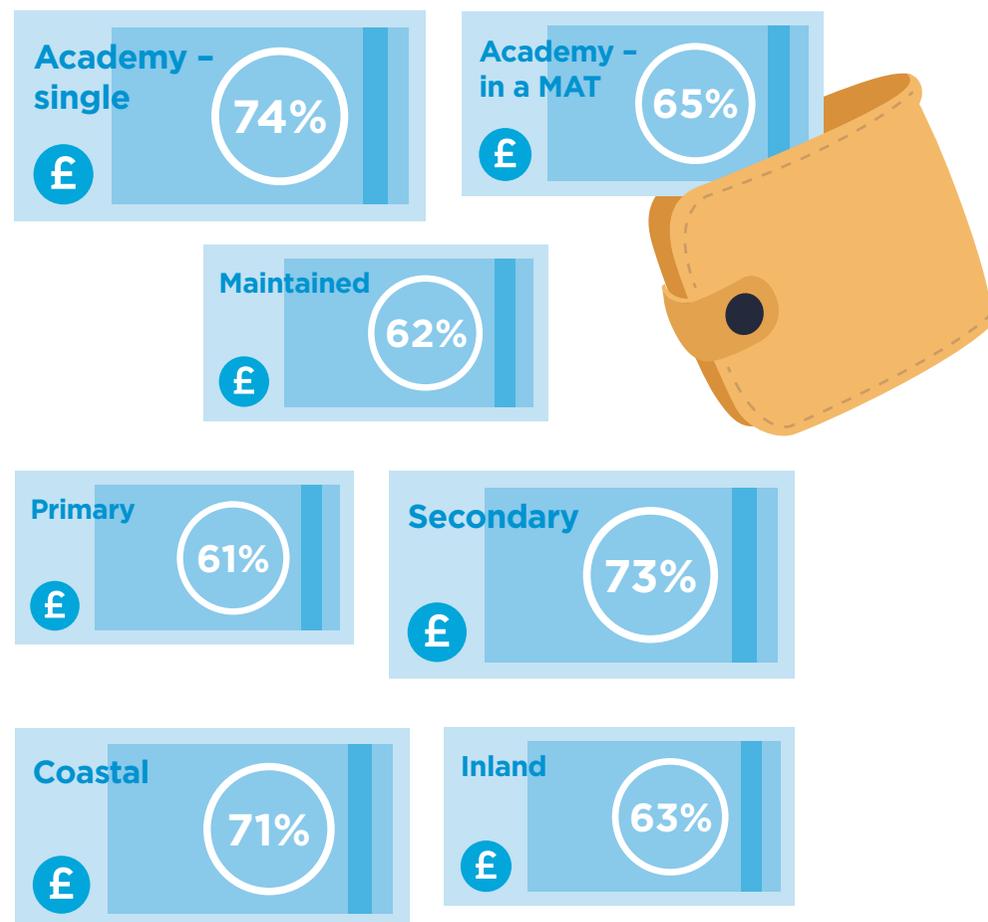
Can the necessary savings be made?

Looking slightly longer term, we asked school leaders how confident they are in their school's ability to make any necessary savings over the next 12-24 months. The results are almost evenly split: nearly half (45%) of all leaders think that essential savings can be made and 50% feel less confident, with no notable difference between those in primary and secondary schools.

School business managers tend to be optimistic, with almost six in 10 (58%) confident of making savings, in contrast to just over four in 10 (44%) headteachers. More than one in 10 (14%) headteachers is 'not at all' confident their school can make the necessary savings.

Despite being expected to fare better from the redrafted national funding formula, a slightly smaller proportion of rural schools (41%) than urban settings (46%) is confident of being able to make necessary cuts.

Percentage of school leaders in different types of schools who need to make savings to balance their budget in the 2017/18 financial year:



Percentage of school leaders who have to make savings in the next financial year and expect to see the following changes in their school as a result:

Five most-cited changes:

Primary



69%
Reduction in support staff



50%
Restricted use of resources across the school



45%
More resourcefulness in the way we do things



45%
Less investment in staff CPD



39%
Reduced investment in development and maintenance of premises

Secondary



68%
Reduction in support staff



68%
Bigger class sizes



64%
Reduction in teaching staff



57%
Narrower curriculum offer



48%
Less investment in staff CPD

Staffing, buildings and the curriculum: where savings will hit most

Staffing budgets will be squeezed most in 2017-18, with two-thirds (66%) of all school leaders who need to make cuts expecting to make most savings here. This tallies both with the proportion of school budgets devoted to staff costs (typically around three-quarters) and saving patterns to date. A Department for Education (DfE) study, for example, found that between 2009-10 and 2013-14, 70% of a sample of maintained schools reduced their staffing expenditure⁹.

More than two-thirds (68%) of school leaders who have to make savings in 2017-18 plan to reduce support staff, and more than a third (37%) expect to reduce teaching staff. Secondary schools are more than twice as likely to cut teaching staff than primary schools, with 64% versus 30% citing this to be the case respectively. This difference may be largely due to the greater number of teaching staff in secondary schools. It might also be related to the fact that 57% of secondary schools plan to narrow the curriculum as a result of budget strains compared to just one in 10 primary schools. Where subjects are dropped, the need for particular subject teachers passes too.

The need to make savings also means bigger class sizes for almost one-third (31%) of schools. Again, the difference between primary and secondary schools here is notable (20% and 68% respectively), with the infant-class size limit likely to be contributing to this contrast.

We can also expect less investment in teachers' professional development in nearly half (46%) of all schools, despite quality of teaching being known to have the greatest impact on pupil outcomes¹⁰. It remains to be seen whether these cuts can amount to the £1.7 billion the DfE expects schools to save in workforce costs by 2019-20¹¹.

Less investment in development and maintenance of premises is expected in nearly four in 10 (39%) schools that need to make savings, and it seems that government plans to provide £216 million of extra investment in improving existing buildings¹² will not be enough. As the NAO reports¹³, at least £6.7 billion is needed to restore all school buildings to a satisfactory condition.

Resourcing the curriculum is also likely to prove difficult over the next 24 months, with only half (51%) of school leaders feeling confident this will be possible to do adequately. Among schools that need to make cuts, the budget for curriculum resources is the second most likely to see the biggest hit, behind staffing, with 8% expecting to make savings here. In some schools, teachers are said to be "resourcing lessons out of their own pockets".

"Schools have to look at themselves as businesses, the leaders as entrepreneurs who think creatively about what opportunities they can capitalise on... It's amazing what you can achieve with some creativity and willpower."

Stuart Pywell, Headteacher, St Stephen's Junior School

Beyond savings: income-generation and financial efficiency in action

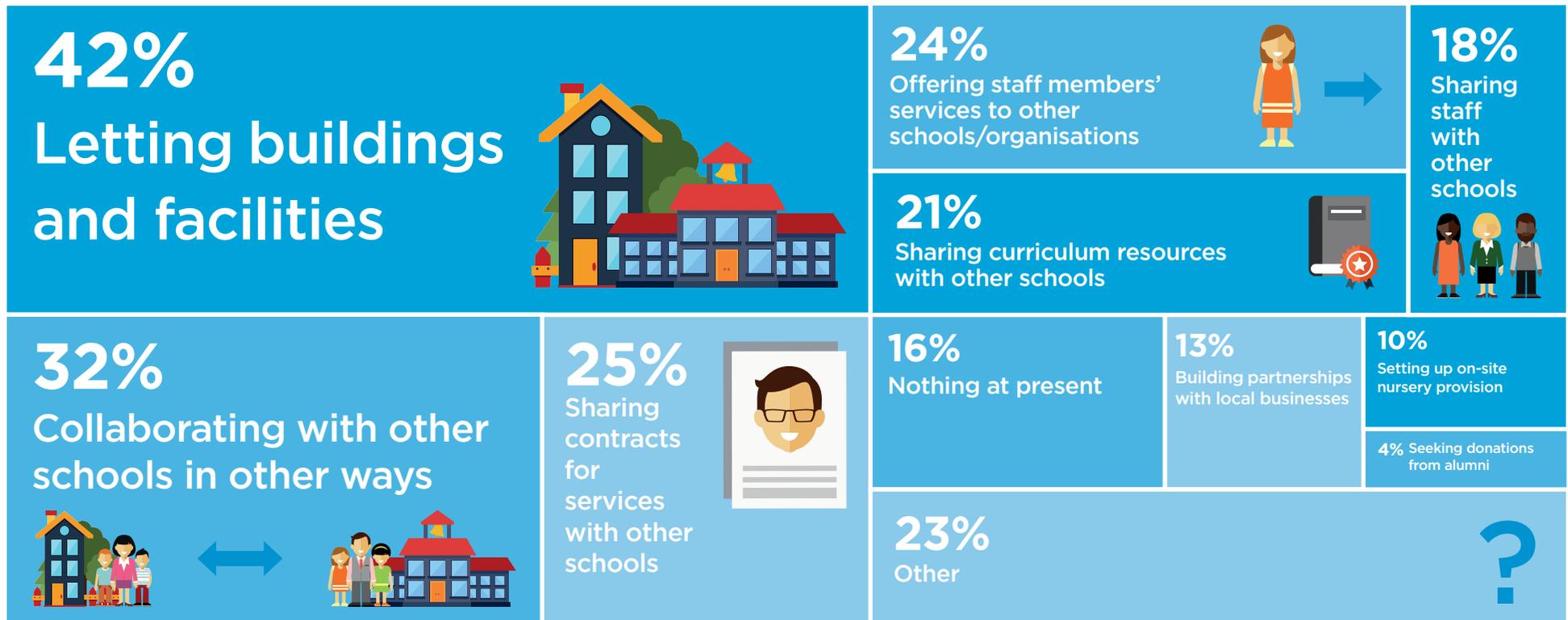
While almost three-quarters (72%) of school leaders say they are not confident in their school's ability to generate additional income to combat budget pressures, many are adopting an entrepreneurial spirit to source significant and much-needed extra money.

We asked school leaders what solutions they are implementing, if any, to achieve greater financial efficiency or generate additional income. More than four in 10 (42%) schools are letting their buildings and facilities – some are offering wrap-around and holiday childcare, for instance, or opening the swimming pool after hours. More than one in 10 (13%) is building partnerships with local businesses, and a similar proportion (10%) is setting up on-site nursery provision.

One school's combined initiatives raise up to £300,000 a year, from activities such as renting out the school hall almost every week-night for anything from church groups to weddings, birthday parties or language classes.

Many schools are also working together to achieve economies of scale: nearly a quarter are sharing contracts for services with others nearby (21%) and a similar proportion (24%) is offering staff members' services to other schools or organisations. The schools' buying strategy¹⁴, published by the DfE, is intended to support schools in this area.

Which of the following solutions are you implementing, if any, to achieve greater financial efficiency or generate income in your school?



"We use qualified staff to offer fitness classes to the wider community for a small cost"

"We have a very active PTA who generate £1,000s of pounds each year"

"A nearby school has bought a bus and we make a nominal payment to use it"

When it comes to raising extra funds, optimism is most widespread in London, where a quarter (26%) are confident they can generate additional income over the next 12-24 months; a further two-thirds (67%), however, are not confident of this. Only 18% of schools in the north east expect to be able to generate income, while 75% disagree.

Comments from school leaders completing our survey suggest a more nuanced picture, dependent on local demographics. Effective parent and teacher associations can raise thousands of pounds for some settings, but schools in deprived areas can struggle to raise funds from local communities with very little income, despite having the expertise to do so.

National funding formula: what do school leaders think?

Almost 11,000 schools are set to gain from the national funding formula¹⁵ when it comes into effect officially in 2019-20*, while over 9,000 schools are likely to receive less money. The formula is intended to ensure a fairer and more consistent distribution of school funding nationally, and in so doing make it easier for schools to plan budgets over the longer term.

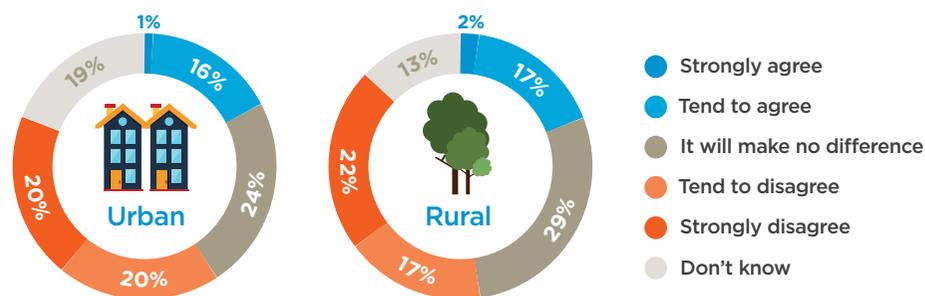
However, less than one fifth (18%) of school leaders think that the proposed, redrafted formula will make it easier for them to forecast and plan their budget effectively; 40% do not expect forecasting to be any easier and 26% think the formula will make no difference at all.

*Subject to the outcome of the June 2017 general election
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/03/tory-uprising-claim-school-funding-row-general-election-campaign-osborne>

Lack of faith in this funding reform is more marked among secondary school leaders, with almost five in 10 (46%) not expecting to be better equipped to plan their budget effectively compared to nearly four in 10 (38%) primary leaders. The current financial predicament of secondary schools might in part explain these results: findings from the NAO show that secondary schools are in a less stable position¹⁶, with 59% of them overspending in 2014-15 as opposed to 33% of primaries.

The redistribution in school funding will hit schools in urban areas the hardest. Nine of the 10 local authorities set to lose the most money are in London¹⁷, with Manchester being the exception. Yet scepticism about the redrafted formula is just as likely among rural school leaders as it is among those in urban settings: 39% and 40% respectively do not believe that the formula will make it easier to budget-plan in the coming years.

“The national funding formula will make it easier for my school to forecast and plan our budget effectively.”



Governor perspective

Only one-fifth (20%) of governors think the proposed national funding formula will make it easier for their school to forecast and plan their budget effectively, echoing the views of school leaders.

While governors anticipate funding pressures ahead, they are confident in their ability to oversee finances in their schools. More than nine in 10 (93%) governors are confident that their board has the knowledge and skills to hold the leadership team to account for financial management. A similar proportion (91%) thinks that their board has full oversight of their school's financial situation, and more than half (56%) are confident that they will be able to manage any funding pressures over the coming two years.



Successfully managing budget pressures, however, does not come without related challenges, and governors acknowledge that making savings could detrimentally affect their school's performance. Seven in 10 (72%) governors are not confident, for instance, that standards can be maintained if cuts are made to their school's staffing budget. This is worrying, given that two-thirds of school leaders expect to have to make savings from their staff structure in the next two years. Cuts to staff development are similarly unfavourable, with only one-third (34%) of governors confident that school performance would not suffer in this instance.

"We have the expertise and experience to generate additional income, but in the deprived area we operate from in a 1950s building we have very few opportunities."

School leader

What funding change would schools most like to see?

When we asked school leaders to choose, from a list of possible scenarios, which single funding change would have the most positive impact on their school over the next three years, two options stood out. Higher base funding rates and higher levels of special educational needs (SEN) funding would be favoured by 29% and 22% of school leaders respectively.

Secondary school leaders, in particular, champion the prospect of higher base funding – 40% believe this would have the most impact, compared to 27% of primary school leaders.

While secondary leaders tend to prioritise higher levels of capital funding (18%) over funding for SEN (10%), in primary schools the reverse is true (15% and 24% respectively).

3. SCHOOL PRESSURES: accountability, curriculum and assessment

School leaders across both phases are critical of the reformed national assessment system, lacking confidence in it and feeling inadequately informed. For many, budget pressures and the challenge of teacher recruitment and retention are placing constraints on the curriculum. New accountability measures are also widely considered to be unfair and inaccurate measures of school performance, particularly at primary level, and school leaders are feeling under increased strain from these changes.

91% of school leaders think the level of pressure on schools from performance measures has increased over the last two years

55% of secondary school leaders do not feel they have adequate information to ensure pupils sitting this year's GCSEs are well-prepared

A time of sweeping change

In terms of core education provision, the last two years have brought significant changes for school leaders to manage in both primary and secondary settings.

Primary schools have grappled with a new National Curriculum and the introduction of new statutory assessments for grammar, punctuation and spelling alongside reading and mathematics. Reforms to GCSEs mean that secondary schools are working with revised subject content, a reduction in non-exam assessments and a new grading scale.

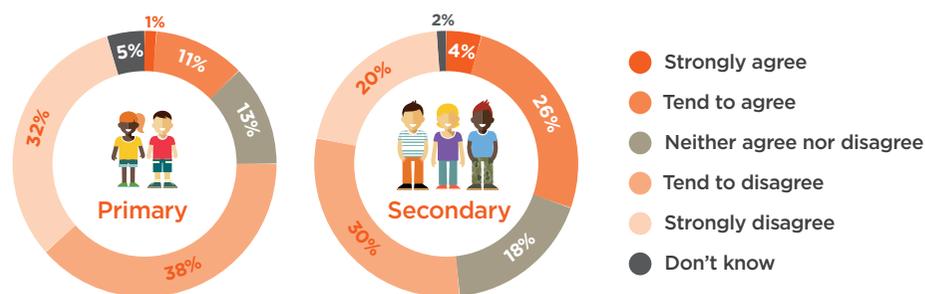
Across the board, reforms to accountability measures mean that long-established attainment standards have fallen away to be replaced by a greater emphasis on value-added measures, and a more interventionist approach to dealing with underperformance. The introduction of scaled scores and floor standards at primary level and the progress 8, attainment 8 and English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measures for secondary schools - combined with the 'coasting' measure - has meant yet more change to manage, and more pressure as our survey findings suggest, for our schools.

“There is no let up in the measures used to judge schools”
Secondary school leader

Reflecting on the changes to accountability measures

The majority of school leaders (66%) do not think that the new accountability measures are a fair and accurate way to measure school performance, although perspectives vary by phase.

“The current accountability measures are a fair and accurate way to measure school performance.”



Frustrations are more marked among primary school leaders, with seven in 10 (70%) disagreeing that the measures are fair and accurate. This discontent is unsurprising following the controversy around Key Stage (KS) 2 writing assessment and moderation in summer 2016¹⁸ and the potential implications of 'coasting' school status if too few pupils do not meet the expected standard. In 2016, 477 schools¹⁹ met the definition of coasting at KS2.

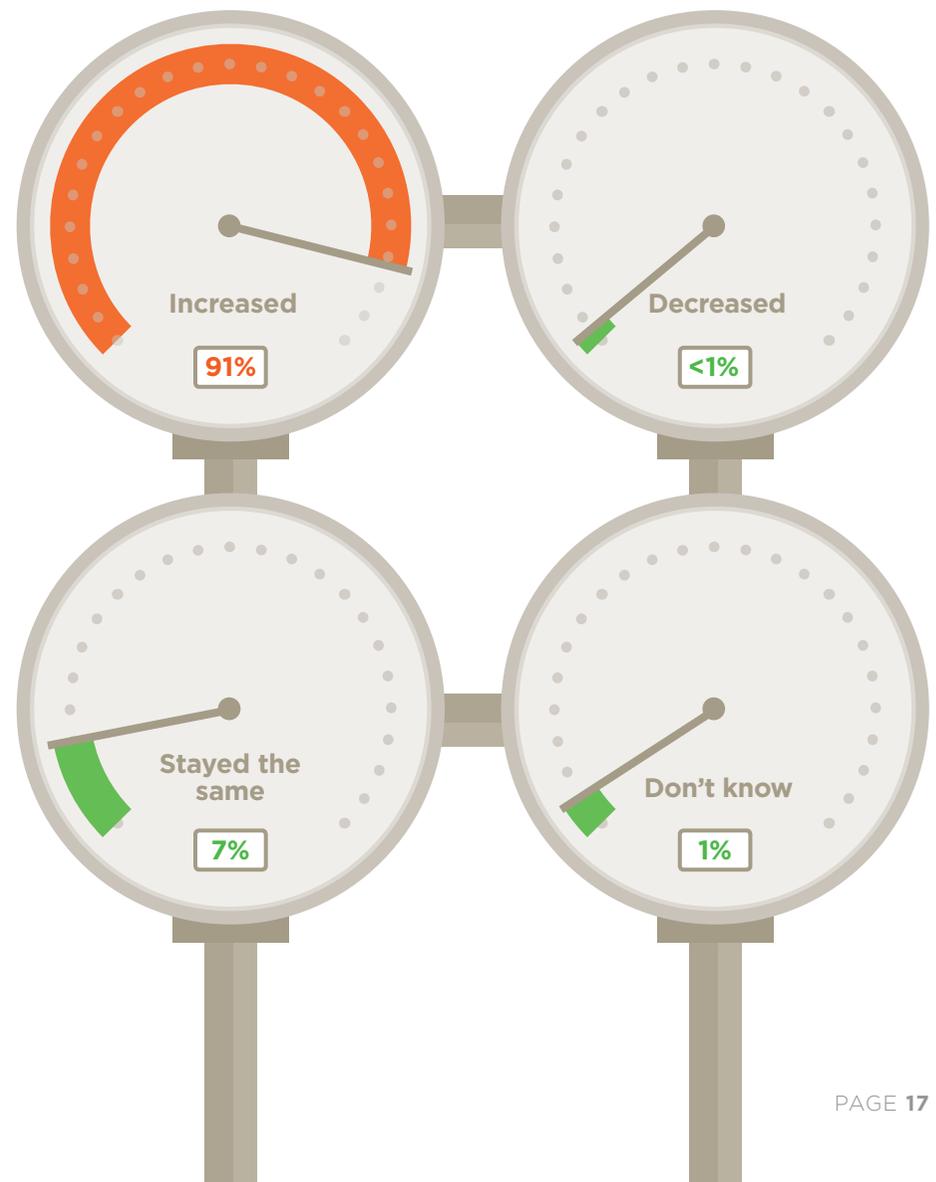
At secondary level, leaders are more likely to feel positive, with three in 10 (30%) saying that the current performance measures are fair and accurate; half (50%), however, disagree. Nonetheless, secondary school leaders are less optimistic than this time last year, when seven in 10 (69%) thought that the new progress 8 measure would more accurately capture the overall performance of their school.

This lack of faith in performance measures may be a consequence of the strain school leaders feel they are under. More than nine in 10 (91%) think that the level of pressure on schools from performance measures has increased over the last two years. Primary and secondary school leaders are broadly of the same opinion, with 92% and 86% respectively believing this to be the case. Less than one per cent of school leaders in each phase think that the current performance measures have decreased the stress placed on the school system.

“There should be more exemplification materials available for national tests, especially for reading ... Sourcing appropriate and matched resources has a huge impact on a teacher’s workload...”

Primary school leader

Over the past two years, do you think the level of pressure on schools from school performance measures has increased, decreased or stayed the same?



How do school leaders think the curriculum has fared over the last two years?

We asked school leaders to consider some of the biggest changes and challenges over the past two years and whether they had had a positive or negative impact, or neither, on the curriculum.

All phases



There is widespread feeling that budget pressures are negatively affecting the curriculum in both primary and secondary schools, with more than eight in 10 (83%) leaders believing this to be the case. A lack of funding is hitting the secondary curriculum hardest, with nine in 10 (91%) secondary school leaders indicating that this challenge is having a negative effect here.

Primary



Overall, we see a primary school system that is struggling to fund the curriculum sufficiently, and to fund and retain the staff to teach it, yet being held to higher account for how pupils perform against it.

While one-quarter (24%) of primary leaders think that the introduction of the new primary curriculum has been positive, more than four in 10 (44%) say it has had a negative impact and just over a quarter (27%) say it has made no difference.

Negative feeling about the new primary performance measures is more prevalent. Six in 10 (61%) primary leaders believe this change is having a detrimental impact on their curriculum; two in 10 (21%) say it is making no difference.

Teacher recruitment and retention challenges are negatively affecting the curriculum in more than four in 10 (44%) primary schools but making no difference to it in a similar proportion (40%).

Secondary

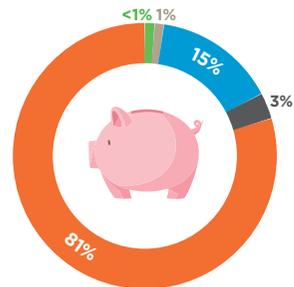


In secondary schools, more than two-thirds (67%) of school leaders think that reforms to GCSEs have detrimentally affected the curriculum, and the impact of teacher recruitment and retention challenges is once again a worry for more than six in 10 (63%) leaders. This is to be expected, since the latest initial teacher training statistics show that, in some core EBacc subjects, too few teachers are entering the profession in the secondary phase. Recruitment of modern foreign language teachers, for instance, has missed the teacher supply model targets²⁰ for five of the past seven years, with figures hovering between 83% and 95% of the target since 2013/14.

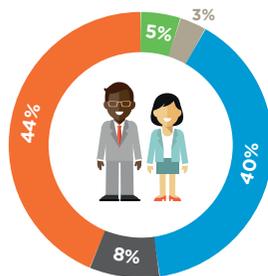
Teacher retention problems might well be explained by the increased workload burden that school leaders report their teachers are facing as a result of curriculum and performance measure changes. Nine in 10 school leaders overall believe that teacher workload has been negatively affected by these changes, with primary and secondary leaders in agreement (90% and 91% respectively).

Have each of the following had a positive or negative impact on your curriculum over the past two years?

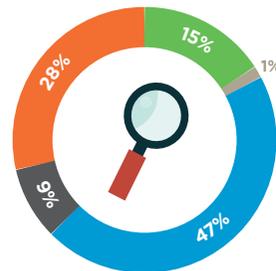
Primary



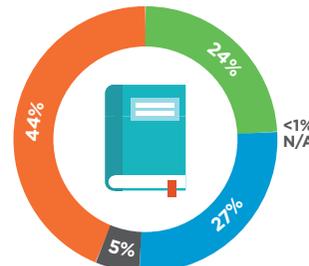
Budget pressures



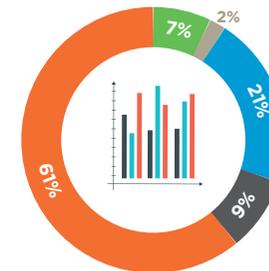
Teacher recruitment and retention challenges



Changes to inspection (introduction of Ofsted's Common Inspection Framework)



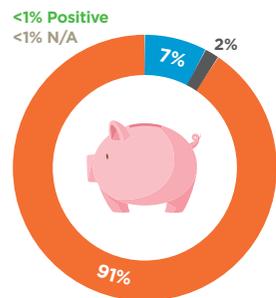
Introduction of the new primary curriculum



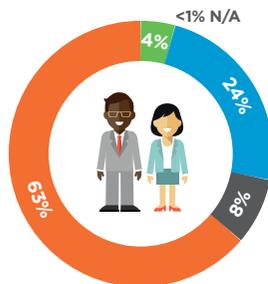
Introduction of new primary performance measures



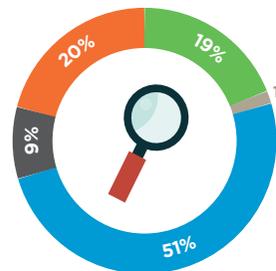
Secondary



Budget pressures



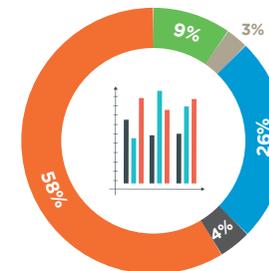
Teacher recruitment and retention challenges



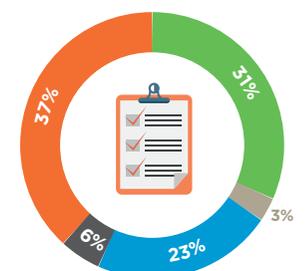
Changes to inspection (introduction of Ofsted's Common Inspection Framework)



Reforms to GCSEs



Introduction of the EBacc performance measure



Introduction of the progress 8 and attainment 8 performance measures

Reformed national assessments: what do school leaders think?

School leaders are resoundingly critical of the current national assessment system, with more than three-quarters saying they do not have confidence in it at both primary and secondary level (77% and 76% respectively).

In almost half (47%) of primary schools, leaders do not feel they have adequate information to ensure pupils are well-prepared to sit this year's KS2 assessments; just two in 10 (22%) leaders say they do have enough information. According to one school leader, there is "too little information, too late". This dissatisfaction follows last year's delays to guidance materials and leaked test papers, which led to questions over the validity of SATs data²¹ for the first cohort of pupils to be taught the new KS2 curriculum.

Concern over a lack of information is similarly apparent at KS4, with more than five in 10 (55%) school leaders feeling unable to adequately prepare pupils for GCSEs this summer and only one in 10 (12%) feeling sufficiently equipped. While the government has published subject content for English language, English literature and mathematics, first taught in September 2015, comments such as "teachers are having to work in the dark, and second-guess the examiners" appear often in the replies to our survey.

School leaders are calling for additional resources and mark schemes for the new GCSEs, in particular for those subjects that are being taught under the new curriculum from September 2016. One school leader drew attention to the ultimate impact of such frustrations in the system, telling us she "feels so sorry" for her current year 11 students who "have so many questions to which we just don't have the answers".



More than three-quarters (77%) of school leaders do not have confidence in the current national assessment system



Almost half (47%) of primary leaders do not feel they have adequate information to ensure pupils are well prepared to sit this year's KS2 assessments



Just over one in 10 (12%) secondary leaders feels sufficiently equipped with information to prepare pupils sitting GCSEs this year



"There are insufficient resources... Teachers are having to work in the dark, and second-guess the examiners." *School leader*

9 to 1 grading: employer confusion

Questions around the reformed GCSEs might well continue beyond the school gates, now that the previous A* to G grading structure is being replaced by the numerical 9 to 1 system.

More than four-fifths (85%) of secondary school leaders worry that pupils will be disadvantaged by employers' lack of knowledge of this new system.

Nearly nine in 10 (88%) school leaders across both phases already think that too much focus is placed on academic testing as a measure of pupils' success: this focus becomes yet more problematic for pupils' prospects if their future employers do not understand what academic success looks like.

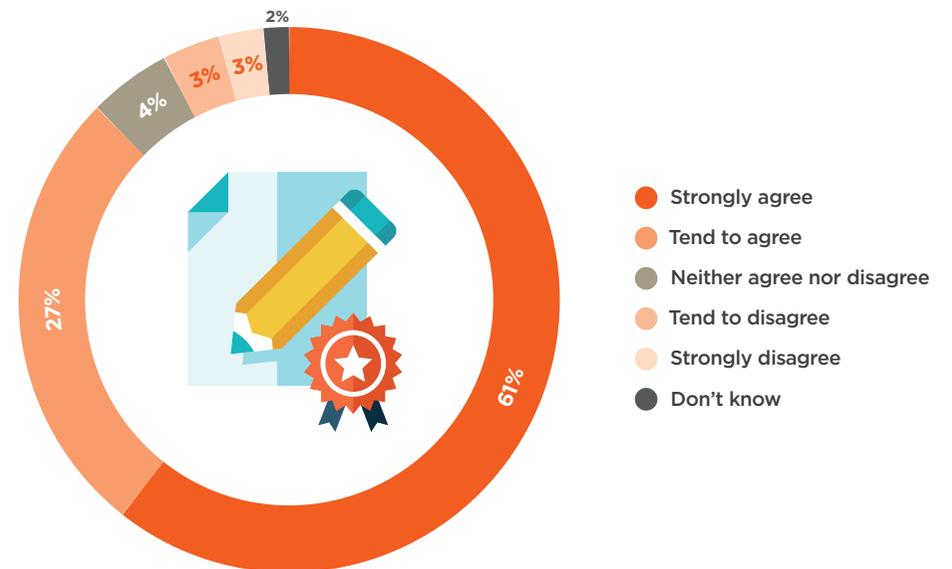
“Assessment has been drastically changed and poorly communicated ... As we get closer to summer, and our pupils are applying for apprenticeships, companies are phoning me to ask why English and maths have numbers and the other subjects have letter grades. They have absolutely no idea of the new grading system and what it actually means. They just want to know what number equates to a C!”

Secondary school leader



More than eight in 10 (85%) secondary school leaders think that pupils sitting GCSEs under the new grading system will be disadvantaged by employers' lack of knowledge of the new system.

“Too much focus is placed on academic testing as a measure of pupils' success”



Governor perspective

Almost six in 10 (59%) school governors expect monitoring school performance under the new performance measures to be a challenge over the next academic year – the second most-cited challenge behind budget pressures.

Governors are, however, confident that they have the knowledge and skills to hold the leadership team to account for pupil achievement: more than nine in 10 (93%) agree this is the case. They are comfortable, also, in holding the leadership to account for staff performance: 89% of governors believe their governing board can do this effectively.



“The stringent focus on testing and academics at the expense of the development of the whole child is represented by the diminishing status of the arts in our schools. If we look to international best practice we are doing the reverse of the highest performing countries and only exasperating the gaps in our system, not fixing anything. We need a period of stability to let things settle and embed, including taking the parent and employer stakeholders with us through the changes we are experiencing.”

Hannah Wilson
Headteacher – Aureus School

“Over the past year, we have seen an increase in questions from primary school leaders who are unclear as to how they can accurately assess pupils due to a lack of guidance and last-minute policy changes. Questions from secondary school leaders continue to show concerns around the impact of progress 8 and the EBacc on their school's curriculum offer. The interest in our case studies on KS3 and KS4 curriculum models shows that many school leaders are still looking for inspiration in this area.

That said, school leaders continue to demonstrate an incredible ability to adapt to, and overcome, these challenges through collaboration – working together to moderate assessment judgements, sharing resources and organising CPD. The popularity of our articles on moderation reflects this.”

Adam Medlycott
Senior researcher – The Key

4. PUPIL WELLBEING

Stress and anxiety among young people are on the rise, and pupils seem more fearful of what lies beyond school. Changes to the curriculum, assessment and accountability measures appear to be having a negative impact: fear of academic failure, in particular, has increased over the last two years, and most school leaders see a direct link between these system changes and a deterioration in pupils' mental health and wellbeing. Schools are working with parents and training staff to spot early indicators of poor mental health, among many other interventions, but are calling for primary pupils in particular to be able to "enjoy school" and "not be pressured to perform".

81%

of school leaders worry more about pupils' mental health during assessment periods now than they did two years ago

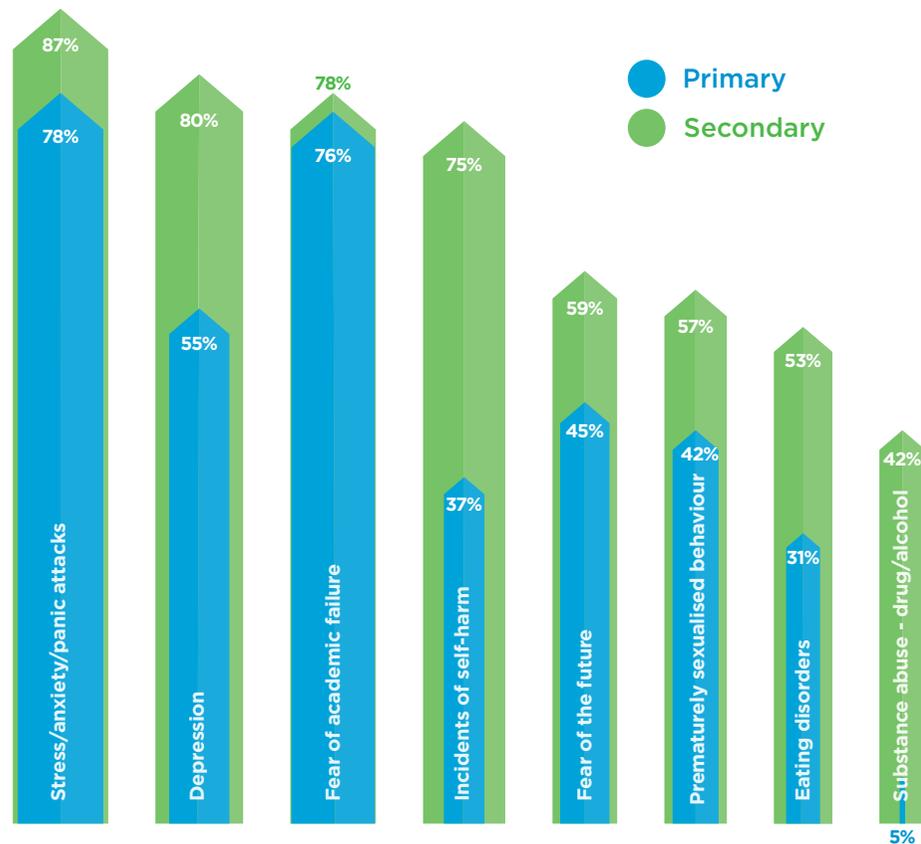
79%

have noticed an increase in stress, anxiety and panic attacks among their pupils over the past two years

66%

are working with parents to support pupils' wellbeing

Percentage of school leaders who have noticed an increase in the following behaviours and conditions among pupils over the past two years.



Mental health and wellbeing issues on the rise

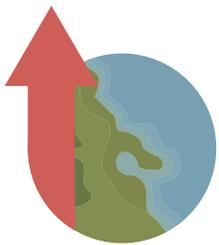
We asked school leaders to reflect on some specific health and wellbeing issues and whether or not they have seen any increase in them among their pupils over the last two years. At both primary and secondary level there are several causes for concern.

Nearly eight in 10 (78%) primary leaders and nine in 10 (87%) secondary leaders have seen an increase in stress, anxiety or panic attacks among their pupils. School leaders in both phases have also seen an increase in depression among young people over the last two years: this is true of more than half (55%) of primary schools and eight in 10 (80%) secondary schools.

In secondary schools, three-quarters (75%) of leaders have seen an increase in pupil self-harm; this corresponds with a 68% increase²² in the number of young people nationally being admitted to hospital because of self-harm over the last 10 years. Four in 10 (42%) secondary leaders have seen an increase in drug or alcohol abuse.

When we look at these issues regionally, we see that depression, self-harm, stress/anxiety and fear of the future are believed to be more prevalent among children in the north west; the figures are, however, consistently stark in most regions.

Pupils in coastal schools appear to be suffering more commonly than their inland peers: 57% of coastal school leaders have seen an increase in pupil self-harm compared to 43% of those in inland schools. Fear of the future among pupils appears to be more dominant in coastal regions also, where 58% of school leaders think it has increased, alongside 46% of leaders in inland schools.



57% of coastal school leaders have seen an increase in pupil self-harm compared to 43% of those inland.

Health impact of curriculum, assessment and accountability

While there may be many and varied reasons for these increases, there are clear signs that the school system is having an impact on pupil mental health and wellbeing.

Three-quarters (75%) of all school leaders say they've seen an increase in fear of academic failure among their pupils over the past two years, with little difference between primary and secondary settings. School leaders believe that changes to the curriculum and school performance measures, which have largely taken effect in the course of the last two years, are not only causing challenges for them but also affecting their

pupils. Seven in 10 (68%) primary leaders and almost eight in 10 (77%) secondary leaders believe that these changes have had a negative impact on pupils' mental health and wellbeing.

Percentage of school leaders, by phase, who think changes to the curriculum and school performance measures over the past two years have negatively affected their pupils' mental health and wellbeing:



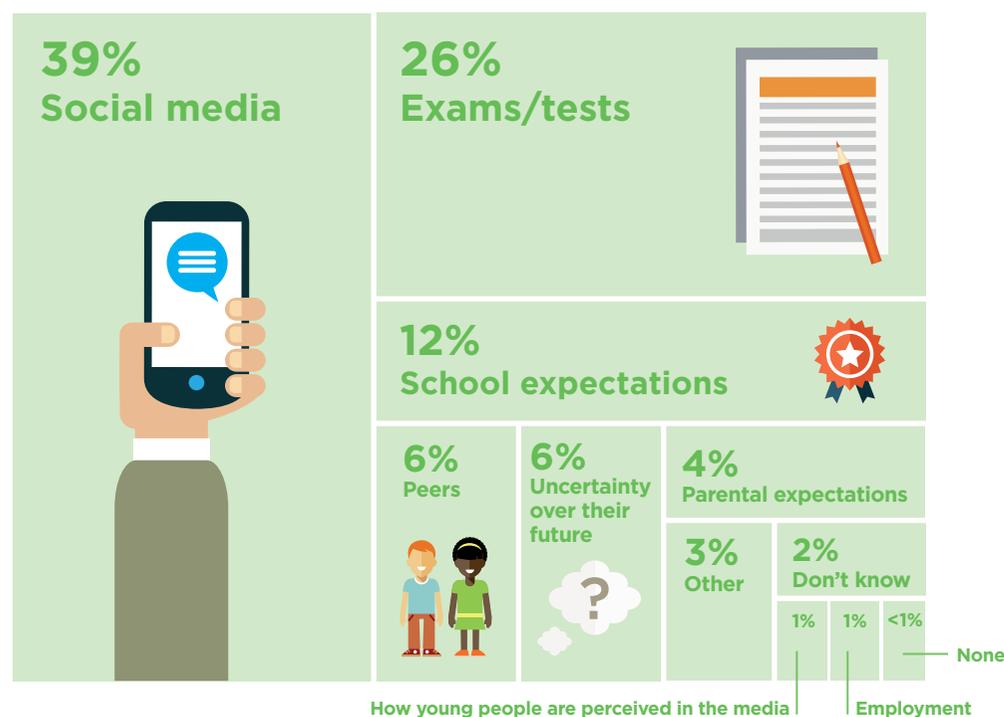
Alongside this, we see a more prevalent fear of the future: 45% of primary leaders and 59% of secondary leaders believe this to be more widespread among their pupils than two years ago. Uncertainty around the national assessment system, how well future employers understand it, and events on the world stage might well be playing into these fears.

“An increase in issues with the emotional health of young people has coincided with a wholesale change in the curriculum and a lack of funding to support that curriculum change.”
School leader

Social media and exams: the greatest pressures

Pupils are battling a wider range of pressures than five years ago, according to more than nine in 10 (93%) school leaders. When we asked leaders what they consider to be the greatest pressure on pupils today, social media came top for four in 10 (39%), followed by examinations and tests for a quarter (26%).

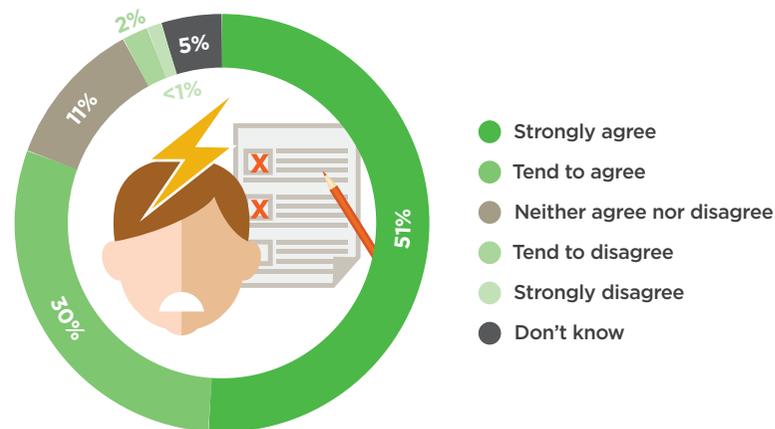
What do you think is the greatest pressure on pupils today?



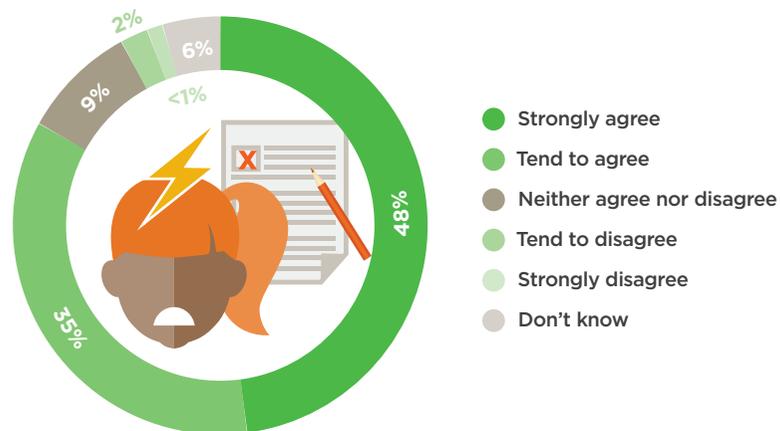
In some primary settings, the burden of accountability and performance measures felt at school level might be filtering down to pupils, with 14% of leaders here saying that school expectations are the greatest pressure on pupils. In secondary settings, 13% of leaders think that uncertainty over the future is the greatest pressure.

As we move towards an increasingly exam-focused system, it is perhaps not surprising that four out of five (81%) school leaders worry more about pupils' mental health during assessment periods now than they did two years ago. It is concerning that 83% are witnessing signs of mental health issues increasing among pupils at these points (91% of secondary school leaders and 82% of primary leaders).

"I worry more about pupils' mental health during exam/assessment periods now than two years ago"



“Signs of mental health issues among pupils increase during exam/assessment periods”



Pupils are less resilient than two years ago

We asked school leaders to reflect on a range of skills and attributes that pupils might display and tell us in each case whether they have improved or worsened over the past two years.

For more than six in 10 school leaders (61% at primary and 65% at secondary), pupils are less emotionally resilient than two years ago. In our 2016 survey, eight in 10 (79%) primary school leaders told us that pupils did not have the expected social skills when they joined reception class. It seems this situation has not yet improved: nearly half (45%) of primary leaders this year report that children’s social

“Children’s wellbeing should be the most important thing to us, because without that, they can’t learn.”

Simon O’Keefe,
CEO - Stour Academy Trust

skills have deteriorated, and a similar proportion (41%) says they have stayed about the same.

Academic resilience among young people has not fared well over the last two years, in either phase. More than four in 10 leaders (42% at primary and 47% at secondary) say

that academic resilience has got worse, while fewer than two in 10 (18% at primary and 14% at secondary) believe it has improved.

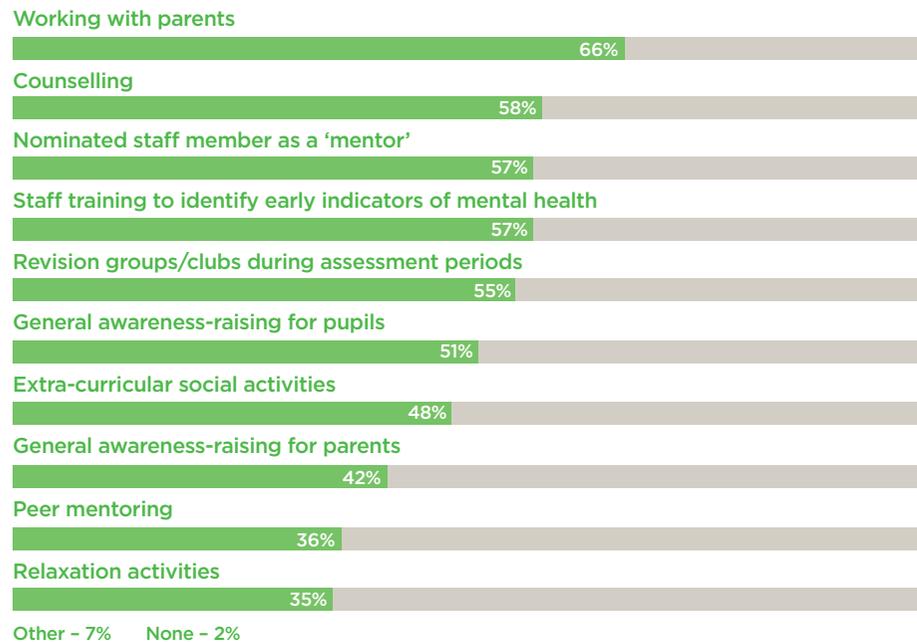
Pupils remain just as ambitious as previously in just over half of schools (53% at primary and 51% at secondary), and are more so in 19% of secondary schools. While half of leaders in each phase believe that their pupils are just as tolerant as before, one in three (30%) primary leaders and one in four (26%) of those in secondary settings believe pupils’ tolerance of others has worsened.

Primary leaders are more positive about pupils’ problem-solving abilities, with 28% seeing an improvement here.



More than a quarter (26%) of school leaders think pupils’ problem-solving abilities have got better over the past two years.

What interventions, if any, has your school put in place to support pupils' wellbeing?



How are school leaders supporting their pupils?

We asked school leaders what they are doing to support pupils' wellbeing. In two-thirds (66%) of schools, staff are working closely with parents. Counselling is also available in just over half (52%) of primary schools and eight in 10 (83%) secondary schools, reflecting the higher levels of social, emotional and mental health issues that school leaders are witnessing among their pupils.

Comments about the efforts of school staff to support pupil mental health are striking. One school leader notes that the only reason children remain motivated is the dedication

“The only reason our children remain motivated is the dedication of our teaching staff.”

School leader

of the teaching staff, and another places any improvement in pupil attributes to the school's “dedicated leadership team with a clear vision and strong backbone who are determined to do what is right for the children”. Our data bears this out: 57% of schools have trained staff to identify early indicators of poor mental health, and the same proportion has put in place nominated staff mentors to support pupils. Staff mentors are particularly common in secondary schools, with 75% putting this intervention in place alongside 54% of primary settings.

Comments also reflect widespread concern over the impact of the assessment system in primary schools. One school leader calls for the government to acknowledge the links between increased emotional health issues in young people and a wholesale change to the curriculum, without the necessary funding to support these changes. In the bid to address examination-related stresses, schools are running revision groups and clubs during assessment periods: this is happening in nearly nine in 10 (87%) secondary schools and nearly half (49%) of primary schools. Resilience groups, one-to-one interventions for anxiety/stress, and mindfulness groups are just some of the other structured interventions in place in schools across the country.

5. PUPIL LEARNING AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

In both primary and secondary settings, the curriculum is being squeezed in favour of more academic subjects, and there's concern that it is not meeting the needs of all children. Primary leaders are calling for more freedom to deliver a broader curriculum, and greater emphasis on personal progress and development. Secondary leaders believe more focus on life skills would better equip pupils for life beyond education, and call for increased flexibility around progress 8 so that vocational subjects count towards the headline measure.

79%

of school leaders do not think the current curriculum requirements deliver the best outcomes for all pupils in mainstream education

59%

think changes to the curriculum and school performance measures over the past two years have had a negative impact on provision in arts and creative subjects

79%

think the curriculum should include more core life skills

Providing the best outcomes for pupils

Current national curriculum requirements are not providing the best outcomes for all pupils in mainstream education, according to eight in 10 (79%) school leaders. School leaders' views on the questions we asked around pupil learning convey a sense that the current curriculum and accountability measures do not recognise that achievement looks different for different children.

Do you think the current curriculum requirements deliver the best outcomes for all pupils in mainstream education?



What's happening in primary schools?

When we look more closely at the impact of curriculum changes and the focus on value-added performance measures at primary level, it is clear that some pupils are losing out. Almost six in 10 (58%) primary leaders believe that the progress of children with special educational needs (SEN) or disabilities has been negatively affected.

“What accountability has done has said you have to be here at this point. If there's no movement you are a failure and children don't learn like that. One of my past pupils with SEN is now an airline pilot. In those days he was given the space to consolidate and build when he was ready.”

School leader

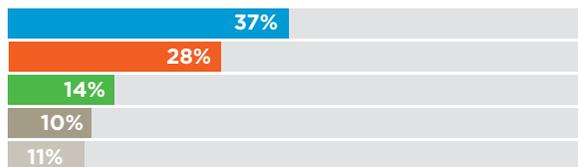
School leaders suggest there has been a narrowing of the curriculum offer as a result of these changes, with six in 10 (60%) primary leaders saying that provision in arts and creative subjects in their school has suffered. Pupils' readiness for secondary school has also been negatively affected, according to more than a quarter (28%) of primary school leaders.

Primary leaders are passionately concerned about what many perceive to be a squeezing of the curriculum in favour of more academic, and attainment-focused, learning. For one school leader, the current primary curriculum is too narrow, “with too much emphasis on attainment and not enough on personal progress and development”.

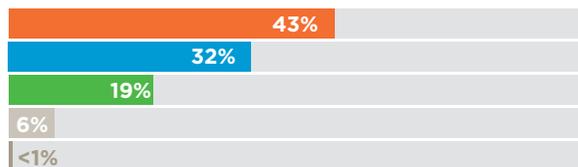
In general, have changes to the curriculum and school performance measures over the past two years had a positive or negative impact on the following in your school? (Primary)



Pupils' readiness for secondary school



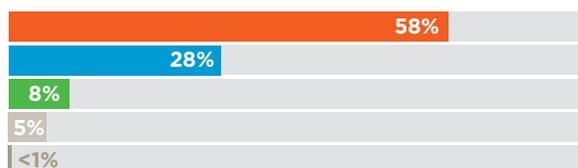
Pupils' academic achievement



Provision in arts and creative subjects



Progress of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities



● Positive ● N/A ● Neither ● Don't know ● Negative

“Life skills need to be added instead of something else - not squeezed into an already overcrowded curriculum.”

School leader

What would primary school leaders change?

Eight in 10 (79%) primary leaders would like the curriculum to include more life skills, such as financial management, communication skills and keeping healthy. Primary leaders also call for more freedom from “government interference in curriculum development” and show a willingness to work towards a broader curriculum. One leader comments, for instance, that she would “love to be part of a changing curriculum for the better, that thinks outside the box and enhances the future generation to be able to take their learning to a new level without the need for a good ability to remember facts”.

Spotlight on the secondary curriculum



At secondary level, we see a similar narrowing of the curriculum in favour of core academic subjects. While the government has not yet responded to its consultation on making the EBacc compulsory for 90% of pupils in mainstream schools by 2020, the inclusion of the EBacc in headline performance measures from 2016 means that schools are increasingly prioritising traditionally academic courses.

Our findings show that two-thirds (65%) of secondary leaders, like their primary counterparts, believe provision in arts and creative subjects has suffered in their school as a result of changes to the curriculum and performance measures. More than half (56%) believe their vocational/technical offer is now weaker, and nearly three-quarters (73%) say that pupils with an aptitude for vocational or technical subjects are not being best supported by the current school system.

Furthermore, four in five (80%) secondary school leaders believe that the EBacc measure is actively limiting opportunities for pupils with vocational/technical aptitude who may not thrive in a purely academic environment.

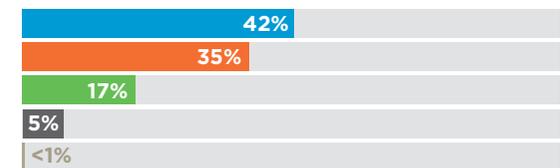
These findings echo claims by Sir Michael Wilshaw that the EBacc will put some pupils at a disadvantage²³ and not prepare all pupils for life after school, in particular those who wish to undertake an

apprenticeship. In three in 10 secondary schools (31%), leaders believe that their pupils' readiness for employment or post-16 education has been negatively affected by the reforms to curriculum and accountability over the past two years.

In general, have changes to the curriculum and school performance measures over the past two years had a positive or negative impact on the following in your school? (Secondary)



Pupils' academic achievement



Provision in arts and creative subjects



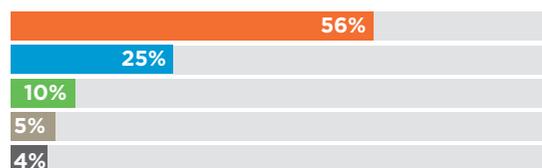
● Positive
 ● N/A
 ● Neither
 ● Don't know
 ● Negative

“Pupils should be able to follow vocational routes and work placements without penalising their chances of competing with the most academic pupils, and without negatively impacting on a school’s progress 8 score.”

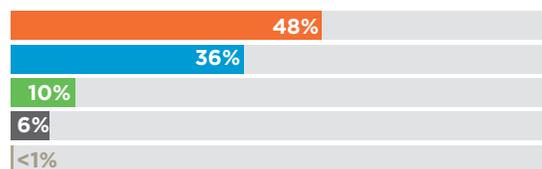
School leader



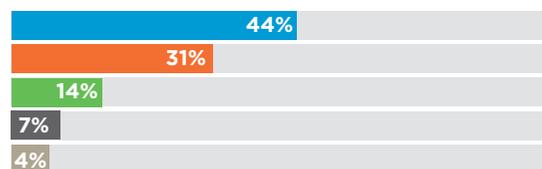
Provision of vocational/ technical education



Progress of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities



Pupils’ readiness for employment/ further education post-16



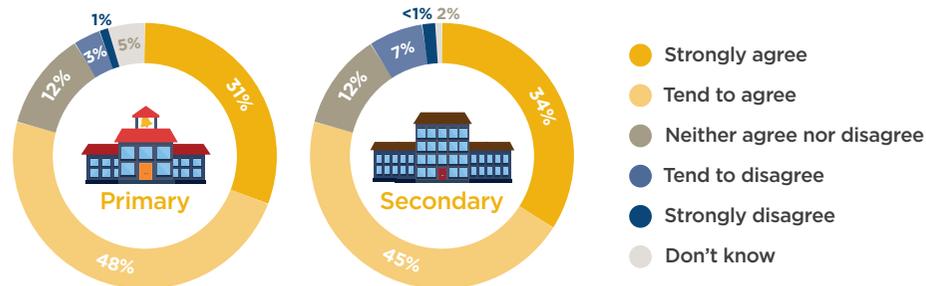
What would secondary leaders change?

Unsurprisingly in the context of these wider results, secondary leaders – in common with primary leaders – call for a focus on more core life skills: eight in 10 (79%) think this would help them to better serve their pupils. The majority of leaders believe in a balanced and holistic curriculum offer. Less than half (43%) of secondary school leaders would split the curriculum into academic and vocational/ technical streams, given the choice. One school leader comments: “There should be a more balanced offer of courses but I do not agree with streaming. Students should have access to the curriculum that allows them to achieve success and enjoy their learning. This, in most cases, would be a combination of courses ... Flexibility and equal status (of vocational and academic courses) is what is needed”.

For schools to confidently offer this holistic curriculum, leaders are calling for more flexibility around progress 8, so that vocational subjects can count towards the headline measure.

Some schools are choosing to risk their performance in the league tables, telling us that they are instead matching pupils with the most appropriate subjects for them and championing individual pupil success over school performance tables.

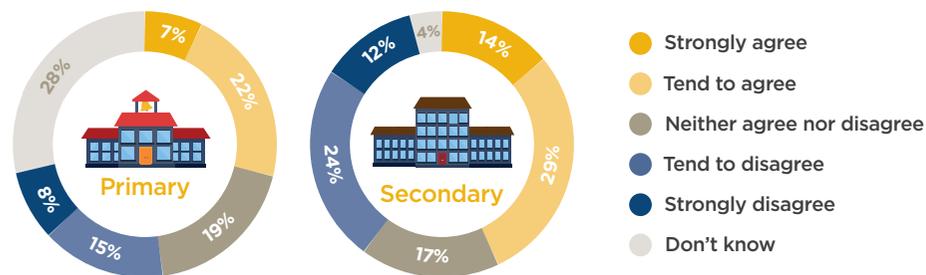
“The curriculum should include more core life skills (for example, financial management, communication skills and keeping healthy)”



“School life is about so much more than attainment and progress in English and maths. We should be celebrating how our pupils are as individuals and future citizens rather than whether they hit a numeric target.”

School leader

“If I had the choice, I would split the curriculum into academic and vocational/technical streams”



“These findings are confirming what has become increasingly apparent among the 100,000 targeted children and young people engaged in Achievement for All programmes. The common starting point for the majority is the need to build core strength; the confidence and ability to learn, develop and participate in society. Compounded by the curriculum and related issues, children and young people experiencing challenge, needs or disadvantage lack confidence and find learning difficult, which leads to a lack of progress when compared to their peers. Evidence demonstrates that when managed effectively this can change.”

Professor Sonia Blandford

Founder and CEO, Achievement for All

6. PERCEPTION OF THE PROFESSION

Perception of the profession has got worse over the last five years, according to the majority of school leaders. They believe morale is suffering as a result, as are teacher recruitment and retention. To turn the recruitment tide and boost applications, school leaders call for a better work-life balance for the profession. Tired but optimistic about opportunities ahead, school leaders remain dedicated to the purpose of education and the difference they can make to the lives of young people.

86%

of school leaders who think the perception of the profession has got worse over the past five years believe this is negatively affecting morale

79%

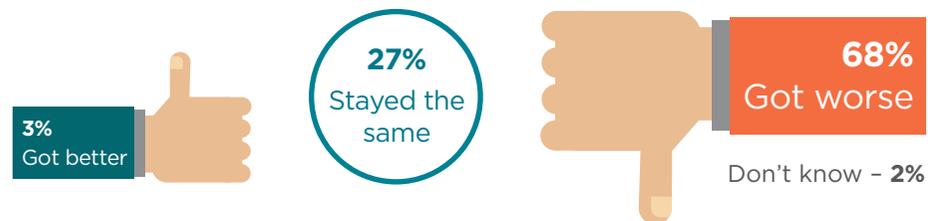
think better work-life balance will do most to encourage people to get into teaching

How is the teaching profession perceived?

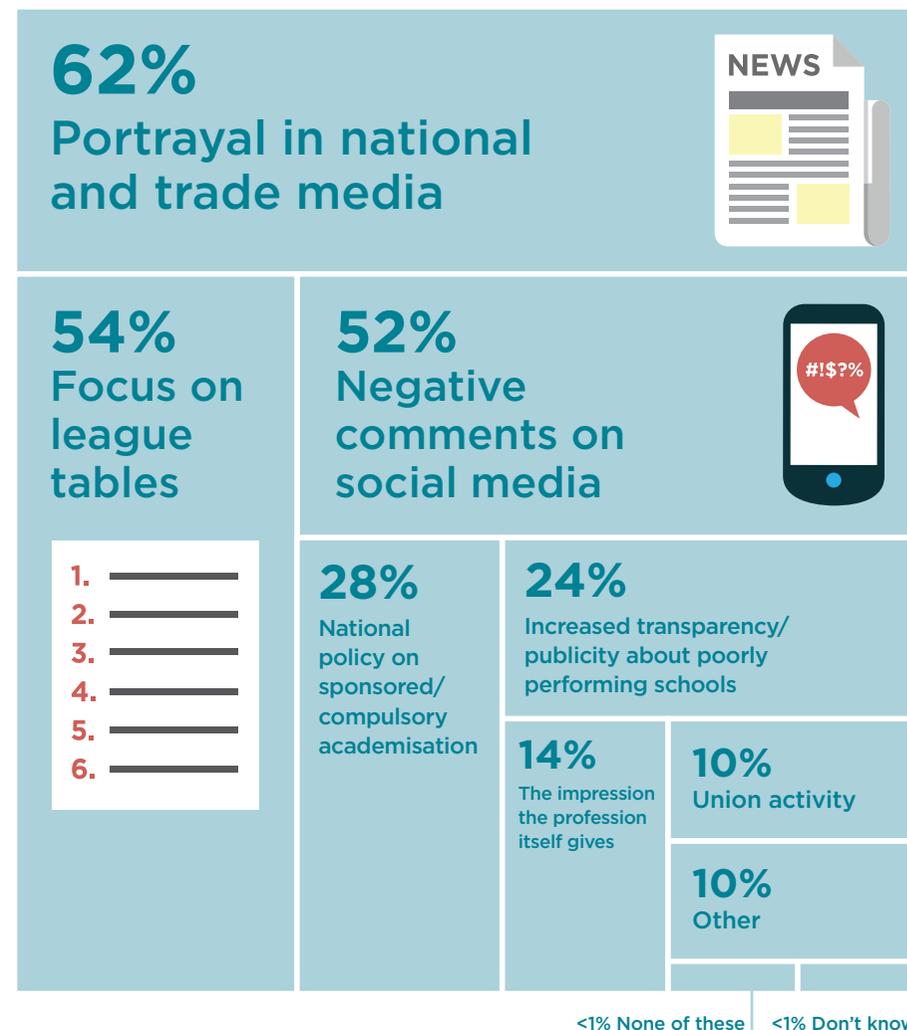
Readers of this report might not be surprised to learn that nearly seven in 10 (68%) school leaders think the perception of the teaching profession has got worse over the last five years. Of these, more than six in 10 (62%) say that the national and trade media are one of the factors most responsible. This is perhaps not surprising, given the high-profile nature of the proposed national funding reallocations, the domination of school budget-related headlines in education news in recent months and ongoing reports about teacher recruitment and retention issues.

The focus on league tables and negative comments on social media are also among the top three most-cited reasons, believed to be to blame by 54% and 52% of school leaders respectively. The government's policy on sponsored/compulsory academisation is a key factor for more than a quarter (28%) of school leaders who think the perception has worsened.

In general, do you think the perception of the teaching profession has got better, worse or stayed the same over the past five years?



Which of the following, in your opinion, has contributed most to the perception of the profession getting worse?*



*Of the 68% of school leaders who think it has got worse

Perception of the profession is in decline: what's the impact?

Morale is suffering as a result of the decline in how the teaching profession is perceived. Eighty-six per cent and 85% of school leaders in primary and secondary settings respectively believe this to be true. This negativity is also affecting the number of people applying for teaching positions, and is making it more difficult to keep current teachers in post.

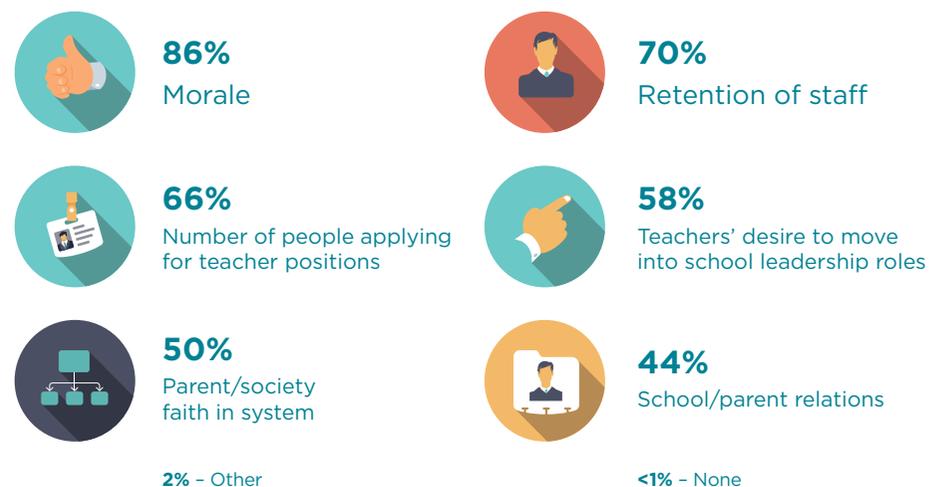
Recruitment and retention challenges are felt more acutely in secondary schools, where 83% of school leaders say staff retention is suffering as a result of the worsening perception of the profession. The cost of recruiting and training new teachers is high, and so as financial belts tighten, retention concerns are likely to become yet more troublesome. The parliamentary education committee suggests it might be time for the sector to shift its focus to retaining teachers²⁴, rather than focus so explicitly on recruitment targets. To address retention issues, however, we need more data to fully understand the problem. At present, the government collects data on teacher retention rates by gender but not by subject or region. Nor does the DfE capture information on why teachers leave; NFER has recently tried to plug this gap by looking at why teachers might be leaving²⁵.

Our findings can shed light on the geography of the staff retention issue. London is battling one of the greatest retention challenges, with 79% of school leaders citing this as a casualty of the decline in the

perception of the profession. The east of England and south east are close behind, with 75% in each region citing retention as a problem. The issue is least acute in the north east, but 56% of school leaders here still say retention is suffering because of the increased negativity about the profession.

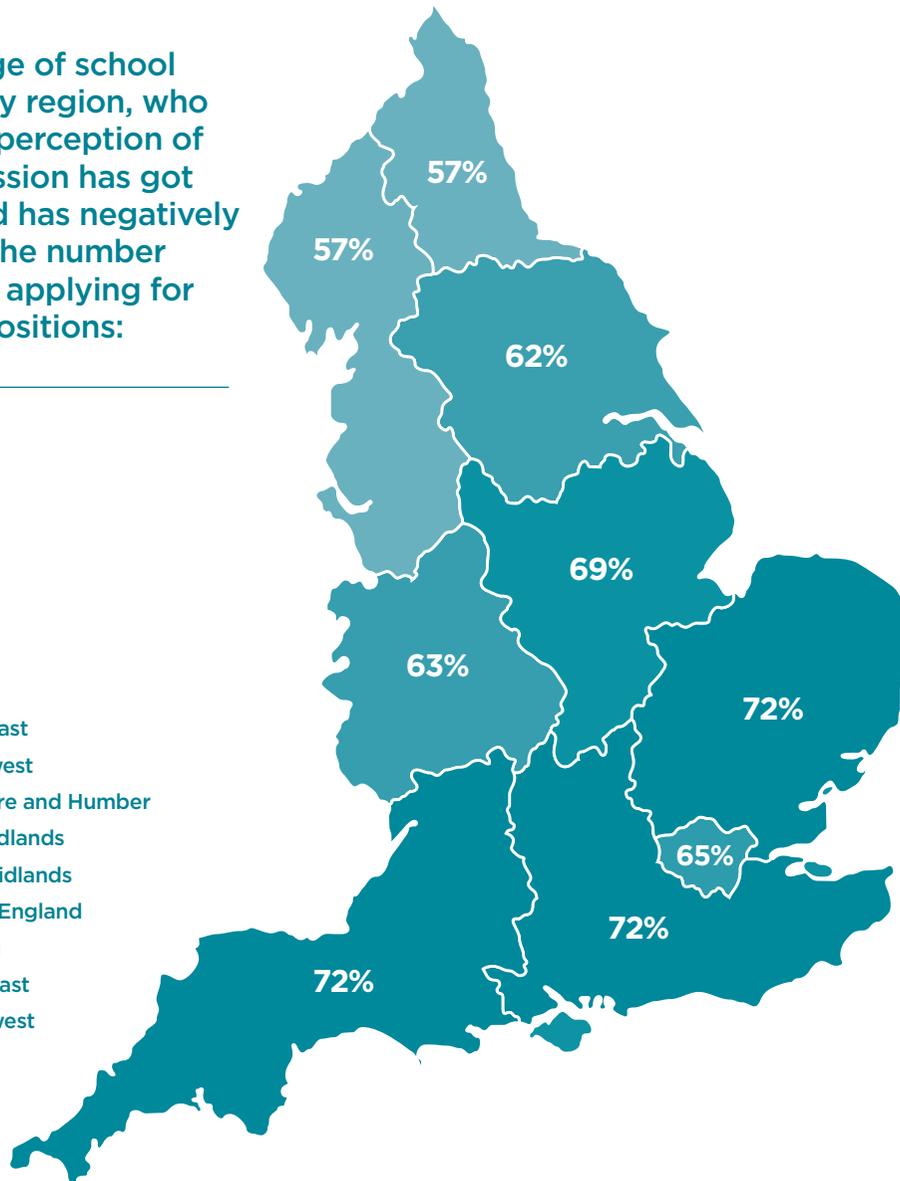
Workforce issues are further exacerbated by teachers' reluctance to step up to leadership positions, which 60% of primary leaders and 50% of secondary leaders also attribute to negative perceptions of the profession.

Which of the following, if any, do you think is being negatively affected by the decline in the perception of the profession?



Percentage of school leaders, by region, who think the perception of the profession has got worse and has negatively affected the number of people applying for teacher positions:

- 57% - North east
- 57% - North west
- 62% - Yorkshire and Humber
- 69% - East Midlands
- 63% - West Midlands
- 72% - East of England
- 65% - London
- 72% - South east
- 72% - South west



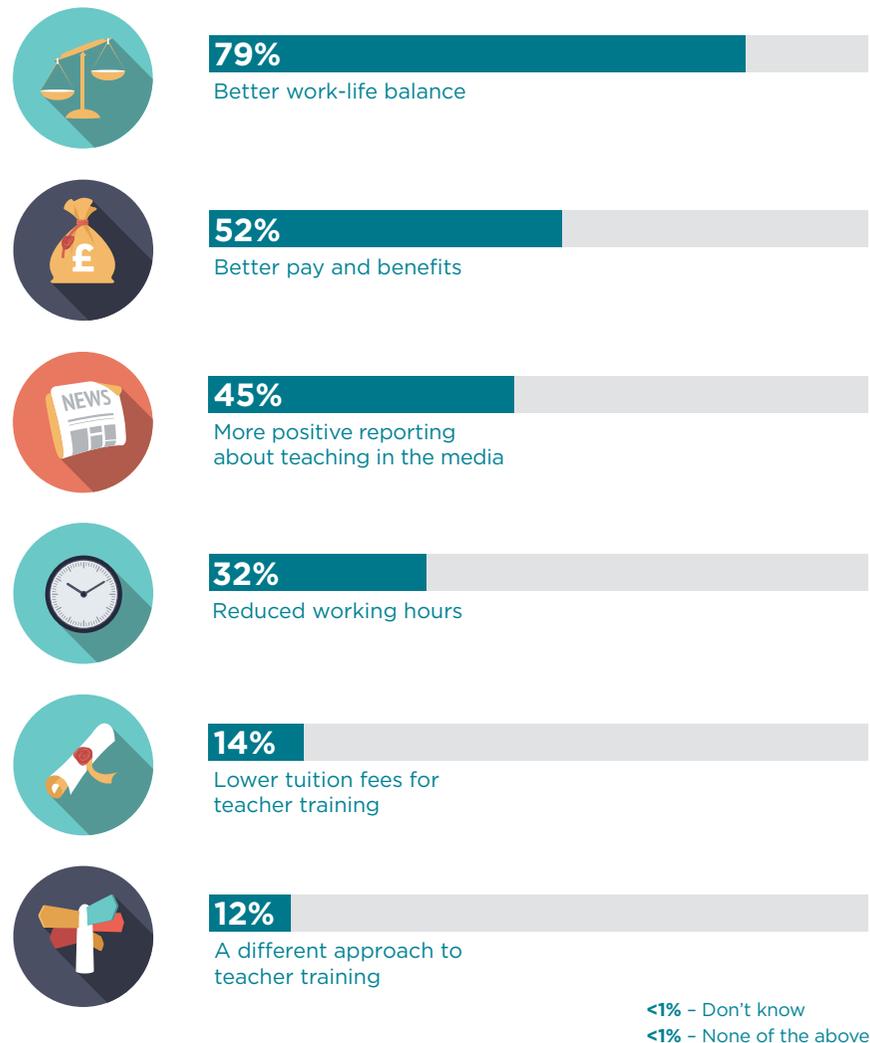
What would do most to get people into teaching?

A better work-life balance would be one of the most effective ways to boost teaching applications, according to 79% of school leaders. This finding builds on our survey last year, when 44% of primary school leaders and 42% of secondary leaders said that workload was one of the main three reasons teachers leave their school. The DfE's 2016 teacher workload survey²⁶ shows the extent of the problem. On average, classroom teachers and middle leaders reported that they work 54.4 hours a week, and it seems that newer, less experienced teachers are spending significantly more time working outside of school hours than more experienced colleagues. While there is scope to become more efficient as time passes, statistics such as these can do little to entice more people into the profession.

Workload is a complex issue²⁷, but the DfE has now taken more concrete steps to address it. It has released an updated action plan²⁸ for reducing teacher workload, and a poster²⁹ to bust myths on marking, planning and data management. Will we see a combined effort between the government and schools to tackle this prevailing issue? The challenge now is for school leaders to find the time to implement these recommendations and assess the impact they have in their settings.

In your opinion, what would do most to encourage more people to get into teaching?

Six most-cited answers



Governor perspective



Managing staff wellbeing and morale is expected to be a challenge over the next academic year for 47% of school governors. When it comes to teacher recruitment and retention, one-third (33%) of primary school governors and half (51%) of secondary school governors expect to face a challenge, which chimes with the views of their school leader counterparts.

For governing boards in primary schools, the recruitment and retention of governors is more pressing: four in 10 (43%) expect this to be a challenge in the year ahead, alongside three in 10 (31%) governors in secondary schools. Employers providing more time off for their staff to be governors would do most to encourage more people into the role and therefore help solve this problem, according to almost a quarter (24%) of those surveyed. The government also has a role to play: one-fifth (19%) of governors think that government efforts to raise the profile of this volunteer role could help bring more people into school governance. More than one in 10 (13%) governors thinks that making the role paid would help.

A fifth (20%) of governors expect senior leadership recruitment and retention to pose a challenge for them over the 2017/18 academic year, with little difference between school phase (20% in primary schools and 23% in secondaries). Two-thirds (67%) think that a better work-life balance would do most to encourage more people to become headteachers, and better leadership training is key for over a third (35%). Once again, the role of the media comes into play: 35% of governors believe more people would be encouraged into headship if education was reported on more favourably in the press.

Positivity and purpose remain at the heart of the school system

There are challenges ahead for all those working within the school system, and much uncertainty and change to get to grips with over the coming years.

But when we asked school leaders what remains great about working in education, we see a profession that is dedicated to young people and the difference that can be made in schools. Time and time again, school leaders tell us they relish the challenge of their role, and the opportunity to improve the life chances of their pupils so that they become the best they can be. Many school leaders simply say that the best thing about their job is “the children”.

“I love the daily challenge and opportunity to make a difference.”

“For me it is a calling, not a job. That light-bulb moment and that smile is the reason I do this job.”

We also asked school leaders to describe how their job makes them feel, in three words. Exhausted, rewarded, privileged, overwhelmed, over-emotional, proud, tired, lucky and happy come up often.

“This report is important as it confirms assumptions about the concerns that affect our profession. It is heartening to read that teachers are inspired by their work, although the pressure they experience to work intolerably hard is evident. It is my hope that the work of the Chartered College of Teaching can begin to address workload by enabling teachers and school leaders to take brave decisions informed by evidence about aspects of their work that they may choose to do less of in order that we can all achieve more.”

Professor Dame Alison Peacock
CEO - Chartered College of Teaching

“I absolutely love my school and I’ve only ever worked in this school. When I get there it feels like my second home. You get so attached to the children that you teach, you want the best for them and you worry about them. Our headteacher says to each new member of staff, treat each child as if they’re your own. That’s when you get the most out of teaching.”

Alessandra Desbottes
Assistant headteacher – Ulverston Victoria High School

Which three words best describe how your job makes you feel?



Which five words best describe the role of a school leader?



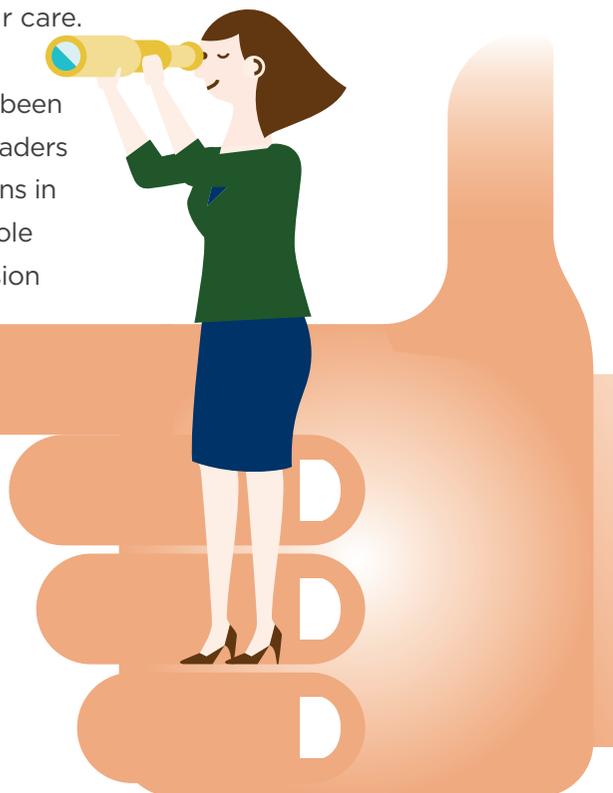
What is it that you love about your job/working in education?



The opportunities ahead

Overall, more than seven in 10 (73%) school leaders believe the quality of teaching has either stayed the same or improved over the last five years, and six in 10 (61%) think that opportunities for career progression/professional development are the same or better than before. School leaders across the board are excited about the opportunities that lie ahead: some are looking forward to joining or expanding a MAT and developing leadership within trusts, while others anticipate focusing specifically on improving teaching and learning for the pupils in their care.

The education landscape has been tricky to traverse for school leaders this year, and the contradictions in how leaders feel about their role are clear. Yet we see a profession that is determined to stride forward, and continue giving its best to improve outcomes for young people in this country, while being proud of the immense work that happens in schools.



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About the survey

The Key invited a sample of its members to complete its annual survey in February 2017. The questionnaire for this study was designed by The Key and conducted online using SurveyMonkey. 1,182 school leaders and 1,257 governors from mainstream schools completed the full survey.

The data has been weighted to match the population profile of schools in England in terms of region, school phase and school type. The profile of The Key's membership database is similar to the profile of schools across England. The data can therefore be taken to represent the views of school leaders on The Key's database, which in turn provides an indication of the opinions of leaders in mainstream schools across England.

The survey was designed, administered and analysed by The Key. Ipsos MORI provided advice on questionnaire design and weighting.



About The Key

The Key provides high-quality, trusted information and online solutions to the education and wider public sector. Our market-leading information services, professional development and online platform solutions help busy professionals work with increased confidence, knowledge and capacity. At the heart of everything we do is a passionate commitment to helping organisations save time, work smarter and deliver better results for the communities they serve.

For more information please go to: www.thekeysupport.com



About Ipsos MORI

Ipsos MORI's Social Research Institute works closely with national government, local public services and the not-for-profit sector. Its 200 research staff focus on public service and policy issues, including a team focusing on education issues. Each of our researchers has expertise in a particular part of the public sector, ensuring we have a detailed understanding of specific sectors and policy challenges. This, combined with our methodological and communications expertise, ensures that our research makes a difference for decision makers and communities.

For more information please go to: www.ipsos-mori.com

We are grateful to everyone who completed the survey, participated in focus groups and shared their comments. Thank you also to our colleagues at The Key and to Ipsos MORI for your hard work in putting this report together.



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