

Schools
North East



*For every child, for every school,
for the future of our region.*

2024

MANIFESTO

*for North East
Education*



The Voice



The Glue



The Bridge

The education policy 'gap'

The main political parties have all previously emphasised the importance of education. But, despite the promises being made by political parties in respect of education, current party manifestos do not sufficiently reflect the concerns or hopes of North East school leaders. No matter what the make-up of parliament after Thursday 4th July, it will be vital to hold all policymakers to their professed commitment to improving educational opportunities and outcomes for ALL children, especially in the most disadvantaged areas.

At Schools North East, we have refreshed our manifesto recommendations as a call to action from all political parties wanting to take seriously the long-term challenges of education in our region. We have updated the details of our recommendations, using data and 'lived experience', from our regular roundtables, surveys, and reports, of our school leaders.

As with our 2019 manifesto, our refreshed 2024 manifesto highlights the significant issues that our schools are facing and the dedicated, **hardworking school staff who are having to deal with the realities of decades-old social and economic issues**. The challenges of long-term deprivation are particularly acute in our region, and **our schools are leading the way in tackling the growing disadvantage gap**. They need and deserve effective education policy and support from all political parties in doing this.



We must hold all policymakers to their professed commitment to improving educational opportunities and outcomes for ALL children, especially in the most disadvantaged areas.



INTRODUCTION

The 2024 general election is a critical juncture for education policy, affording an opportunity for policymakers to acknowledge the long-term structural concerns which impact on attainment and outcomes in the North East, and the extent to which these have been exacerbated in recent years.

There needs to be a genuine sense of urgency, from all political parties, to put in place and begin comprehensive efforts to address these issues within the next parliament. This must include a major investment in education and the services that support children and young people, to guarantee equality of opportunities and greater equity in outcomes, and ensure plans to tackle the disadvantage gap are credible.

A failure to act now risks turning the growing disadvantage gap in educational attainment into a disadvantage chasm. By the end of KS4, students from disadvantaged backgrounds were 18.1 months behind their peers in 2019. In 2022, this had risen to 18.8 months. The gap has increased at all stages of education, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds 4.8 months behind their peers before starting school.¹

Our manifesto sets out the perennial challenges that impact educational opportunities in our region, and the principles needed to inform any educational policy wanting to seriously address these challenges.

Our region's schools are too often falsely cast in a negative light, beset with accusations of low outcomes, low prospects, and a so-called 'North-South' divide in standards.

The gap has increased at all stages of education, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds 4.8 months behind their peers before starting school.

¹ [Annual Report 2023, Education Policy Institute](#)

INTRODUCTION

However, this is the result of measures of school performance that fail to take into account the educational challenges in the North East, particularly high-impact long-term deprivation, leading to economic and geographic factors mistakenly presented as educational ones.

As well as presenting a **false negative narrative**, a failure to map and identify contextual factors has meant resources and funding have not reached where need is highest. Education policy has too often taken a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, denying schools and trusts the flexibility necessary to meet the needs of their communities.

Addressing the contextual factors in 2019 was crucial to tackling educational disadvantage, and these challenges have only increased since. Recognising the North East scale of the contextual challenges is a matter of urgency, and any party serious about tackling long-term disadvantage and ensuring equality of opportunities must prioritise these perennial issues.

“ Measures of school performance that fail to take into account the educational challenges in the North East, particularly high-impact long-term deprivation ”

Unprecedented disruption since 2019

Schools have faced unprecedented disruption brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. The impact of these crises has hit the North East hardest, with its decades long perennial challenges being exacerbated.

Despite the huge changes in the educational landscape, the recommendations and principles in our manifesto have remained relevant, both during the pandemic and after. Rather than facing purely Covid-related challenges, school closures have exacerbated those perennial challenges that we highlighted in 2019.

These challenges have put enormous pressure on the education system, with significant increases in responsibilities and workload burdens on school staff. Addressing these challenges requires a period of stability and 'de-pressurising' of the system, and a focus on how our school leaders, their staff and students can be supported and protected.

CONTEXT

The North East continues to have the highest rates of students eligible for free school meals (FSM)

Our region has consistently had amongst the highest rates of SEN, rising from 12.6% in 2019/20 to 14.6% in 2023/24, and now the highest in England

Our 2019 manifesto particularly focused on the need for greater recognition of the contextual challenges schools face. Its recommendations called on policymakers to **acknowledge the impact of long-term disadvantage in the North East, as well as other contextual factors such as the challenges faced by rural schools, or schools with higher rates of SEND students.**

Despite commitments from policymakers to spread opportunities, **education policy has failed to deliver support to where it is needed most.** Schools North East wants to foster a deeper understanding of our regional context, and to ensure that education policy relating to our region is fit for purpose.

Since 2019, the contextual challenges facing our region have been exacerbated. The North East continues to have the highest rates of students eligible for free school meals (FSM), increasing from 23.5% in 2019/20 to 31.2% in 2023/24 (compared with 24.6% across England). The FSM gap between the North East and the South East (where FSM are lowest) has increased, from 10.6% to 11.5%.²

Our regular roundtables with NE school leaders have highlighted the growing concerns around special educational needs (SEND), attendance, and behaviour, since the pandemic. Our region has consistently had amongst the highest rates of SEN, rising from 12.6% in 2019/20 to 14.6% in 2023/24, and now the highest in England.³

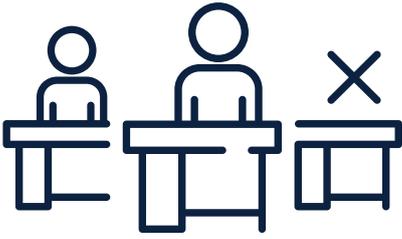
Similarly, the North East has some of the **highest rates of students with an education, health, and care plan (EHCP)**, rising from 3.5% in 2019/20 to 5% in 2023/24 (compared with 4.8% nationally).⁴ In addition to these rises in rates of SEND students and EHCPs, in regular feedback from our region's school leaders, there has been an increase in the complexity of need.

² [Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education](#)

³ [Special Education in England, Department for Education](#)

⁴ [Special Education in England, Department for Education](#)

CONTEXT



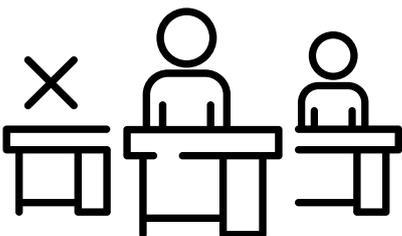
Returning attendance rates to pre-pandemic levels has been a central focus for schools in the past several years. **Absence rates in the North East rose to 7.8% in 2022/23, from a pre-pandemic rate of 5%; the highest rate in the country.**

Persistent absence rates in our region increased from 12.1% in 2018/19, to 22.5% in 2022/23, again, these rates are the highest in England.⁵

**“
Rebuilding
the social
contract with
parents and
communities
is crucial in
tackling
educational
disadvantage
”**

With rising student needs and ever lengthening waiting lists for external services and agencies, more has been expected of schools, with school staff taking on additional responsibilities beyond ‘simply’ educating children. In our Spring 2024 State of the Region survey, **80% of school leaders said they have faced increased challenges with regards to parental relationships.⁶** The pandemic and the cost of living crisis has affected parents and families, as well as students. This has impacted the ability of parents to support their children, and also attitudes towards education.

Parents are at the heart of what schools do, and a range of educational challenges require parental cooperation, particularly on issues such as attendance. However, relationships with parents have changed in the last few years, leading to a seismic shift in attitudes towards school staff, behaviour, and attendance.



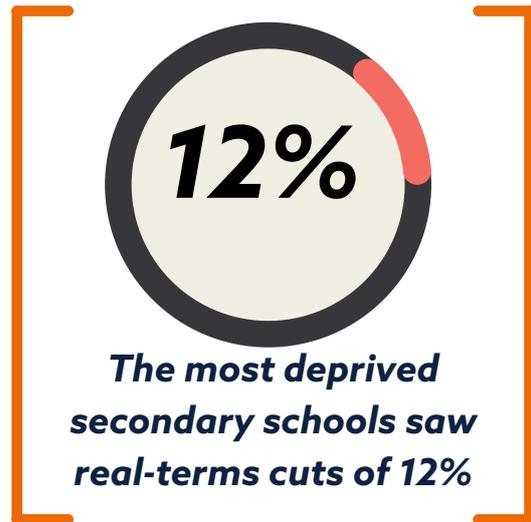
While the majority of interactions with parents are positive, rebuilding the social contract with parents and communities is crucial in tackling educational disadvantage. It is crucial to engage parents with education, especially for supporting SEND students and ensuring parents can trust schools to deliver the right support.

⁵ [Pupil absence in schools in England, Department for Education](#)

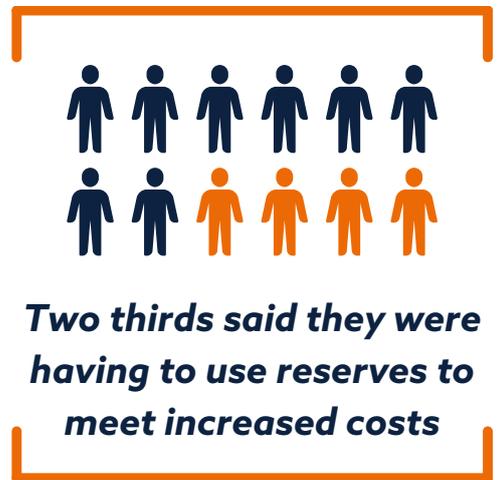
⁶ [Schools North East State of the Region Spring 2024](#)

CONTEXT

Delivering the right support requires adequate funding and the right staff in all of our schools. Both funding and recruitment and retention have been top priorities mentioned in our termly surveys of North East school leaders. **Recruitment targets continue to be missed, with North East seeing the greatest decreases in new entrants for initial teacher training** (10% fewer new entrants in 2023/24 than in 2022/23)⁷ For schools to be fully inclusive, they must have the right staff in place to support all students in accessing the curriculum.



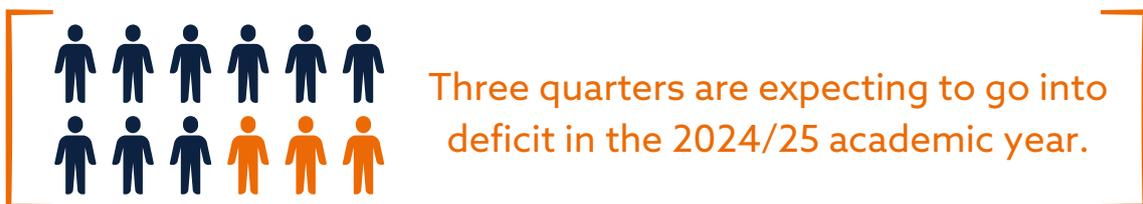
School spending per pupil in England fell by 9% in real terms between 2009-10 and 2019-20. The most deprived secondary schools saw real-terms cuts of 12% compared with 5% for the least deprived ones.⁸



In our Summer 2023 State of the Region survey, two thirds said they were having to use reserves to meet increased costs, with three quarters expecting to go into deficit in the 2024/25 academic year.⁹

It is important to note that these challenges are not evenly spread across the North East, nor are they unique to our region. But **these challenges are particularly acute in the North East**, schools need the flexibility to meet the contextual demands of their respective communities, whether it be high rates of disadvantage or the challenges associated with working in rural areas.

In allowing schools the flexibility to meet changing needs, schools will be better placed to close education gaps which have been increasing in recent years, even prior to the pandemic¹⁰. The pandemic has served as a reminder that our schools are not an island, and now more than ever a collaborative approach across sectors is needed, with adequate investment and planning to support this. A more targeted approach, as outlined in our manifesto, will ensure the most effective outcomes can be reached.



⁷ [Initial Teacher Training Census, Department for Education](#)

⁸ [Annual Report on Education Spending in England: 2023, Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)

⁹ [Schools North East State of the Region Summer 2023](#)

¹⁰ [Education Policy Institute Annual Report 2019](#)

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognise the regional context



2. Promote a positive narrative around North East education



3. Depoliticise Education



4. Evidence-based policy making



5. Long-term view



6. Greater Support for Early Years



7. A joined up approach from cabinet to the chalkface



8. Support North East school staff at every level



9. Ensure all pupils can access an appropriate curriculum



10. Targeted support for those with the greatest needs



OUR RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Recognise the regional context**

Addressing the contextual factors in 2019 was crucial to tackling educational disadvantage, and these challenges have only increased since. Recognising the scale of the North East's contextual challenges is a matter of urgency, and any party serious about tackling long-term disadvantage and lack of opportunities must prioritise these perennial issues.

The regional challenges are not limited to long-term deprivation, nor are issues spread evenly across the North East.

An incoming government must map and recognise 'hidden' poverty, such as those schools working in rural or isolated areas, where access to services, transport links, and other opportunities are sparse.

In mapping needs, it is vital that the Department for Education and Ofsted recognise and define long-term deprivation. Long-term deprivation (LTD) should be a discrete feature for the purposes of school performance and league tables.

Currently, the 'holistic' figure for disadvantage fails to unpick where schools are managing LTD and the more complex challenges this presents.

The next government must devolve more resources and decision-making powers to regional DfE and supporting agencies, so relevant governmental bodies can better understand the context of our region and take a greater lead in development of effective policy to address its problems.



2. **Promote a positive narrative around North East education**

The Department for Education should aim for a transformation of culture in the relationship between North East communities and North East schools. This should be a specific, measurable DfE target.

The narrative around the work schools do should ensure schools and staff can have transformational and meaningful impact on students. There should be a sustained promotional campaign targeted at school communities that need the greatest parental and community support, similar to previous campaigns aimed at stopping smoking.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department for Education should identify and promote the positives of attending and working in North East schools to reassure parents and gain their active support, prevent unacceptable behaviour or abuse of staff, and actively attract staff to the region's schools.

Current measures of school performance fail to take into account the educational challenges in the North East, particularly long-term deprivation, leading to economic and geographic factors mistakenly presented as educational ones.

Reform of the accountability system needs to not just take into account the contextual factors, but also must consider what outcomes we value. The relationship between Ofsted and schools needs to be reset to one of school improvement, not punishment based on one-word judgements.



3. Depoliticise Education

The constant chopping and changing of education policy has taken teachers and support staff away from the classroom and exacerbated the recruitment and retention crisis. Uncertainty over the future of the education policy landscape has led to 'strategic procrastination'.

Future governments must avoid loading diverse, unconnected agendas onto schools. Policymakers must focus on establishing basic foundations, giving school staff the space and flexibility to support their children and young people.



4. Evidence-based policy making

Too often, DfE engages with a limited range of stakeholders that don't reflect the reality at the chalkface.

Going forwards, a broader range of regional voices and North East school staff should be utilised to inform the education policy debate and ensure effective delivery of reforms.

The DfE should commit to closer engagement with Schools North East as a matter of routine, to receive feedback from schools across our region.

Additionally, networks of schools and school hubs (such as Teaching School Hubs and Early Years Practice Hubs) should be further supported to allow for sharing of good practice, identifying what does and doesn't work for particular settings and preventing replication of work.

A broad evidence-base should be used to examine and adopt policy.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS



5. Long-term view

Following on from several years of unprecedented disruption, schools urgently need a period of stability. An incoming government must avoid any dramatic reform or structural changes that would only add administrative workload to school staff.

Any reforms should build on what is already in place, and avoid disrupting, displacing, or decreasing the provision currently available.

Education spending should be seen as an investment, and so requires a clear financial strategy, not just short term spending to plug gaps or react to emergency needs. Without a financial strategy, schools are unable to plan ahead, with funding spent on constant firefighting of issues, as has been seen this academic year on maintaining school buildings.



6. Greater Support for Early Years

Tackling educational disadvantage requires early identification of need. High-quality provision for the youngest children, both in education and in wider services, has a lifelong impact. For example, access to a Sure Start centre between the ages of 0 and 5 significantly improved the educational achievement of children, with benefits lasting at least until GCSEs. The impact was largest for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹¹

As such, the Early Years sector has a central role to play in ensuring equality of opportunities, and it is vital that the sector has long-term commitments and prioritisation. The status of working in the Early Years sector needs to be raised, in order to attract the highest possible quality of staff to where need is highest.

Additionally, a framework for the Early Years sector must focus on quality education and interventions, not simply childcare and getting parents back into the workforce. This can be aided through supporting the Early Years Practice Hubs, to facilitate sharing of good practice.

As with all stages of education, achieving the best interventions at Early Years requires adequate wrap-around support from external agencies.

¹¹ [The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes, Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS



7. A joined up approach from cabinet to the chalkface

Successful education policy and implementation requires joined-up thinking between sectors and agencies, with reform building on what is already in place, and learning from previously successful interventions.

The government should commit to creating an 'organisational' memory of past education policy initiatives, to learn from previous successes and avoid repeating past mistakes.

In multi-agency work to support children and young people, schools are often treated as a lead agency. If this expectation is continued, then funding and resources must reach where support is being delivered. Targets and budgets of departments that relate to children and young people must be made to include and support the work of schools.

These targets and resources should focus on key North East issues, such as behaviour, attendance, and SEND. Non education departments' budgets should be used to support the work schools do that crosses-over with the work of other departments e.g. the NHS. Schools are often expected to lead and co-ordinate work for which they receive no budgetary provision.

As well as working across agencies, schools play a central role in community cohesion. Schools have raised concerns about the decline in the 'social contract', leading to rising expectations on schools at a time when budgets are stretched, and there is a crisis in recruitment and retention.



8. Support North East school staff at every level

A future government needs to consider how to create space and reduce that element of workload which takes staff away from the classroom. Additionally, that work which school staff do should be centred around quality first education, ensuring all schools and staff can have transformational and meaningful impact on students. The government must trust the teaching profession by avoiding policy micromanagement of schools.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

8.

A workforce strategy is needed to attract quality school staff to our schools and trusts. It needs to include not just classroom teachers, but school leaders, teaching assistants, and support staff.

Failures to hit recruitment targets are not evenly distributed, even within defined areas such as the North East. There are challenges in particular subjects and stages, as well as in rural, post-industrial, coastal, and disadvantaged areas. There is a multifaceted rather than a single teacher market, as there is for support staff.

In our Spring 2024 State of the Region survey, over 60% of North East schools were struggling to recruit permanent staff.¹² Recruitment of quality teaching assistants has been a key concern, and has impacted on what provision schools can offer SEND students. A sustained marketing campaign is needed to raise the status of working in schools and to emphasise the benefits and impact school all staff have on students.

Aiding retention requires funded, high quality professional development for all staff. There is a risk that, without adequate resources, the delivery infrastructure for CPD that has been built up over the past several years will weaken, leading to cold spots in access to CPD, especially in local areas.

Schools are seeing rises in vexatious complaints, facilitated by the current complaints system. External bodies should only get involved once a school or trust has exhausted their internal complaints procedure. We must protect our schools with a campaign against abusive behaviour towards staff, similar to the one undertaken in the NHS.



9. Ensure all pupils can access an appropriate curriculum

Adequate funding is needed to ensure that all of our region's schools can provide a minimum 'curriculum guarantee' to all pupils, allowing them to access the same educational experiences as more advantaged students, raise aspirations, and build cultural capital. A broad and balanced education should be a right.

The curriculum should develop more than just academic skills, with room for creative and vocational subjects, serving the needs of pupils and not performance tables. Equality of opportunity must be prioritised for all students in the North East.

The next government must set high level objectives but give schools and trusts the autonomy and flexibility to meet the specific needs of their communities.

¹² [Schools North East State of the Region Spring 2024](#)

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS



10. Targeted support for those with the greatest needs

The system for supporting children and young people with SEND is at crisis point. The SEND system, whether this be in mainstream, alternative and specialist provision, or services outside of schools, is massively oversubscribed. Services and schools are working with children and families in crisis, constantly fire fighting which leads to services working in silos and delivering inconsistent support.

A long term strategy is needed to consider the role schools, social services, child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS), educational psychologists, and other services play. Early identification of need, as well as timely diagnoses following referrals, is crucial to deliver the right support and education. Funding and resources must be accessible and sustained, avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy. Gathering real data to identify where the need is, and ensure funding reaches those that need support, is vital.

Funding and resources must target the region's pupils with SEND, with the ambition of making the support they receive the envy of the world, whatever setting they are in. Inclusivity must be central to reform of the SEND system, ensuring students can remain in mainstream settings, with AP schools used for short-term support where needed, and sufficient special school places.

To support greater inclusivity, school staff need to receive high-quality training and sustained CPD, to match the needs of students. Too few staff have real experience of working in SEND and AP settings, however gaining experience in these settings is crucial in delivering the right support in mainstream settings. Quality subject enhancement training would help in staff moving between settings, and offset the perception that working in special schools may 'deskill' subject specialists.

“

**Schools
North East**



***For every child
For every school
For the future of our region***

”



*For every child, for every school,
for the future of our region.*

Get in touch to discuss



0191 204 8866



@SCHOOLSNE



info@schoolsnortheast.com



@schoolsnortheast



www.schoolsnortheast.org



Schools North East



Schools North East

2024 MANIFESTO
FOR NORTH EAST EDUCATION