

School Leaders



Welcome to this report on the findings from our Autumn 2024 School Leaders Survey.

Research for the survey, where we invited the leaders of the nation's schools and academies to share their views, was carried out for four weeks during October 2024. Over 200 leaders completed the survey, which we estimate* represent the leadership of over 1,800 schools, collectively responsible for nearly 1 million pupils from across all regions of England.

These results also reflect a fairly balanced distribution of age groups, with 52% of these schools comprising infant, junior, and primary, and 37% middle, secondary, and sixth form (the remainder comprising of specialist SEN provision, all-through and nursery).

Of those school and trust leaders responding, 21% are CEOs and Deputy CEOs, 16% are Trustees and 29% are Executive Headteachers, Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers and Assistant Heads. Responses for the remaining 34% included business managers/partners, HR professionals, local governors and central team members.

Of respondents working in the sector, 73% are in a multi-academy trust, 11% in standalone academies and 12% in maintained schools, with the remainder in local or regional educational roles.

As always, we're really grateful to all the school leaders who gave their time generously to participate.

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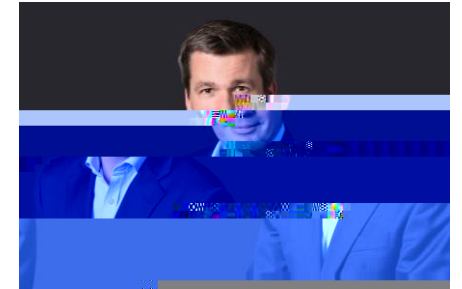
Leading up to the general election, Labour's messaging was of a government in waiting.

In the week after winning, there was a blizzard of policy announcements across the board. In education, the mood appeared to be that after another long year we'd go away for the summer to return in the September with a policy agenda focused on the big issues, taking further shape throughout the Autumn term.

Reflecting on the survey results, it appears that the education sector is currently a sector in waiting. Respondents are clearly waiting to understand what the substance of the government's education agenda will be.

In this survey, we also revisit two key issues for the sector for a more detailed look: Artificial Intelligence and SEND. Both sections will give leaders food for thought when planning their priorities and approaches in 2025.

To find out more or discuss our findings, please do get in touch.



Nick MacKenzie
Partner

Nick is an education lawyer, accredited executive coach and head of education. He is also a member of Browne Jacobson's board.

The Policy Landscape

New government, but priorities remain the same. Extreme concern around funding remains a theme threaded throughout this report.

Nowhere more so than SEND, where leaders are telling us that government policy to date is simply not working, and guidance is not clear enough.

Proposals such as access to specialist mental health professionals being provided in every school could seem hollow if there is not the funding to back it up.

Only 2 in 10 school leaders judge the financial prospects of their organisation as positive in light of the new government.

9 out of 10 respondents were 'very dissatisfied' or 'dissatisfied' with SEND funding.

Only 14% of respondents agreed with the government's approach to tackle the SEND crisis by providing training to existing members of staff.

Three quarters of school leaders report that there's insufficient AI expertise in their organisation.

A fifth of school leaders are regularly using dedicated AI tools in an education setting.

Over a quarter of respondents felt that there was insufficient expertise in their organisation in respect of talent management and development.

Nearly half of school leaders ranked behaviour and attendance as a top three operational priority.

Almost two thirds are dissatisfied with government policy on excluding pupils with special educational needs.

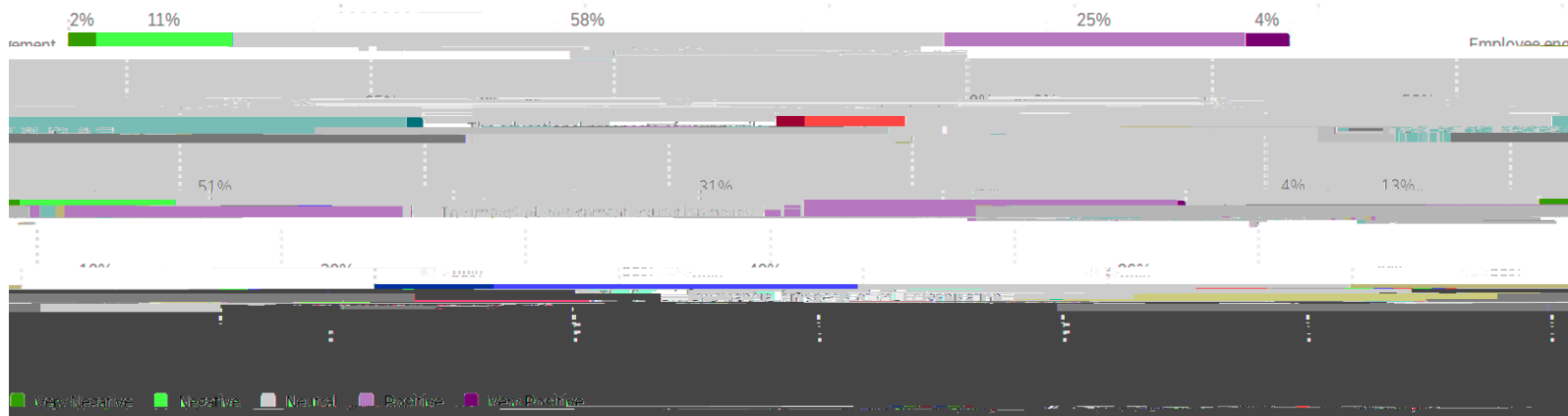
Almost all leaders remain confident that they have sufficient or more than sufficient safeguarding expertise within their organisation.

Almost 3 out of 4 school leaders (74%) remain
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The Policy Landscape

In light of the election results bringing in a new government, how do you judge the following for your organisation?



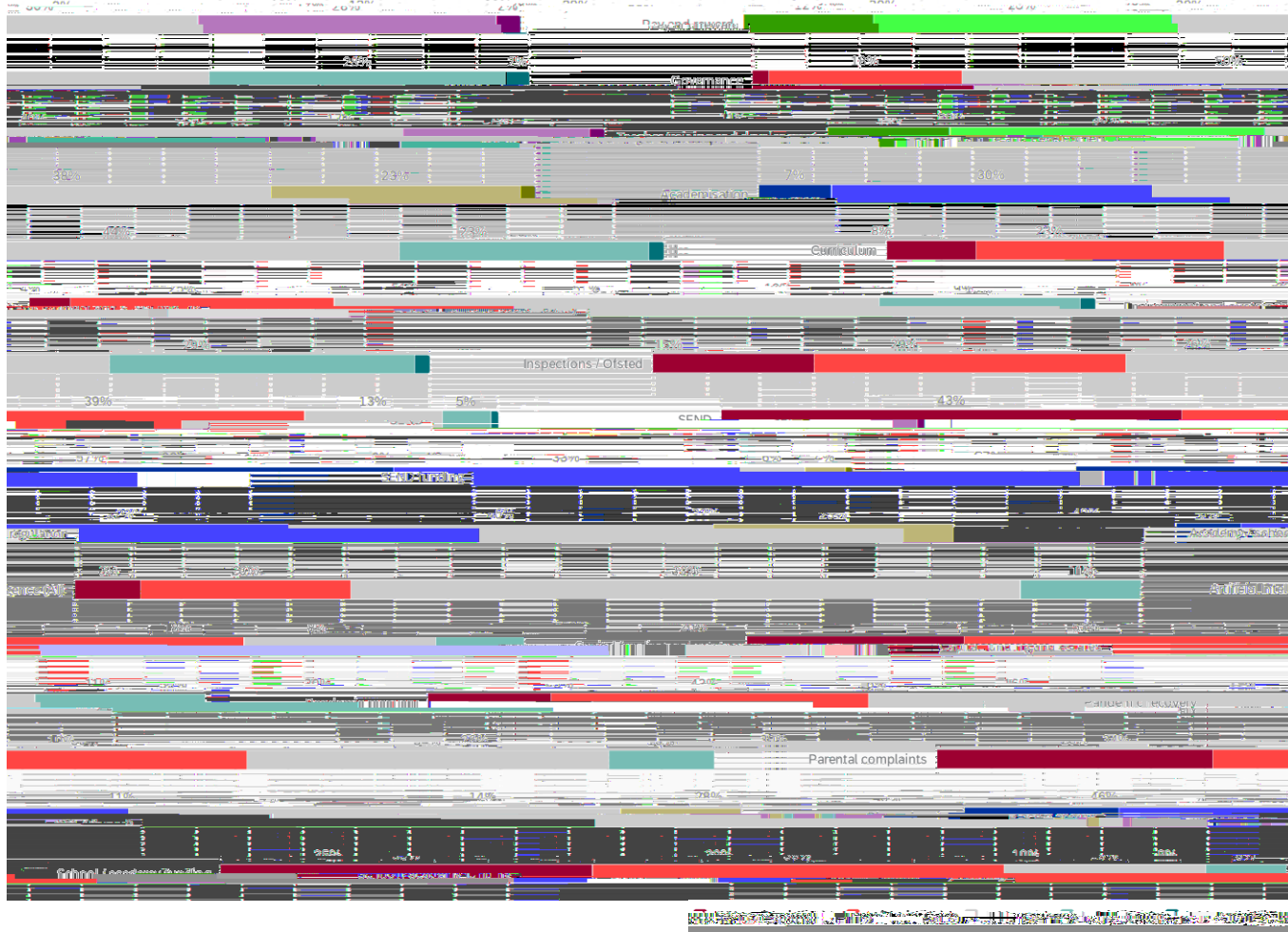
Four months in office, and it's clear that school leaders are waiting to see what the details of the government's education agenda will really look like. **51%** expressed neutrality when asked about the impact of government policy.

Interestingly, with the government's early focus on resetting industrial relations across the public sector, compared to our last survey, the new government has had minimal impact on employee engagement, with only 3 in 10 reporting positivity.

In our last survey, **50%** felt positive about the educational prospects of their pupils; that's now down to **35%**.

Negative feelings in relation to the financial prospects of the organisation have decreased, but 40% feel neutral, so that's likely to be down to seeing what the new government will invest and the emerging policy agenda.

Heather Mitchell, Partner



After years of strong dissatisfaction around the government’s policy for pay and reward, this is an area where leaders are demonstrating more optimism, with **30%** showing positivity compared to just **14%** in our last survey.

The proposed reinstatement of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body was announced immediately after the survey closed, we expect that to have a significant impact on future views around pay and reward.

Similarly, the abolition of the one-phrase Ofsted judgements seems to have shifted opinion, with over half of respondents now feeling neutral or positive towards Ofsted inspections, compared to just **29%** before that policy change.

Funding remains a major concern across the board. Almost three-quarters of school leaders tell us that they were dissatisfied with funding for capital funding and estates and school or academy funding generally.

That increased to 9 out of 10 leaders feeling dissatisfied in respect of SEND funding, a level we have seen felt consistently across our surveys. However, these responses were recorded prior to the Autumn Budget announcements, where there was a commitment of a £1BN uplift in SEND funding, so it will be interesting to assess the impact of this when we revisit for our Spring 2025 survey.

Katie Michelin, Partner.

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Priorities and organisational resilience

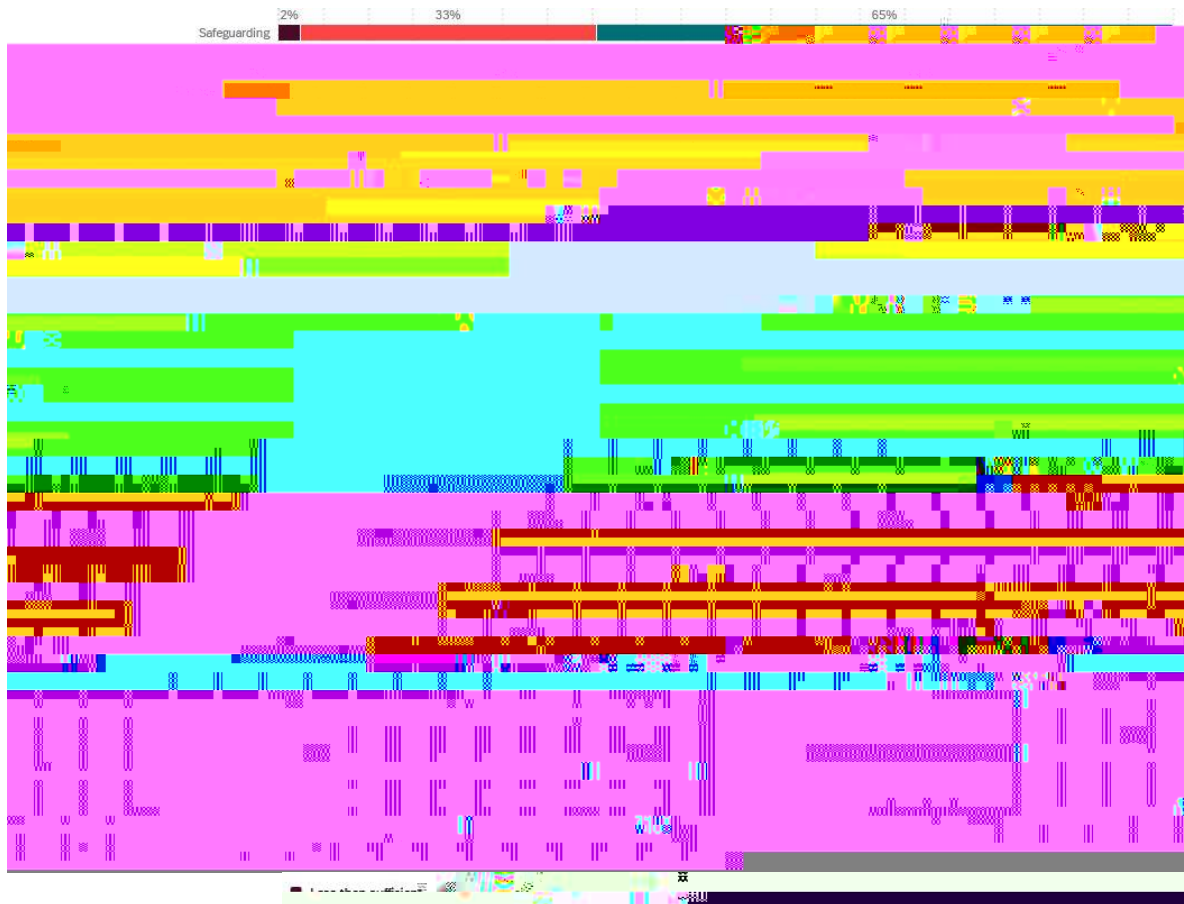
This table shows the most selected top three priorities from the range of priorities made available to school leaders.

It gives a clear sense of areas of focus, with the top three operational strategies being financial stability, enhancing educational provision together with behaviour and attendance. Recruitment and retention comes close in behind (**32%**), an area that we have consistently seen raised as a priority.

Again this time, financial sustainability is the top priority for half of the leaders surveyed. With declining birth rates affecting much of the country, the impact of that is starting to take its toll particularly at primary level. It is not clear that the demographic challenges that will only grow have received the strategic attention it deserves at a sector planning level.

Behaviour and attendance comes a close second with almost half (**49%**) sighting it as a top three operational strategy. The updated statutory guidance on school attendance came into force in August 2024, requiring a more prescriptive approach.

Which areas do you feel there is sufficient expertise within your organisation?

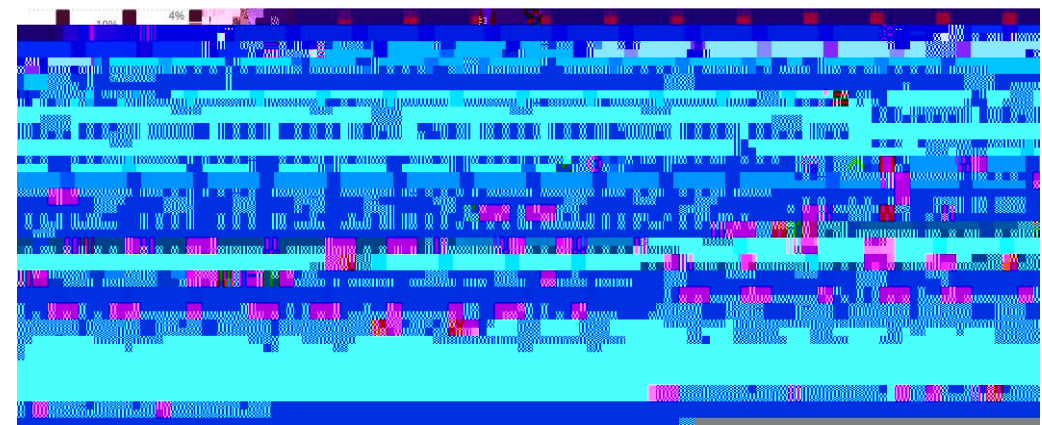


With 3 out of 4 school leaders reporting that there is less than sufficient expertise within their organisation in AI, this is clearly an area of concern, explored in detail in Section 3.

27% of leaders felt that talent management was an area where they did not have sufficient expertise, up from **22%** in our last survey. In most other areas, there is a confidence that organisations have sufficient expertise, with safeguarding coming out the strongest.

In terms of recruitment, behaviour management is another particularly challenging area. With leaders reporting behaviour as a top operational priority perhaps it is not a surprise that 6 in 10 (**62%**) reported some level of difficulty recruiting into this area.

How hard is it to recruit expertise to the following areas?



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Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Whilst **29%** of respondents stated they're not using AI at all, there's otherwise a varied use of AI across all aspects of school life, with nearly half using it to create or enhance resources.

It appears that personal data is being processed in AI tools by schools, with personalised learning, assessment and feedback, virtual tutoring handling parent enquiries and complaints all being listed as uses.

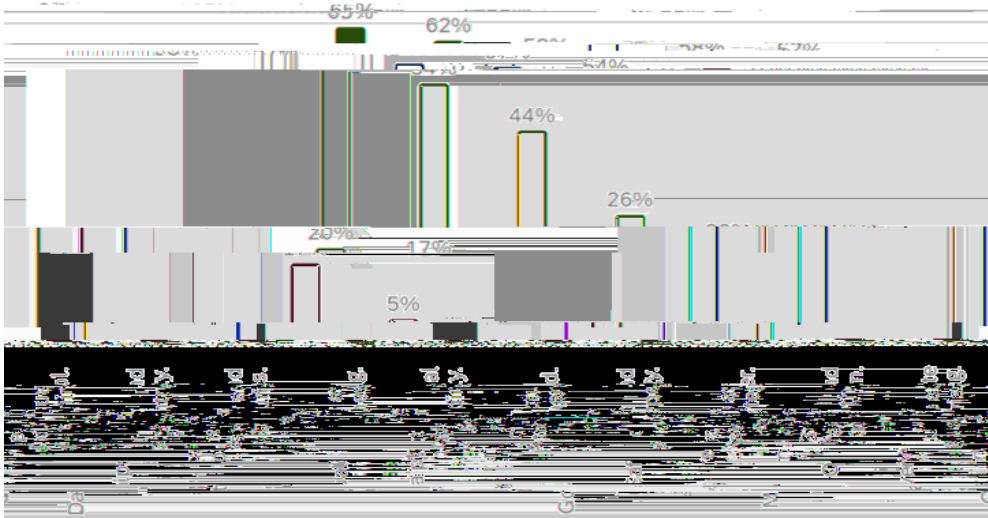
AI is being used to address recruitment processes as well, which suggests that tools are being used in a way that may pose additional risks to individuals.

Of the **40%** of leaders who use AI, the majority said that they were using readily-available tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Co-Pilot, with only a minority using tools that were specifically designed for the UK education sector.

These tools may be deployed because of their ease of access.

Bethany Paliga, Senior Associate.

What concerns do you have about the use of AI in education?



Leaders are engaged with the risks of AI in education. However, despite the JCQ stating that schools must be aware of the risk of malpractice and plagiarism, just **65%** are aware of this as a risk.

Over half are concerned about issues such as quality control, data privacy and security, bias and fairness, which does demonstrate that messages about the risks from bodies such as Ofsted and the ICO are landing with schools, but again, we would expect awareness to be much higher than this. Whilst awareness of risks is reasonable, only 17% see that effective governance and strategy of AI should be an area of concern.

Do you have an agreed strategy for using AI?



Whilst technological enhancements and digital projects are not seen as operational priorities for schools, AI usage could have the potential to be part of the toolbox for other priorities, particularly in reducing staff workload to improve staff wellbeing, enhancing educational provision and with SEND.

The good news is that **62%** of respondents have either agreed a strategy for AI use, have one in progress, or are planning to develop a strategy. Therefore, the majority understand the need for strategic leadership and are acting on this understanding.

The next challenge will be to ensure that the strategy includes plans to effectively monitor and oversee risk management and governance, not just operational and pedagogical effectiveness.

Claire Archibald, Legal Director

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Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

90% of school leaders were 'very dissatisfied' or 'dissatisfied' with SEND funding and **82%** were 'very dissatisfied' or 'dissatisfied' with government policy on SEND generally.

The additional comments provided in the survey also reflected the fact that most schools and academies are woefully underfunded to make the provision needed for pupils with special educational needs, with many saying that this was their biggest barrier to supporting pupils appropriately.

Encouragingly, this indicates that many schools remain willing to provide inclusive environments, but they report being prohibited by the lack of investment in the sector.

Despite the scale of this issue and insufficient funding, the majority of leaders responding (**76%**) felt that they have sufficient in

The majority expressed dissatisfaction with government support and guidance on exclusions and absence management for SEND pupils.

The SEND Code of Practice has now been in place for 10 years and the intention to provide a more joined-up approach between education, health and social care hasn't yet been realised.

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CEO, South-West England.

Furthermore, in addition to funding and increased places for specialist SEND provision, many school leaders flagged a lack of consistency, clarity and availability of local health services and support.

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Principal / headteacher, South-East England.

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Laura Thompson, Senior Associate

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We champion fairness, make the complex simple, and forge connections between clients to find creative solutions.

This is how our lawyers improve outcomes for every person, community, education institution

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The team are ambitious and forward-thinking. We seek to combine our legal expertise and deep sector understanding to provide advice that enables our clients to navigate the evolving education landscape.

The team are ranked Tier 1 in both Legal 500 and Chambers and Partners UK.

Media enquiries

If you'd like to feature any of the findings from this report or explore any of these themes in more detail, please get in touch.

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