
School Leaders Survey findings

Autumn 2024

**Browne
Jacobson**

Introduction

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.

Contents

Foreword	3
Key themes and findings	4
01. The Policy Landscape	6
A new government	7
Policy satisfaction	9
02. Priorities and resourcing	11
Operational strategies	12
Staff expertise and recruitment	13
03. Artificial Intelligence	14
Attitudes to AI	15
Strategy and risk	18
04. Special Educational Needs	20
Government policy	21
Government guidance	22
Mental health provision	24
About Browne Jacobson	27

Foreword

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.

Key themes

Trends emerging from the Autumn edition

The Policy Landscape

There has been a marked shift in the picture painted of school leaders' views around key government policy areas, from widespread dissatisfaction to a position of neutrality.

Leaders appear to be on a watching brief to examine developing policy announcements around the academy system, the approach to school improvement, SEND reforms, funding and significant staff pay changes around the imposition of the School Support Staff Negotiation Body, to name a few.

Priorities – SEND

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.

Artificial Intelligence

Education leaders are concerned about the lack of AI expertise and feel unprepared for its implementation, yet optimistic about its potential to improve education by personalising learning and reducing workload.

Many are not using AI, and those who do often use general tools not tailored for the UK education sector, raising suitability and security concerns.

The survey highlights the need for better expertise, tailored AI tools, strategies for governance, risk management and effective AI integration.

Key Findings

20%

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

90%

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

14%

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

75%

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

20%

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

27%

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

49%

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

62%

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

98%

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

75%

Almost 3 out of 4 school leaders (74%) remain dissatisfied with overall government funding.

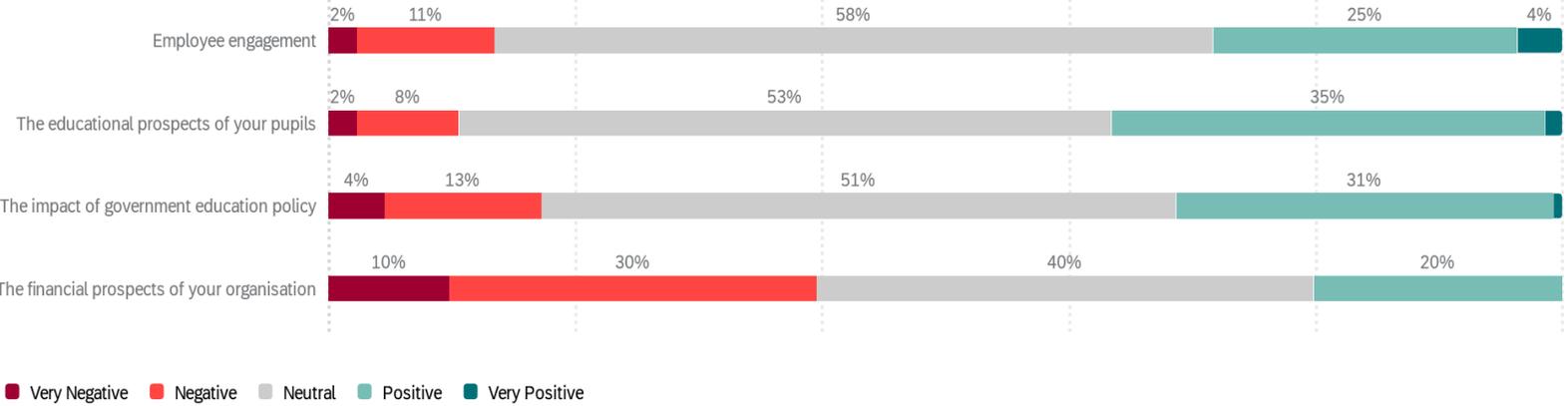
01

The Policy Landscape

1.1 Policy landscape

A new government

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.

01. Policy landscape

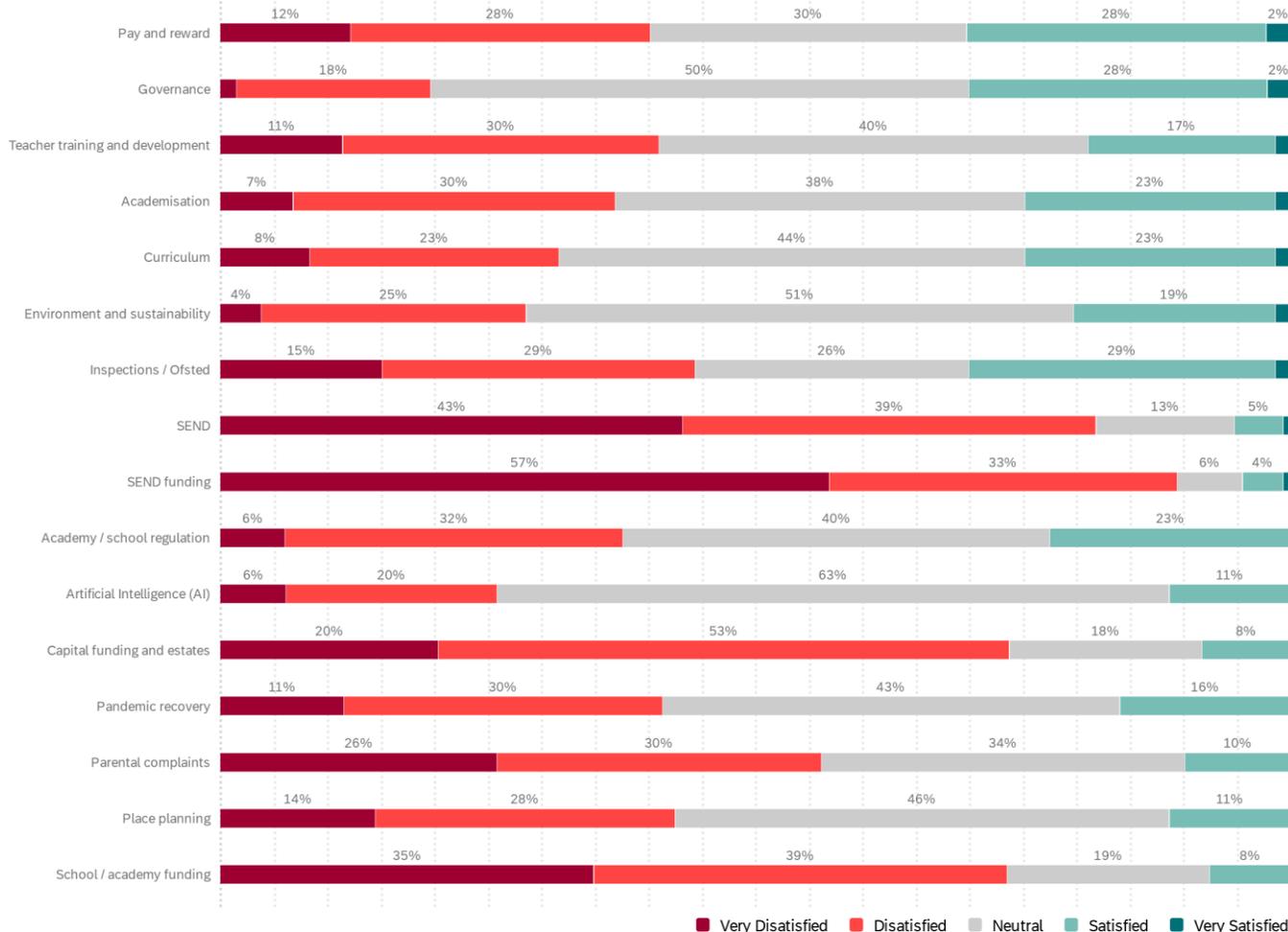
First 100 days

“Our survey was held in the weeks which marked the conclusion of the Labour government’s first 100 days in office. School leaders have clearly told us that government policy, on education at least, has had no substantial impact in that time. Half of respondents felt neutral about the impact of government policy, with only 3 in 10 feeling positive.”

Heather Mitchell, Partner

1.2 Policy Landscape

Satisfaction



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.

01. Policy landscape

Ofsted

“Is there a direct correlation between the removal of single-phrase judgements and a marked increase in satisfaction towards Ofsted inspection? Perhaps. Leaders seem encouraged that this scope of change is now genuinely on the table. But there are also signs of better inspection practice on the ground.

As we head into a period of consultation and decision on the detail of report cards, hopefully the dial will continue to move in this positive direction.”

Katie Michelin, Partner.

-

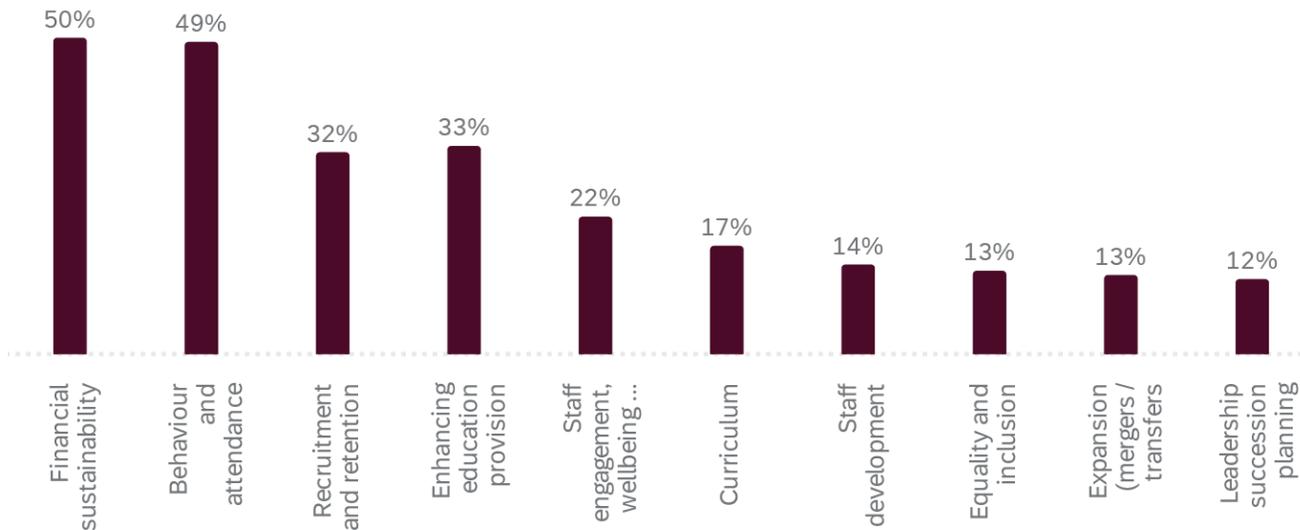
02

Priorities and organisational resilience

2.1 Priorities and organisational resilience

Operational strategies

What are the top three organisational strategies that your organisation will focus on over the next 12 months?



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. At this point, that does not appear to have lessened its impact as a top priority for leaders.

2.2 Priorities and organisational resilience

Staff expertise and recruitment

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

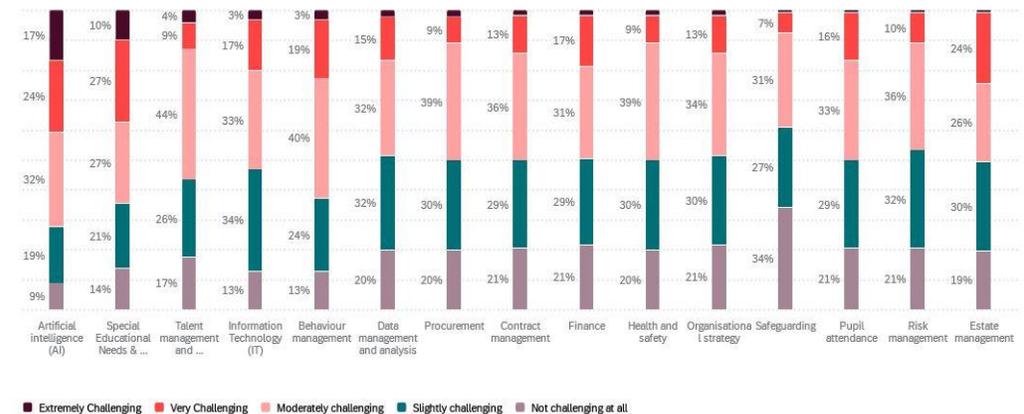


With 3 out of 4 school leaders reporting that there is less than sufficient expertise within their organisation in AI, this is clearly an area of concern, explored in detail in Section 3.

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?



03

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

3.2 Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Use cases

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.

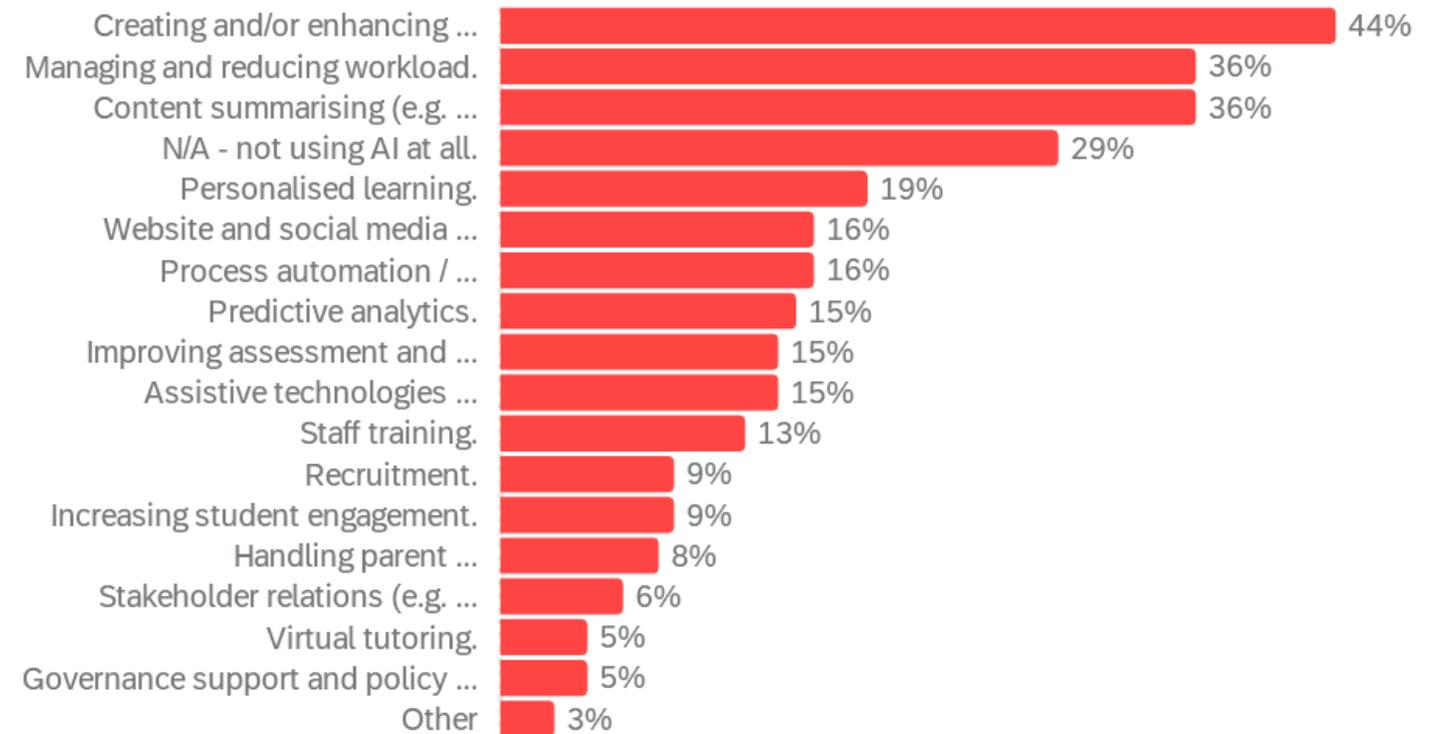
It appears that personal data is being processed in AI tools by schools, with personalised learning, assessment and feedback, virtual tutoring handling parent enquiries and complaints all being listed as uses.

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. However, terms and conditions of these freely-available tools may not be suitable for education, with terms including provision for inputs to be used to further train the model, and risks of inaccuracy as they are not trained specifically on UK education information.

How are you currently using AI in your organisation?



03. Artificial Intelligence

“Although the adoption of AI isn’t yet seen as a top operational priority, bodies such as the DfE, Ofsted, the ICO and the JCQ expect schools to be engaging with the risks of AI, which may already be part of the way individual staff and students work.

It seems that the messages from these bodies that the safe use of AI is a priority is not always landing with leaders. We suspect this is, in part, due to the cross-sector approach taken by government to allow AI to be regulated through existing regulators, resulting in different messages coming from various sources.

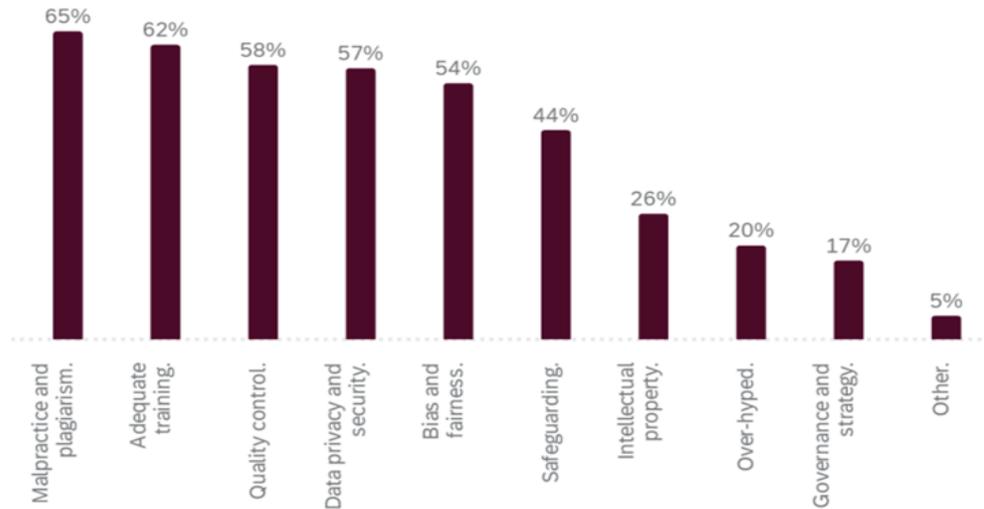
That’s why we’re urging education clients to carefully consider which AI tools are used to ensure they properly consider compliance risks in order to use AI technology safely and effectively. Embracing AI in education is not just about staying ahead technologically; it's understanding the unique complexities and challenges that come with adopting new technology in a school environment.”

Bethany Paliga, Senior Associate.

3.3 AI

Strategy and attitudes to risk

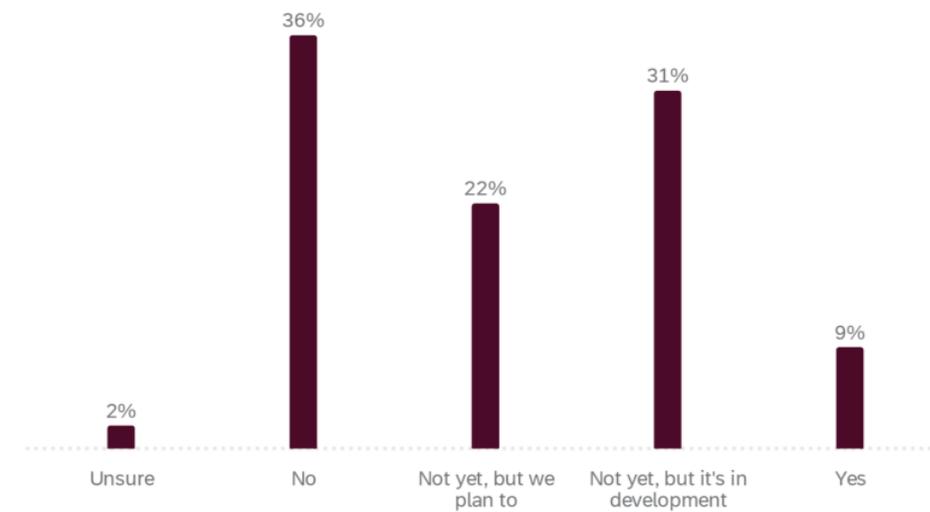
What concerns do you have about the use of AI in education?



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.

03. Artificial Intelligence

“Whilst a sizeable proportion of leaders have not yet engaged with AI tools, many others are optimistic about its potential; already using AI for a variety of functions, including assessment, pupil report writing and even recruitment processes.

Leaders also tell us that they are concerned about data privacy and security, bias and fairness, safeguarding and quality control. This reveals a contradiction: their actions, such as trying out new technologies without fully understanding the implications, don't always reflect these concerns.

Furthermore, the approach to adopting technology may not be planned with a clear strategy. Instead of first setting clear goals and then finding tools that meet those needs, it appears tools are chosen first based on their convenience to access, with potential uses being figured out afterward through trial and error.

A clear strategy, underpinned by strong governance and oversight will be a key part of operational success and safe deployment for schools and academies.”

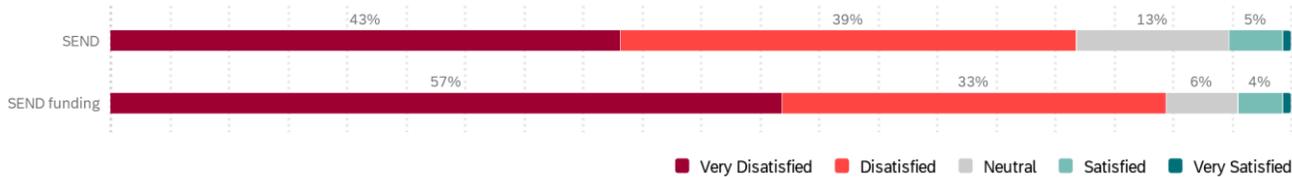
Claire Archibald, Legal Director

04

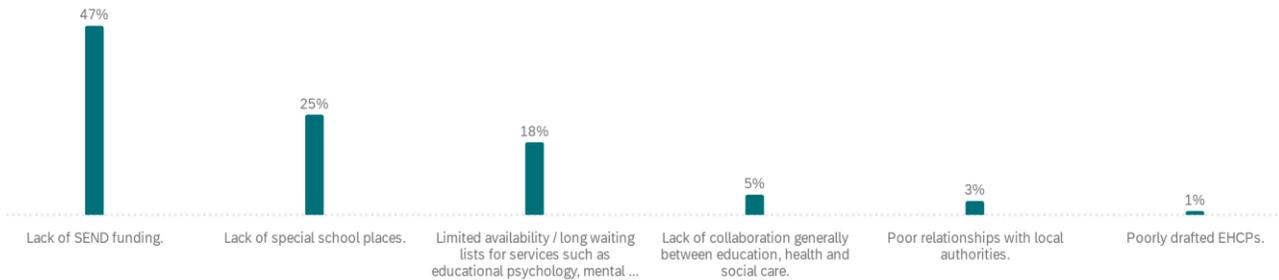
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

4.1 SEND Government policy

How satisfied are you with government policy on SEND?



If you could remove one of the obstacles to effective SEND provision, which would it be?



“SEND provision is the most important factor affecting the education landscape. Get that right, and properly funded, then I think most other areas, including overall funding, can be managed by the professionals at the coalface”.

Trust CEO from the South-East of England.

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.

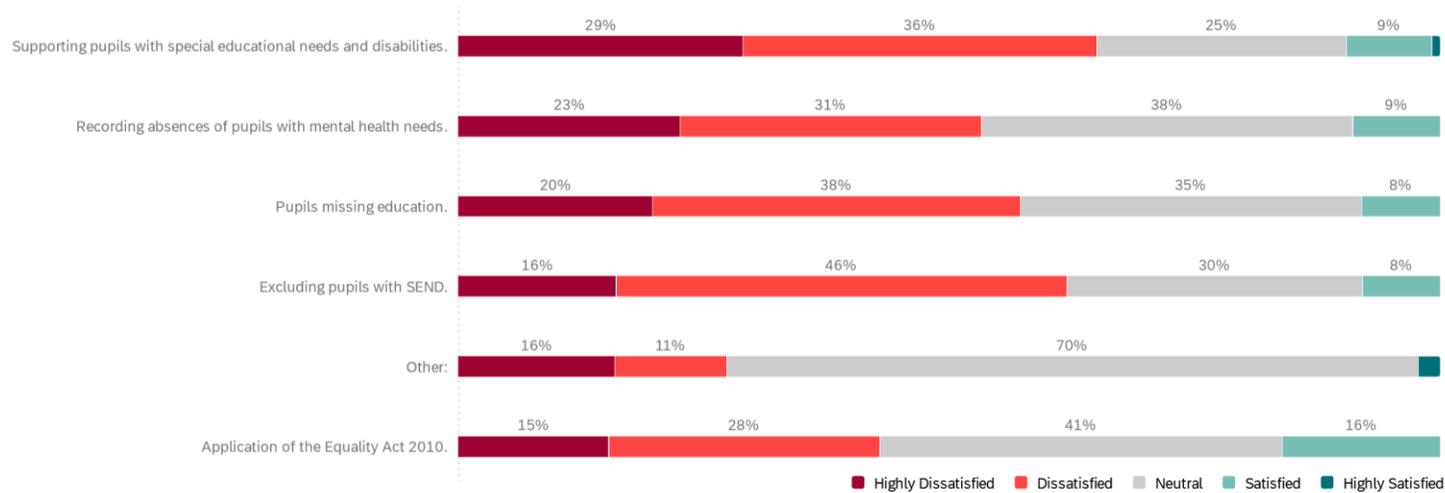
Encouragingly, this indicates that many schools remain willing to provide inclusive environments, but they report being prohibited by the lack of investment in the sector.

Despite the scale of this issue and insufficient funding, the majority of leaders responding (76%) felt that they have sufficient in-house expertise in SEND. However, most (86%) find recruiting individuals with SEND expertise to be a challenge.

Interestingly, two thirds of respondents said that they considered the previous government’s SEND and AP plan to provide funding for an additional 33 special schools was one of the most important proposals – just behind National SEND Standards.

4.2 SEND Government Guidance

How satisfied are you with existing government guidance on the following issues?



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.

“Meaningful external agency support with SEND needs in schools - improvement in CAMHS, social care, expert agencies working with schools to improve outcomes.”

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.

“This is a very complex issue. Getting services for children in the first place is a challenge and obtaining the funding children are so in need of is impossible.”

Principal / headteacher, South-East England.

“Timely intervention from external agencies e.g. speech therapy, mental health specialist professionals, CDC, CAMHS etc.”

Principal / headteacher, South-East England.

Please identify the issues you consider to be most important:



04. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

"The lack of consistency in approach within different areas has shown itself to be the next biggest issue for schools, beyond SEND funding. The previous government took steps to implement 'National SEND Standards' with a view to ensuring consistency in the way that children's needs are assessed and met across the country. The change in government has likely slowed the process but this does appear to be something that school leaders are still keen to see.

As one assistant headteacher explains: "We cover 5 different local authority areas, with 5 different processes and 5 different EHCP templates. One approach (taking the best elements from each!) would lead to better outcomes for all pupils."

Since the publication of the SEND Code of Practice in 2014, there have been questions around when – or, if – a standardised template will be prepared for Education, Health and Care Plans but there is still no sign. For something that would, in the grand scheme of things, be a relatively straightforward step to take, it could make a significant difference to schools, local authorities and parents."

Laura Thompson, Senior Associate

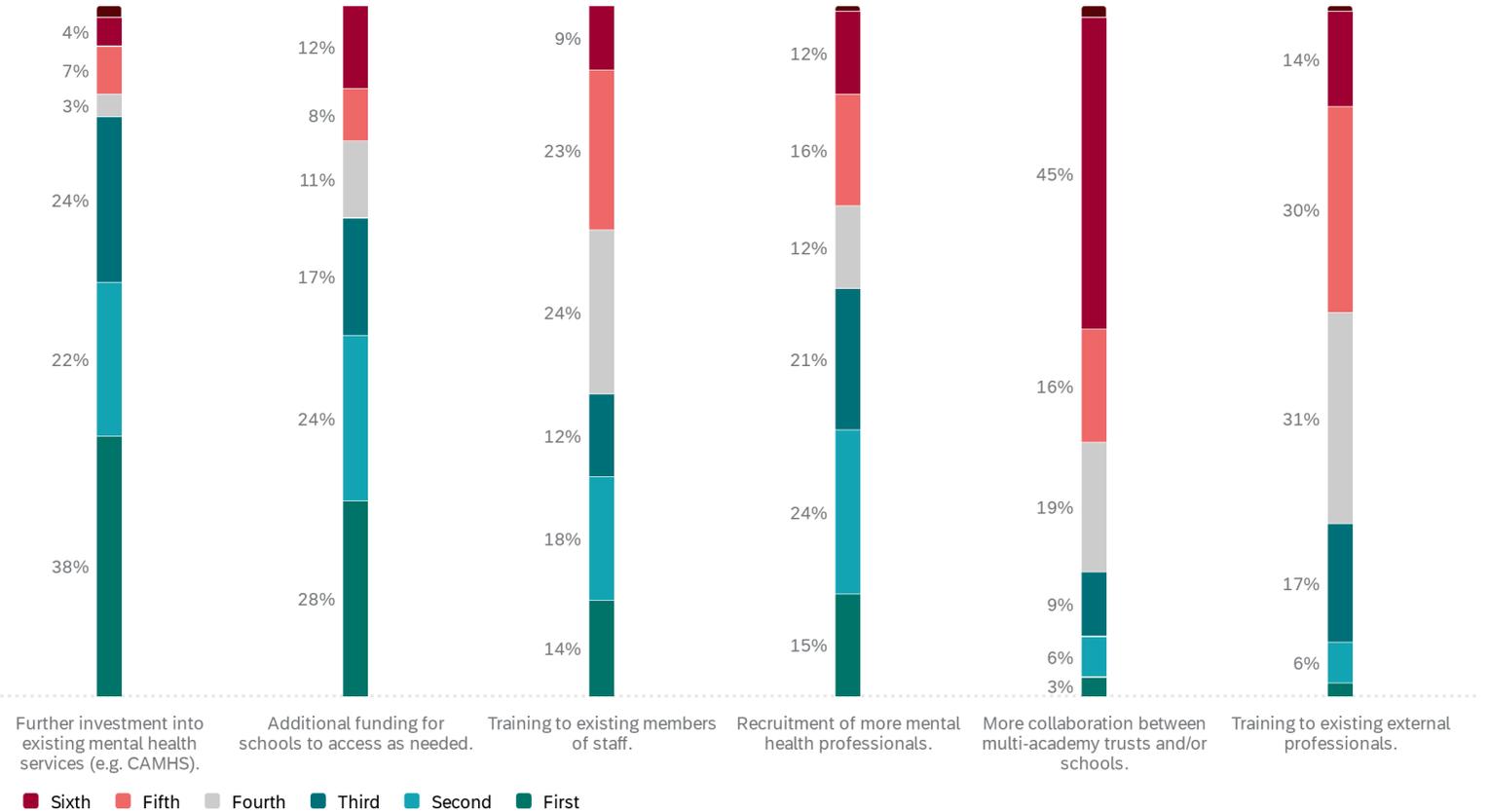
4.3 SEND Mental Health Provision

Most respondents felt that the best (and most realistic) way to ensure a specialist mental health professionals in every school would be through further investment into existing mental health services or additional funding for schools to access as needed.

‘Training to existing members of staff’ was only considered to be the preferred approach by 14% of respondents, despite this being the approach set out in the latest Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance. This guidance notes that schools and colleges can apply for a grant to pay for training for senior mental health leads “to help introduce or develop their whole school or college approach to mental health”. This training will be available to all state-funded schools and colleges by 2025.

While the guidance notes that the ‘Senior Mental Health Lead’ role is not mandatory, there is little clarity on what will be on offer for those schools that do not have a senior mental health lead in school.

The government has proposed to provide access to a specialist mental health professional in every school. How do you think this will best (and most realistically) be achieved?



04. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

“It’s easy to sound like a broken record when the message around SEND funding is played on repeat. However, the results of this survey show that the issue is not going away. Most schools want to do all they can to support pupils with special educational needs, but they need the resource to do so.”

Properly funded SEND provision would help to alleviate other pressure points in schools such as parental complaints and legal challenges, behaviour management, exclusions and staff recruitment and retention”

Laura Thompson, Senior Associate

About Browne Jacobson

Browne Jacobson is the law firm working to make a difference across business and society.

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 and business we serve.

Leading education lawyers

Browne Jacobson's education practice is very well-established and highly regarded. As one of the country's leading law firms operating in the sector, our multidisciplinary practice delivers a comprehensive portfolio of legal and HR services, from our office network to education sector organisations nationally.

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.



Dan Robinson
Senior PR Executive

+44 (0)330 045 1072
dan.robinson@brownejacobson.com

brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)370 270 6000

**Browne
Jacobson**

© Browne Jacobson LLP 2024

The information contained in this report is and shall remain the property of Browne Jacobson. This document may not be reproduced without the prior consent of Browne Jacobson.

Browne Jacobson is the brand name under which Browne Jacobson LLP and Browne Jacobson Ireland LLP provide legal and other services to clients. The use of the name “Browne Jacobson” and words or phrases such as “firm” is for convenience only and does not imply that such entities are in partnership together or accept responsibility for acts or omissions of each other. Legal responsibility for the provision of services to clients is defined in engagement terms entered into between clients and the relevant Browne Jacobson entity. Unless the explicit agreement of both Browne Jacobson LLP and Browne Jacobson Ireland LLP has been obtained, neither Browne Jacobson entity is responsible for the acts or omissions of, nor has any authority to obligate or otherwise bind, the other entity.