

From classrooms to communities: a manifesto for schools and trusts

Governing boards are the accountable bodies for academy trusts and schools, providing oversight, strategic direction and holding senior leaders to account. Following our 2023 annual governance survey and own extensive experiences supporting governing boards in the school sector, NGA is keenly aware of the challenges facing schools and their communities. A quarter of a million trustees and governors give their time, care and expertise to set the vision, culture and strategic priorities and to take crucial decisions to address these issues and ensure that trusts and schools are sustainable.

2024
general
election

1 Future proofing

Staff wellbeing, recruitment and retention

External pressures on school leaders, teachers, and support staff contribute to persistent recruitment and retention challenges. High workload, wellbeing concerns and pay are cited by governing boards as the primary factors affecting their ability to attract and retain staff. Diversity within the workforce also needs to be improved.

Our ask:

While NGA welcomes the recent 6.5% pay raise for teachers and leaders, a comprehensive, long-term plan for pay and incentives for all staff is essential to counter the salary deficit after a decade-long decline. This approach should be integrated into a broader strategy beyond financial aspects aimed at enhancing the appeal of a career in education. In order to have a diverse and representative workforce fairly rewarded, the Government must lead on addressing inequalities in recruitment, retention and development, from the crucial first stage of entry into the profession to leadership.

Estates and environmental sustainability

Recent RAAC concerns highlight longstanding issues with school estate planning and investment. Current measures are primarily reactive, lacking a proactive approach to other critical issues such as asbestos and lead piping removal. Modernising school energy provision is also crucial, given that schools contribute 25% of UK public sector building emissions. Governing boards cite leadership capacity and funding access as the main barriers to progress.

Our ask:

The Government should establish a long-term programme for removing hazardous materials from schools, establishing clear and open lines of communication with governors and trustees as the responsible body. Increased capital funding will ensure adequate resource to maintain and improve school buildings and estates. Leadership capacity and funding must also be secured for premises improvements, renewable energy, and preparing our pupils to deal with environmental challenges, all with appropriate timelines given the climate emergency.

Ed Tech

Access to Ed-tech resources, both in the classroom and at home, cultivates digital literacy and computer skills that are essential to an evolving job market. However, cost and geographical location remain a barrier to many children accessing resources crucial to their learning, particularly those attending schools serving economically disadvantaged communities and those in rural locations. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) also has the potential to revolutionise teaching and learning practices. NGA welcomes a human-centered approach to the use of AI, provided appropriate mitigations are in place to protect the integrity of the education system.

Our ask:

Pupils from low-income households and rural areas must have equal access to Ed-tech resources. The next government should ensure that funding does not disproportionately benefit schools with less disadvantaged student populations which is happening under the current funding formula. The DfE's policy document on generative artificial intelligence must provide adequate guarantees for safeguarding educational institutions against AI misuse or how it will be regulated, as well as ensuring teachers and educators are consulted within the development of AI tools.

2 Families

Attendance

Attendance is a significant challenge for the sector with both persistent absence and overall absence at their highest levels since records began in 2006-07. Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and vulnerable children have the highest levels of absence. The increase in absence is symptomatic of underlying challenges faced by children, young people and families, coupled with under-resourced children's support services. Those children are missing out on their education and the challenge to re-engage them is placing significant pressure on schools and trusts.

Our ask:

NGA welcomes the government's ambition to address sector wide attendance concerns. However, as well as the urgent need to rebuild attendance support services, it is important that engagement with families and communities is at the heart of their strategy. 76% of respondents to NGA's annual governance survey said that communication and providing advice to parents was the most successful method in improving attendance.

Safeguarding

In 2022, 71% of respondents to NGA's Annual Governance Survey said there had been a rise in safeguarding concerns following the COVID-19 pandemic, and in 2023 this trend continued with 55% of respondents reporting a further rise in safeguarding concerns in the past year alone. The finding that bullying, cyberbullying, neglect, and domestic abuse are prevalent show the complexity of situations schools are working with.

Our ask:

Since 2010, government spending on children's early intervention support by councils in England has fallen by 50% and an average of 61% in the areas with highest levels of deprivation. With children not getting the support they need early enough, spending on crisis intervention has soared. The pressure on schools to pick up the pieces is unsustainable. It is the duty of local authorities to care for and protect children (The Children Act 1989). The next government must commit to restoring the funding levels and equipping local authorities to more effectively carry out their statutory duties.

Support services for families

In the face of underfunding of other agencies, schools are providing an increasing range of additional services to families and pupils in need. Although the role schools play in understanding the needs of their pupils and their families and as pillars of their communities should not be ignored, it is not feasible for schools to be expected to provide additional services outside their core remit of teaching and learning.

Our ask:

There needs to be a thorough review of the expectations of schools and trusts within the locality alongside other children and family services, and resources provided to the relevant agencies. The Family Hub model should continue to be rolled out, ensuring a family-focused and integrated system of care, education and wider holistic support for young children and their families.

3 Funding

We are calling for an increase to both capital and revenue funding to ensure schools and trusts can sustain high quality education for all pupils and have sufficient resources to maintain and improve school buildings and estates. We urge the incoming government to sustain current funding levels for schools, despite falling pupil numbers and demographic changes.

SEND

Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and the lack of funding is one of the biggest challenges faced by schools and trusts. The number of children and young people with SEND and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) continue to increase. However, the level and distribution of high needs funding has not kept up; the way in which it is currently distributed is complex and in part based on historic spending rather than current need.

Our ask:

The 2022 SEND green paper needs to be followed through urgently alongside funding reform, an audit of sufficiency of special school places and a consistent approach to training.

Disadvantage

The COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis have had the greatest impact on the most vulnerable pupils and families in our schools and as a result we have witnessed the disadvantage gap increase. The current criteria used to measure disadvantage is restrictive and there are increasing numbers of children living in poverty who are not entitled to FSM.

Our ask:

The pupil premium plays a crucial role in addressing the attainment gap, and its value needs to be protected in real terms. FSM eligibility should be extended to all those pupils in receipt of Universal Credit. The NFF must be reviewed to ensure that as well as all schools receiving sufficient funding to sustain high quality education, they can meet the additional needs of vulnerable groups.

Pupil mental health and wellbeing

The need for mental health support for young people is increasing. While schools are unique in the contact they have with children as a universal service, without adequate training and specialist services they are not equipped to provide the required support. Despite the government's investment through Mental Health Support Teams (MHST), fewer than a third of schools have access to MHSTs now. Many do not have access to counsellors and educational psychologists.

Our ask:

The next government must make the provision of mental health support for young people throughout all schools and access to specialist services a priority.

4 Leadership and accountability

Inspections

NGA recognise the place inspections play within a broader accountability framework and welcome the changes announced by Ofsted in June 2023. However, there remain longstanding concerns with the impact Ofsted has on the workload and wellbeing of school leaders and staff. The current accountability process under Ofsted often detracts from the ultimate stakeholders to whom schools and trusts are answerable – pupils, parents and their communities – via governing boards.

Our ask:

We are calling for a fully independent, expert and transparent review of school inspection addressing how well it contributes to school improvement, including across MATs, without creating the indisputably pervasive culture of fear. The review must consider how inspections affect schools in disadvantaged communities and replace the current grading system with a more constructive alternative that helps schools to improve. Greater recognition also needs to be given to the role and responsibilities of governing boards in the inspection process, and Ofsted's capacity and expertise needs to be developed so it can inspect MATs as a single organisation.

Governance recruitment

Strong and competent strategic leadership from diverse backgrounds is essential for good decision making. Those volunteering on governing boards are a pivotal part of that leadership structure and the role carries with it very significant responsibility. Recruiting volunteers is becoming increasingly difficult. Governing boards are the first line of accountability for our schools in England and this recruitment crisis can no longer be ignored.

Our ask:

The Government needs to invest in a volunteer recruitment campaign to ensure citizens know that that this is an opportunity available to them to contribute to their communities.