

Preventing secondary school exclusions

April 2019

Key findings

- The number of children being excluded from secondary schools in London is increasing year-on-year. The rise in exclusions is due, in part, to the rise in support required for an increasing number of children with complex needs and the difficulties that some schools have in meeting them.
- There are growing concerns about the possibility that some underachieving pupils and those with complex needs are being officially or unofficially excluded to relieve financial pressure or boost school performance measures.
- Data that shows the disproportionate exclusion rates for certain groups suggests that either schools may be failing to adequately support certain learners, or that behaviour management systems inadvertently discriminate against some pupils.
- Pupils with Special Educational Needs are overrepresented in exclusion figures but pupils who have special educational needs and do not have formal support plans, such as an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or Statement, face a considerably higher rate of permanent exclusions than their peers with formal support plans.

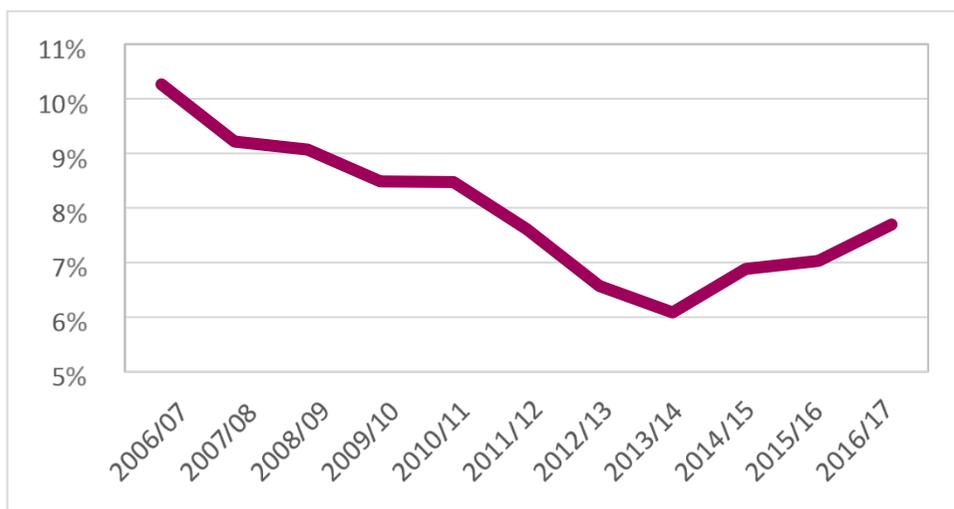
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Background

The number of children being excluded from secondary schools in London has gone up for the past three years for which data is available. In 2016/17 there were 980 permanent exclusions and 37,790 fixed term exclusions, compared with 780 and 34,965 in 2013/14. The number of pupils in Alternative Provision (educational provision outside of mainstream and special needs schools) has also increased since 2013/14.¹

Figure 1: After years of decline, the rate of exclusion from London's secondary schools has risen every year since 2013 (DfE data)



The rise in exclusions is due, in part, to the rise in support required for an increasing number of children with complex needs and the difficulties that

some schools have in meeting those needs.² But there are also growing concerns about underachieving pupils and those with complex needs being officially or unofficially excluded to relieve financial pressure or boost school performance measures.³ Furthermore, data that shows the disproportionate exclusion rates for certain groups suggests that either schools may be failing to adequately support certain learners, or that behaviour management systems inadvertently discriminate against some pupils.

With the number of secondary school exclusions on the rise, it is important that those at risk of exclusion are provided with the support they need to thrive and get back on track. Only one per cent of excluded pupils get the five 'good' GCSEs they need to access the workforce.⁴ There is evidence that school exclusions correlate with later violence or criminal activity, although there is no evidence that it is causative. A study of UK prisoners found that 63 per cent had been temporarily excluded while at school and 42 per cent had been permanently excluded.⁵ Children who have been excluded are also more likely to be victims of serious violence.⁶

In this report we set out the findings from our discussions on secondary school exclusions and put forward a number of recommendations to help ensure that all young Londoners get the high-quality education and support they need to meet their full potential. We urge the Mayor to take these necessary steps to prevent vulnerable children falling through the gaps in a strained education system.

Better support for those at risk

Some experts argue that exclusion rates are going up because mainstream schools⁷ are unable to deal with pupils' increasingly complex needs.⁸ Many of the children being excluded have multiple support needs relating to disruptive behaviour, mental health issues, special educational needs, unsafe or unstable home situations and other adverse childhood experiences.⁹

Stakeholders told us it was necessary to take a holistic approach to meeting the social, emotional and educational needs of those at risk of exclusion. Excluded children are four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have special educational needs and ten times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems.¹⁰

The underlying causes of bad behaviour that can lead to exclusion are often related to adverse childhood experiences. Therapeutic interventions may be needed to help pupils develop the self-management skills they need to get good grades and make successful transitions into further education or work.¹¹ With mental health issues and complex needs on the rise, schools are reporting that they often can't make referrals for urgent therapeutic support services and that long waiting lists are leaving children in crisis.¹²

The adverse childhood experiences that can sometimes put children on a path towards exclusion may also lead them towards risky behaviour and criminal activity.¹³ Amanda Spielman, Ofsted's Chief Inspector, said it was "likely that exclusions and knife crime are two symptoms of the same underlying problems, exacerbated by cuts to local authority children's services."¹⁴ An Ofsted report on knife crime in England found that all pupils who had been permanently excluded due to knife-related incidents had experience of poverty, abuse, neglect or unsettled family lives.¹⁵ The report therefore called for a multi-agency response to address these issues.

Specialist Alternative Provision

Some forms of Specialist Alternative Provision are taking a multi-agency approach to avoiding permanent exclusions. High quality specialist off-site alternative provisions, such as re-engagement units and managed intervention centres, offer intensive support for those most at risk. These centres provide support that addresses negative patterns of behaviour along with social and emotional needs, helping children build up the soft skills, such as effective communication, required for continued studies as well as independent living and adult life.

The focus for these interventions is to take the child outside of the mainstream school environment and provide targeted, tailored support to overcome barriers to learning, so they can be successful in a mainstream setting. They work closely with the pupils and their families, linking in with specialist health and social services, to create a holistic package of support around the child.

Managed Intervention Centres

The Education Panel visited two Managed Intervention Centres in west London. The centres provide six-week intervention programmes for KS3 and KS4 pupils who are at risk of permanent exclusion. The centres aim to find a balance between developing the pupils' soft skills and supporting educational attainment, and centres have a high success rate for reintegrating the pupils back into mainstream schools.¹⁶

The staff at the centres work to understand the root causes of behavioural issues, taking a trauma-informed approach. The centres work closely with the Local Authority, making referrals to specialist services and arranging support workers for the families of the pupils.

The pupils we spoke to felt there should be more early intervention centres across London so more children get the support they need to be successful in mainstream schools.¹⁷

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Dealing with disruptive behaviour through early intervention

The most common reasons for both permanent and fixed-term exclusions are physical violence, persistent disruption and verbal abuse. But disruptive behaviour can be an indicator of unmet support needs. Statutory guidance on exclusions states that early intervention to address the underlying causes of disruptive behaviour should include an assessment of whether appropriate provision is in place to support special educational needs and to identify additional factors such as mental health or family problems. However, we were told that for some schools, exclusions can seem to be the cheap and easy answer.¹⁸

“Exclusion is quite punitive. It is quite critical... It is really interesting that we are saying, ‘To improve your behaviour, your education life chances, we are going to deprive you of your education for a period of time.’ There is something uncomfortable with that, so what can we do differently?”

Councillor Anntoinette Bramble, Deputy Mayor, Hackney

Exploring alternatives to exclusion

The Children’s Commissioner for England has raised concerns about schools becoming less inclusive and said that more must be done to keep students in mainstream schools.¹⁹ We heard that recognising the needs of those at risk of exclusion was a key part of changing the ways of working with these children. Councillor Anntoinette Bramble, Deputy Mayor of the London Borough of Hackney, spoke of the need for a greater shift away from an approach that simply sees challenging behaviour as something to be sanctioned, towards a culture which recognises challenging behaviour as a signifier of needs that are not being met or issues and experiences that require attention or support.

Some schools have developed in-house alternative provision with a view to being able to better meet the pupils’ social and emotional as well as educational needs.²⁰ When done well, this type of intensive support, sometimes called internal exclusions, offers opportunities for restorative meetings, for other professionals within a school to do extra assessments of need, for students to start to reconsider things about a particular incident and work their way through how they might address it in a different way next time.²¹ However, there are examples of those in internal exclusions being isolated without support for their social, emotional or educational needs.

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Additional resources are required to explore alternative ways to work with a child on the path to exclusion. Many schools do not have the funding or the staffing to be able to provide intensive support to de-escalate issues and prevent exclusions. We heard that as funding has become increasingly tight, the support workers that would have been working with those children, assessing social, emotional and special educational needs, are no longer as available.²²

Behaviour management

Zero-tolerance behaviour policies can provide boundaries that enable the majority of pupils to flourish; however, we heard that in some cases these policies escalated issues leading to rapid exclusions which could have been avoided if the school had recognised and attempted to address the underlying causes of difficult behaviour.

We also heard that the way staff react to children can escalate issues. Stakeholders expressed concerns about a lack of teacher training around behaviour management.

“They don’t shout at us.”²³

Pupils at the Managed Intervention Centres told us that the best thing about the centres was that they felt they had a second chance. They said the teachers do not get angry or shout at them but instead help them reflect on their behaviour, explaining where they are going wrong and correcting them.²⁴

We heard about the value of listening to children at risk of exclusion and some of the different approaches to address challenging behaviour that draw on the notion of restorative justice. Better outcomes can be created when the adults working with these children take the time to speak with them, to understand their ambitions and the challenges they are facing, and involve the children in the decisions being made about how they are supported.

Groups with high exclusion rates

Black and Gypsy / Roma children are consistently overrepresented in exclusion figures, as are those eligible for Free School Meals, pupils with special educational needs and Looked After Children.²⁵

Many stakeholders raised the issue of unconscious bias and how it contributed to certain groups being overrepresented in exclusion figures. They said it would be necessary to tackle unconscious bias head on to make progress on this issue.²⁶

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Stakeholders told us that unconscious bias should be explicitly addressed in teacher training, and that there was a need for ongoing and open conversations in schools so staff could gain a better understanding of how unconscious bias plays out in a classroom. We heard that cultural competence and understanding of cultural behaviour could also be improved through training.ⁱ

“ We have to talk about unconscious bias. You cannot get away from that, because there is a disproportionality of young black boys being excluded in the education system. Unless we can sit around this table and say with confidence that only black children do not behave or only black parents cannot raise children.

Councillor Anntoinette Bramble, Deputy Mayor, Hackney

Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)

In 2018, our investigation on SEND provision found that the shortfall in the high needs budget is putting severe pressure on the resources available in schools to support children with SEND.²⁷ In its report on local-area SEND inspections, Ofsted said “school leaders had used unofficial

exclusions too readily to cope with children and young people who have SEND.” Pupils with Special Educational Needs are overrepresented in exclusion figures, accounting for 14 per cent of the secondary school population but 42 per cent of exclusions in 2016/17.²⁸

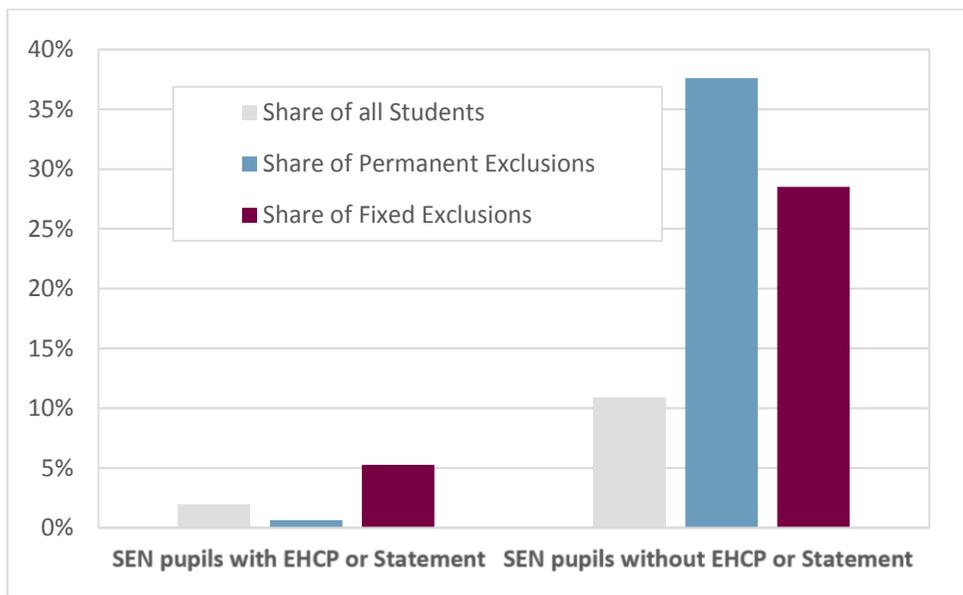
A closer look at the breakdown of exclusion rates shows that pupils who have special educational needs but do not have formal support plans, such as an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or Statement, face a considerably higher rate of permanent exclusions than their peers with formal support plans (see Figure 2). Those who have special educational needs without formal support plans represent only 11 per cent of the student population but 38 per cent of those excluded.²⁹

Figure 2: Pupils with Special Educational Needs are significantly over-represented in exclusion figures (DfE data, 2016/17)

ⁱ The Brexit Alliance Group does not accept the need for unconscious bias training

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Hidden exclusions

The Education Panel has for a long time highlighted its concerns that the true extent of school exclusions is being masked by unofficial exclusions that are not recorded in government statistics. This can include a child being moved to another school or some form of offsite alternative provision, or being taken out of school for home-schooling.

A ‘managed move’, when headteachers mutually agree to move pupils from one school roll to another, can give a child a fresh start when it involves the informed consent and agreement of the parents, the child and

both schools. However, there are concerns that parents are being pushed towards managed moves as an alternative to exclusion.³⁰ There are also concerns that the rise in home-schooling may, in part, be due to parents being encouraged by schools to home educate their child.³¹

Those managed moves, as they are called, are very difficult to track and to trace. As a consequence, it is very difficult to know who it is happening to, how many times it is happening... It is worrying to not be able to dig into that information.

Shaun Brown, Head of Curriculum Research, The Difference

The House of Commons Education Committee raised concerns about “off-rolling”: the use of official and unofficial exclusions to remove underachieving or challenging pupils from a school’s roll to improve results or ease pressure on finances.³² An Education Select Committee report, published in July 2018, stated that schools had “no incentive to, or deterrent to not, retain pupils who could be classed as difficult or challenging.”³³ Ofsted found that off-rolling was more likely to occur in London and was more prevalent in academies.³⁴ Ofsted said in future school inspections would look at the number of children leaving the school roll, particularly where these numbers are higher than expected.

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The Mayor's Post-16 SEND Review found that, in London, most of the cohorts of pupils with SEND see a fall in numbers between year 10 and 11, which is out of line with the growth in the cohorts at earlier ages.³⁵ The analysis suggests that off-rolling is likely to be occurring in London and affecting pupils with SEND as they approach GCSE exams. The review also found that pupils requiring higher levels of learning support were more likely to be off-rolled. The Mayor, along with Police and Crime Commissioners across the country, has called for off-rolling to be outlawed.³⁶

Recommendations

Mainstream schools are under growing pressure to support more and more children with increasingly complex needs, but too many children are being excluded having been failed by an education system incapable of meeting their needs. Many schools struggle to provide support that can prevent issues escalating to the point where exclusion is being considered as a necessary step. Schools require assistance from external specialist services to meet pupils' complex needs and are often unable to make prompt referrals.

Sometimes it may be more appropriate for a child to attend a specialist provision centre which can provide respite and intense support. But use of alternative provision should be for short periods, and part of a long-term plan to reintegrate them back into mainstream education.

The experts we spoke to called for a shift to more inclusive practices. We were told that there was a considerable need for more tolerant values, a recognition that challenging behaviour is often a signifier of unmet needs, and a move away from simply punishing disruptive behaviour without an attempt to understand and address underlying causes. We heard that barriers to inclusive practice include lack of support available for pupils' social and emotional needs, pressure on resources, some schools' zero tolerance approaches to behaviour management, insufficient teacher training and unconscious bias.

The Education Panel is concerned that the true extent of school exclusions is being masked by pupils being removed from schools in ways that do not register on government statistics. The number of children being excluded and educated outside mainstream settings is rising, and there are significant concerns that some of the decisions being made are more so in the best interests of schools rather than those of pupils. More accountability and transparency is needed around decisions relating to exclusions and other reasons pupils are removed from the school roll, such as 'managed moves'.

The education sector needs to get to grips with these issues to prevent thousands of children falling through the gaps in the system. We heard about good practice in preventing exclusions and supporting those with complex needs in mainstream schools and Alternative Provision, including support for social and emotional needs, bespoke learning programmes, listening to and motivating children, positive behaviour management, working with families and teacher training. Children at risk of exclusion require support from schools, parents and specialist services so that they can receive an appropriate education and meet their full potential.

There is much to be done to build the capacity of all mainstream schools to meet the complex needs of those at risk of exclusion. We call on the Mayor to support and encourage the development of practices that respond to the needs of all pupils. We urge the Mayor to challenge all schools to bring the number of exclusions down particularly where there is evidence of an

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unusually high number of pupils being removed from the school roll. In that context, we are highlighting three key areas for action.

1. Provide help to prevent unnecessary exclusions

The Mayor should work with partners to develop a toolkit of practical solutions that schools can use to prevent exclusions. This should include pathways to specialist support. He should promote examples of good practice in supporting pupils at risk of exclusion through the Schools for Success programme and other networks. The Mayor should work with organisations such as The Difference to develop expertise in inclusive practice and reduce exclusions through the Getting Ahead London school leadership programme.

2. Review the supply of alternative provision that specialises in supporting those at risk of exclusion

The Mayor should commission a review to evaluate whether London needs more early intervention centres, such as Managed Intervention centres and re-engagement units, that provide tailored, holistic support packages for those at risk of permanent exclusion. He should include his findings in his submission to the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review.

3. Actively monitor and challenge off-rolling

The Mayor should commission a review to better understand the scale of off-rolling in London, including managed moves and home schooling. He should work with partners to improve monitoring of all forms of off-rolling

to increase the transparency of school data. This data should be published on a borough basis in the Mayor's annual education report.

We urge the Mayor to take action to ensure that these young Londoners are getting the support they need to flourish. Leaving children on the path to exclusion without adequate support to get back on track is simply not acceptable. The Education Panel will continue to follow up the recommendations to the Mayor in the year to come.

Education Panel



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Notes

¹ IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion

² IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion

³ House of Commons Library, 2019, Off-rolling in English schools, Paper Number 08444

⁴ IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion

⁵ MOJ cited in IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion

⁶ Mayor of London press release, 7 March 2019, <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayor-and-pccs-call-for-end-to-off-rolling>

⁷ Mainstream schools include Local Authority maintained schools, Free Schools and Academies which are not special schools or Alternative Provision.

⁸ IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion; Expert testimonies at Education Panel meeting on 13 September 2018

⁹ IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion

¹⁰ IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion

¹¹ DfE, 2017, Alternative Provision: Effective Practice and Post 16 Transition

¹² Expert testimonies at Education Panel meeting on 13 September 2018

¹³ Expert testimonies at Education Panel meeting on 13 September 2018

¹⁴ Amanda Spielman, 2019, Speech on Knife Crime on 12 March 2019

¹⁵ Ofsted, 2019, Safeguarding children and young people in education from knife crime: Lessons from London

¹⁶ Testimonies from Education Panel visit to the Westminster Education Centre and Goldborne Education Centre on 7 November 2018.

¹⁷ Testimonies from Education Panel visit to the Westminster Education Centre and Goldborne Education Centre on 7 November 2018.

¹⁸ Expert testimonies at Education Panel meeting on 13 September 2018

¹⁹ Children's Commissioner, 2017, Falling through the Gaps in Education

²⁰ DfE, 2017, Alternative Provision: Effective Practice and Post 16 Transition

²¹ Expert testimonies at Education Panel meeting on 13 September 2018

²² Expert testimonies at Education Panel meeting on 13 September 2018

²³ Testimonies from Education Panel visit to the Westminster Education Centre and Goldborne Education Centre on 7 November 2018.

²⁴ Testimonies from Education Panel visit to the Westminster Education Centre and Goldborne Education Centre on 7 November 2018.

²⁵ DfE data, August 2018, Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017

²⁶ Expert testimonies at London Assembly Education Panel – 13 September 2018

²⁷ London Assembly Education Panel, 2018, Together: Transforming the lives of children and young people with special education needs and disabilities in London

²⁸ DfE data, August 2018, Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017

²⁹ DfE data, August 2018, Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017

³⁰ Expert testimonies at Education Panel meeting on 13 September 2018

³¹ IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion

³² Education Select Committee, 2018, Forgotten Children

³³ Education Select Committee, 2018, Forgotten Children

³⁴ Ofsted, 2018, <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2018/06/26/off-rolling-using-data-to-see-a-fuller-picture/>

³⁵ MIME, 2019, London Post-16 SEND Review

³⁶ Mayor of London press release, 7 March 2019, <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayor-and-pccs-call-for-end-to-off-rolling>