

Written evidence submitted by the British Psychological Society (BPS) to The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB263).

The British Psychological Society (BPS) is the representative body for psychology and Psychologists throughout the UK. We are committed to providing and disseminating evidence-based expertise and engaging with policy and decision makers. We believe psychology has a fundamental role in helping to tackle some of the most crucial policy issues we are facing in our communities and schools, including the wellbeing of children.

It is essential that all children have access to the resources and support needed to fulfil their full potential. It is well acknowledged that prevention and early intervention is more cost-effective than allowing difficulties to escalate.¹ Childhood is a key period of life and greatly impacts subsequent development - intervening during this period is critical to improving children and young people's health outcomes both now and into the future.²

This submission explains the areas of this Bill which the BPS welcome, whilst also presenting evidence to explain where the Bill needs to go further in supporting children.

1) Support for children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) –

Whilst we welcome the intention of this Bill in raising the academic standards for every child, there is not enough detail from the outset on how systems and structures (including school performativity measures) will be developed in a way which considers children and young people with SEND. This is important as the SEND system should be fully integrated into education rather than a bolt-on as it is currently.

Over 1.6 million pupils in England have special educational needs (an increase of 101,000 from 2023).³ Every child with SEND should have access to the high-quality support that they need to ensure that they can thrive in the education system. However, demand is currently outstripping capacity. Since 2014, the number of children and young people with education, health and care plans (EHCPs) has risen by 140%.⁴ As such, children with SEND are one of the most disadvantaged groups in education, and there is currently a postcode lottery in the educational outcomes of children with SEND.⁵

This Bill could be strengthened by implementing measures which demonstrate that driving forward high academic standards and the flexibility required for inclusive education are not mutually exclusive aspirations - this needs to be acknowledged and reflected across whole education and care systems.

For example, this Bill proposes that all new teachers in state primary and secondary schools will be required to have Qualified Teacher Status or be working towards it. **The BPS recommend that all teachers should receive adequate training on SEND**

and child development, from initial teacher training, through to later career specialisation. This would enable greater understanding and awareness of individual differences and barriers to learning, which would in turn support teachers to design and adapt effective curriculums to suit all learners needs.

Moreover, the BPS is calling for every education setting to have a linked Educational Psychologist based in their local authority. Educational Psychologists are experts in supporting children and young people with SEND. However, there is currently a significant shortfall of this workforce. In a survey of Educational Psychologists in England carried out by the BPS, 70% of respondents felt that children and young people in their local authority did not have fair and equal access to an Educational Psychologist. The Department of Education has found similar findings - 88% of local authorities reported difficulties recruiting Educational Psychologists and 69% of local authorities reported 'not being confident' they would be able to meet the demand for Educational Psychologist services.⁶

Increased funding and greater focus on the educational psychology workforce and services will not only mean current statutory demands are met but also provide the early intervention work required to support the needs of children and young people at the earliest stage possible.

2) Changes to the national curriculum –

This Bill proposes that all-state funded schools including academies will be required to follow the national curriculum. As set out in our response to the curriculum and assessment review call for evidence, it is our view that **changes to the national curriculum are necessary.**⁷ The current curriculum is too narrow and overloaded in content that is not engaging for many children and young people. Furthermore, the curriculum needs greater flexibility and adaptability to account for all learning needs.

3) School attendance –

We welcome that registers of children who are not in school will be introduced for every local authority in England to increase the visibility of children not in school. In 2022/23, 21.2% of pupils in England were recorded as “persistently absent” (defined by the Department for Education as missing 10% or more of possible school sessions). This equates to around 1.6 million pupils.⁸ There are many benefits for children attending school. This includes the opportunity to develop social connections, greater opportunities for physical activity, and the impact on skills for future employment.⁹

However, we are mindful that the requirements in the Bill on home-schooling risk hindering families who, for legitimate reasons (often because of failures in the SEND provision that they need) have opted to educate their children at home. We

have already highlighted some examples of where further reform to the SEND system is necessary. It is vital that in the development of this Bill, the government engage in further consultation with families of children with SEND to understand their experiences of the education system, and this engagement should inform this piece of legislation.

Additionally, it is important to recognise that a young person's school attendance is impacted by a complex interplay of factors which can include but are not limited to poor mental health, poverty, caring responsibilities and bullying. Evidence suggests that children experiencing these factors are more likely to be absent from school.¹⁰

This Bill could go further in considering other factors that can impact school attendance (such as bullying), and the combination of services that are required to support children who are struggling to attend school. We specifically would welcome a commitment from the UK government regarding increasing the roll out of anti-bullying programmes. Anti-bullying programmes in school can help to reduce bullying and improve the wellbeing of pupils. A UK study evaluating the cost-effectiveness of an anti-bullying programme in schools, found a short-term return on investment from a societal perspective of £1.58 for every £1 invested in the bullying intervention. When long-term economic impacts until the age of 50 were considered, the return on investment was estimated to be around £7.52.¹¹

4) Improving the process around school admissions –

We welcome that this Bill aims to increase collaboration between schools and councils, by giving councils greater powers to ensure school admissions decisions reflect local needs including the placement of vulnerable children. **However, increased funding and capacity within the system will be required to ensure that school placements will be appropriately met.**

5) Steps to minimise experiences of poverty –

The BPS welcomes proposals in this Bill that aim to alleviate experiences of poverty and support struggling families whilst children are in school. This includes the requirement for state-funded primary schools to provide free breakfast clubs and the introduction of statutory limits on the number of branded items of uniform that schools can require. However, further action is needed by the UK government to address the root causes of poverty.

According to recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in 2022-2023, 14.3 million people were in poverty - 4.3 million of these people were children.¹² An individual's childhood greatly affects their development, and poverty has long term implications on physical and mental health.¹³ Growing up in poverty can also impact educational outcomes and future labour market success.¹⁴

We welcome that the Child Poverty Taskforce is developing a Child Poverty strategy. To support the development of the strategy and to strengthen this Bill, **the government could consider reviewing the application and effectiveness of the pupil premium** (funding to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools in England).¹⁵

In addition to their being a moral imperative to give children the best chance in life, evidence has shown that investment in reducing child poverty would bring large gains to the economy. Research by the Child Poverty Action Group (2023) estimated that child poverty costs £39.5 billion a year.¹⁶ A preventative approach that saves people from poverty can lead to future savings across public services through improving the chances for people to access employment and higher-paid work and less spending on social security in the future.

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¹ Mental Health Foundation and London School of Economics (Feb, 2022). The economic case for investing in the prevention of mental health conditions in the UK

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHF-Investing-in-Prevention-Full-Report.pdf>

² Daines, C.L., Hansen, D., Novilla, M.L.B. et al (2021) Effects of positive and negative childhood experiences on adult family health. <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-021-10732-w>

³ Gov UK (June 2024), Special Education needs in England <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england>

⁴ Isos Partnership (July, 2024). Towards an effective and financially sustainable approach to SEND in England <https://www.isospartnership.com/s/SEND-report.pdf>

⁵ Azpitarte, F. & Holt, L. (2024). Failing children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in England: New evidence of poor outcomes and a postcode lottery at the Local Authority level at Key Stage 1

<https://berajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/berj.393>

⁶ Department for Education (June, 2023), Educational psychology services: workforce insights and school perspectives on impact research report

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/649c4a4406179b00113f7498/Educational_Psychology_services_-_Workforce_insights_and_school_perspectives_on_impact.pdf

⁷ British Psychological Society (2024) Department for Education Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for evidence

<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fcms.bps.org.uk%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2024-12%2FBPS%2520response%2520-%2520Curriculum%2520and%2520assessment%2520review%2520response.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

⁸ House of Commons Library. School attendance in England (May, 2024) <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9710/CBP-9710.pdf>

⁹ Department of Health and Social Care, Public Health England. Education, schooling and health summary (September, 2021) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-schooling-and-health/education-schooling-and-health-summary>

¹⁰ Children & Young People’s Mental Health Coalition and the Centre for Mental Health. Not in school – the mental health barriers to school attendance (2024). https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CentreforMH_NotInSchool.pdf

¹¹ London School of Economics and Political Science, Personal Social Services Research Unit, MQ Transforming Mental Health Research (Nov, 2017). The Economic Case for Prevention in Young People’s Mental Health: Bullying. <https://www.mqmentalhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/TheEconomicCaseforPreventioninYoungPeoplesMentalHealth-Bullying.pdf>

¹² Joseph Rowntree Foundation (January, 2025) UK Poverty 2025 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2025-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk#:~:text=More%20than%201%20in%205,and%201.9%20million%20were%20pensioners.>

¹³ British Medical Association (2017) Health at a price reducing the impact of poverty <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2084/health-at-a-price-2017.pdf>

¹⁴ National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (2009) Poverty Reduction and Lifelong Learning <https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Poverty-reduction-and-lifelong-learning-Thematic-Paper-6.pdf>

¹⁵ Department for Education Pupil Premium: overview <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium>

¹⁶ Child Poverty Action Group (2023), The Cost of Child Poverty in 2023 https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Cost_of_child_poverty_2023.pdf