PUBLICFIRST

Nothing Happens In Isolation

Teacher, young people and parent perceptions of school exclusion

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Contents

Foreword

Too often education debates lack nuance, turning into ill-informed shouting matches, presenting false choices that do little to help a sector already struggling for funding and confidence.

The issue of school exclusion is one such topic. Even mentioning it, especially on social media, invites immediate criticism. It's easy to believe that everyone in education – parents, teachers and students – is very definitely in one of two camps: either militantly in favour of the liberal use of exclusion, or advocating for an all-out ban.

This is, of course, far from the reality.

Common sense tells us that much more could and should be done to reduce exclusions, but that especially in the present situation, funding, resources and regulation means that school leaders have to retain the option of using exclusion as their ultimate sanction.

It should not be impossible to raise the discussion about what is happening in schools when it comes to exclusion without being accused of school-blaming. It should not be impossible to suggest that there are social and cultural issues behind the increased behaviour problems in our schools without being accused of being soft on poorly behaved students.

The data clearly show a correlation, for instance, between student exclusions and material deprivation, indicating that this is a social justice issue that requires careful thought and analysis. Tragically, however, addressing exclusion with any degree of subtlety remains a challenge.

With 54 academies in the Oasis family, we see these complexities play out daily. Though our staff members do their utmost to ensure the best education for every child, running a school, and especially a classroom, is hard work. So, while high standards are essential, rigid dogma rarely survives extended contact with real life.

Like all involved in the delivery of education, I know that unless we, as a society, dig deeper for answers, we will continue to fail many of the children it is our responsibility to create opportunity for. That's why nuance is key to any and all meaningful progress around this critical issue, which impacts the life-chances of so many and in turn the health of our whole economy.

All of this leads me to why this report by Public First, commissioned by Mission 44, is so needed and so refreshing.

Bringing an open mind to their task, researchers have got to the heart of the exclusions debate by talking to the people who actually know what's going on: parents, teachers and students. And their findings make for fascinating reading.

Though behaviour is a growing problem in school classrooms and corridors, the report reveals a broad-based openness among parents and teachers to explore the social and cultural issues that are contributing to these trends. Despite being underfunded and exhausted, schools are working extremely hard to give every young person the best possible start in life.

Researchers found that students, parents and teachers want to have a nuanced and subtle conversation about reducing the need for, and the use of, exclusion as an educational tool.

They have found that whilst believing the sanction of exclusion should not be entirely removed, both adults and children have strongly progressive views about how a more inclusive education system could and should be able to reduce the rate of exclusion to a minimum, by supporting the most vulnerable students before they enter into a cycle of decline.

Researchers also found a strong desire to explore a better supported approach to alternative provision that is restorative rather than retributive.

But though this route map is very possible, it is one that can only be delivered with a new kind of understanding, and a new kind of investment.

In short, this report is essential reading if we really want to build a genuinely inclusive, life-transforming education system.

Rev. Steve Chalke _MBE._
Founder, Oasis

Mission 44 Youth Advisory Board Perspective

Aaliyah
Mission 44 Youth Advisory Board Member

School exclusions are a growing crisis that continues to disproportionately impact some of the most vulnerable groups of young people, including those with special educational needs, from disadvantaged backgrounds, and from marginalised communities. As someone who has personally been through the exclusion system myself, I've experienced firsthand how excruciating and devastating it can be, not just academically but emotionally too. From my own experience I learnt that school exclusions can deprive young people of their dignity, and often leave them feeling isolated, misunderstood, and written off by the very system that should be supporting their potential.

The recommendations in this report speak directly to the heart of what needs to change. We desperately need early intervention to make sure that young people are supported before exclusion. Whether that's through improved SEND provision, access to mentors, or teachers who understand and are equipped through CPD to help students through their challenges. Mentors, in particular, can be a large part of the solution.

Mentors should be integrated into schools as a fundamental support for young people, especially those at risk of exclusion. Schools need to focus on early intervention, offering both the emotional and academic support that young people need to stay on track. It's not just about expanding alternative provision (AP); we must also create environments, both in mainstream and AP settings, where students can thrive with the right guidance. With mentors in place, students can have someone to turn to before exclusion becomes the only option. As an adult now, having a mentor has been instrumental to my development and overcoming challenging moments - it provided me with the guidance and support I never had when in I was excluded in school. This is something every young person should have access to.

My hope for the future is that we can build an education system that truly sees every young person for their potential and their strength of character, regardless of their challenges or academic abilities. No young person should feel like they've been rejected or left behind. With the right investment, training, support networks and communication, we can collectively create schools where exclusion is a rarity, and every student has the chance to succeed, no matter their background or circumstances.

Context

Exclusions make nobody happy. At times, they may feel like they are left with no other option, but headteachers and school governors alike take exclusions enormously seriously. They do so with good reason: school exclusions are single events with wide-ranging consequences. They may, ultimately, be justified, but they have a hugely significant impact on young people, their families, their communities and wider society.

The challenge of increasing exclusions must be placed firmly in the context of worsening behaviour and an attendance crisis in schools.[1] Available research points to a perception that this issue is continuing to worsen, with the 'overwhelming majority of teachers and leaders… [saying that] the number of pupils exhibiting violent and abusive behaviours has increased in the last 12 months. This perception holds true for the number of pupils verbally abusing staff members.'[2] This trend has been visible for some time, though has mostly been attributed to poorer socialisation following the Covid pandemic restrictions.[3]

As a result, there is a small but growing number of children who are excluded from school, and these children are more likely to be vulnerable or disadvantaged: children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) are four times more likely to be suspended and five times more likely to be expelled than their peers. The rate of suspension for Gypsy Roma pupils is 33.71, relative to a White British rate of 7.90. While other ethnic groups are not affected in the same way, it is still worrying that Black Caribbean children also have a higher suspension rate (13.58) than their White British counterparts.[4]

There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a growing evidence base demonstrating that children who are excluded have significantly poorer outcomes than their peers in academic, social, economic and health terms. The Education Policy Institute's recent analysis of outcomes for pupils who have been suspended found that they are, on average, approximately twelve months behind their not-suspended peers. They have poorer education outcomes overall and are significantly less likely to

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1   The 23/24 attendance data up to 12th July 2024 showed a persistent absence rate of 20.3%, which is down from the previous year's 22.3% but considerably higher than historical trends. This data is available from Gov.UK's education statistics page, available here: Pupil attendance in schools, Week 28 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk). For qualitative analysis of parental attitudes to the crisis, see Dr Sally Burtonshaw and Ed Dorrell for Public First, Listening to and learning from parents in the attendance crisis, 2023, available here: ATTENDANCE-REPORT-V02.pdf (publicfirst.co.uk).

2   NASUWT, Behaviour in schools (September 2023, 2023, available at: Behaviour in Schools - Full Report (September 2023) (nasuwt.org.uk)

3   Ibid.

4   Department for Education, Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, 2022/23, available at: Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, Academic year 2022/23 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

achieve a standard pass in GCSE English and maths. This association persists after controlling for a wide range of student and school characteristics.[5] While exclusion is not the cause nor the sole factor behind poor outcomes, it is a significant marker. For this reason, it is critical to consider how the school system can think differently about exclusions, both in the lead-up to an exclusion and afterwards.

It is in policymakers' gift to ensure that young people who are excluded from school receive the quality education every child deserves, enabling them to lead fulfilling and productive lives. Current outcomes data suggests this is far from reality for excluded young people. If behaviour can be improved, then schools, communities, and the wider social structure ought to try very hard to improve it, and they should be given the resources to do so. If we think that the outcomes for excluded children can be improved, then we owe it to those young people – especially given the correlations between exclusions and material disadvantage, special educational needs and specific ethnic groups – to take their future incredibly seriously, and not simply gesture at confounding variables out of a desire to defend schools.

Acting, however, is easier said than done. Exclusions are an emotive and difficult issue, and the contemporary debate is too often polarised between two binary and often unhelpful terms: 'zero tolerance' policies generally do have some tolerance, 'zero exclusions' policies often allow for exclusions in different forms, and thus both terms are unclear to people not fully tuned into the debate. These two sides take up much of the airtime in the discussion around exclusions, with both sides having strong feelings about the issue at hand – and often the opposing side.

In the middle of this debate lie ordinary teachers, pupils and parents – those who make up the vast majority of the population. It is these voices that often go unheard, and yet who are essential to establishing a new way of thinking about exclusions. It is their views that we wanted to understand for this project.

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5   Allen Joseph and Whitney Crenna-Jennings for the Education Policy Institute, Outcomes for young people who experience multiple suspensions, 2024, available at: EPI_Suspensions_Report_FINAL.pdf

Methodology

Public First were commissioned by Mission 44 to undertake public opinion research in order to better assimilate the ways in which the public, specifically teachers and young people, understand and perceive exclusions from school. The research for this report was conducted in April and June 2024 and took a mixed methods approach.

Polling:

We ran three anonymous, online surveys targeting 1,008 adults (including 675 parents), 663 teachers, and 1,096 13–19-year-olds across England from 17th April – 9th May. All results are weighted using Iterative Proportional Fitting, or 'Raking'. The results of the nationally representative survey are weighted by interlocking age & gender, region, and social grade to Nationally Representative Proportions. The results of the pupil survey are weighted by age, gender, and region to Nationally Representative Proportions. The results of the teacher survey are weighted by region to Nationally Representative Proportions.

Public First is a member of the British Polling Council, and company partners of the Market Research Society. As with all opinion polls, there is a margin of error in the answers, and the margin of error is greater when sample sizes are smaller (when there are cross-breaks of specific groups of people). For pupils and the public, the margin of error is +/-3%. For teachers, it is +/-4%. All polling numbers in this report should be read on this basis. Full polling tables are available on Public First's website.[6]

Focus Groups:

Public First conducted a total of four focus groups: two with parents in Manchester and Stevenage, and two with teachers, again in Stevenage and Manchester.

Manchester: A large urban area in the north of England with relatively high levels of both socioeconomic and ethic diversity.

Stevenage: a smaller urban area in the south of England with less ethnic diversity and a largely white working class population. In addition, Stevenage was particularly interesting politically, acting as a bellwether during the 2024 General Election buildup.

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6   In compliance with British Polling Council guidelines, all polling tables are publicly available on www.publicfirst.co.uk

Parent and teacher groups were independently recruited for a mix of gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic demographics. Teachers were from state schools only, with both primary and secondary represented. Parents were those with children at state schools only, and parents whose children had experienced exclusion directly were screened out for ethical reasons.

Individual or Paired Interviews:

Public First undertook a series of 10 one-to-one interviews with young people who had experienced exclusion, and parents and carers of young people who had experienced exclusion. These included young people and their parents or carers, as well as those who were interviewed either the young person or the parent or carer. They were recruited through a multi academy trust in the north of England.

Confidentiality:

The qualitative element of this research included focus groups and one-to-one interviews with young people, parents and teachers. The identifying features of all participants have been blurred to protect their anonymity. This report uses thick description to narrate and interpret what has been observed and discussed within a broader context and provide analysis based upon the voices of participants. Their words remain unchanged.

Terminology:

Throughout this report, we deal with the issue of exclusion from school in the form of: 'temporary exclusions' (also known as 'suspensions'), and 'permanent exclusions' (also known as 'expulsions'). In our focus groups, we found that while teachers were comfortable with 'permanent/fixed term', the public were generally more likely to use the latter phrases, and as such we refer to 'exclusions', 'expulsions', and 'suspensions' throughout for ease of public understanding. Our polling used and explained the terms 'temporary' and 'permanent', and this has been left as is when citing.

'Suspensions' or 'Temporary/Fixed Term Exclusions'	This refers to the removal of a pupil from school for a fixed period of time.
'Expulsions' or 'Permanent Exclusions'	This refers to the removal of a pupil from school permanently.

'Nat rep' refers to our nationally representative poll of 1,008 adults in England, including 675 parents.

Acknowledgements:

Executive Summary

Our research found that views on this issue are complex, sometimes appear contradictory, and challenge many of the assumptions on all sides of the exclusions debate. Hearteningly, there is a strong consensus across the data that more could be done to reduce the need to use exclusion.

We saw differences of opinion between the public, pupils and teachers, as well as apparent contradictions within groups themselves. For example, respondents from ethnic minorities consider the system to be discriminatory, but support exclusions regardless. Teachers were the most pro-exclusions of all, while also being profoundly concerned with the impact on students' wellbeing and highly likely to blame social factors for poor behaviour. Pupils thought that schools were unfair, but were most likely to blame individual agency for poor behaviour.

The structure of this report is designed to explore these nuances and add additional context from our data where necessary. Throughout our research, a series of coherent themes and challenges emerged.

Although there is broad consensus that behaviour in schools is getting worse, there is strong consensus that more must be done upstream to manage behaviour and prevent exclusions. While there is agreement that exclusions are, and will remain, an essential tool for schools to manage behaviour, very real concerns exist around fairness and discrimination.

The key findings of the research are:

1. **Behaviour is widely seen to be a serious issue in schools (and getting worse)**
   Pupils, the public, and teachers are all concerned about behaviour, with a feeling from all three groups that it is bad and getting worse.

2. **…but there is a real sense, whether accurate or not, that schools can be inconsistent when determining punishments.**
   The public and pupils alike see some punishments as disproportionate to actions, and think some pupils are treated differently from others.

3. **Parents and teachers are more likely to ascribe poor behaviour to social factors than pupils.**
   While parents and teachers are likely to attribute poor behaviour to a difficult home life, pupils themselves prefer individualistic explanations, such as 'some children just like to misbehave'.

4. **Teachers think they are supporting pupils as best they can with the resources they have…**
   Teachers feel strongly that they are doing the best they can for marginalised pupils, and find discrimination incredibly difficult to discuss, while recognising that students with mental health issues and Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) pupils are not being as well supported as they could be.

5. **…and almost universally agree that pupils at risk of exclusion can be identified early.**
Most teachers feel that more can be done in terms of early intervention, with almost all teachers agreeing that they can 'tell' who will be excluded early on in their school career.

6. **In some cases, expulsion is seen as the only credible option…**
Few people are enthusiastic about expulsion, but it's seen as a completely necessary punishment and a last resort.

7. **…but those from ethnic minorities are more likely to find exclusions discriminatory.**
While ethnic minority respondents across pupils, teachers and the public were supportive of exclusions, this sits alongside evidence that they perceive the behaviour system in many schools to be discriminatory.

8. **Teachers are more in favour of suspensions than pupils or parents.**
Teachers are most likely to support suspensions - they view such measures as needed, if only for respite.

9. **There is disagreement around the best ways to improve behaviour in schools…**
Beyond reducing class sizes, there are big differences between how groups perceive that behaviour could be improved. For example, the general public are strongly in favour of banning phones; pupils and teachers, markedly less so.

10. **…but widespread agreement that reducing exclusions should focus on tackling the causes of poor behaviour, including through providing mentoring and support.**
The public, pupils and teachers concur that while exclusions are needed, more should be done to tackle the causes of poor behaviour, and more support should be given.

11. **Parents need better communication around behaviour and exclusions policies, and school expectations.**
Most parents haven't read behaviour guides or codes of conduct. While there is a large volume of communication from schools, more and clearer communication around expectations of behaviour and exclusions policies would be welcomed.

12. **There is widespread support for a better Alternative Provision (AP) system, alongside support for bringing students back into mainstream education where possible.**
Many respondents see the benefits of AP for pupils who are excluded, and want to see far more support for the existing AP system, with greater funding, greater numbers of places, and higher standards.

1. Behaviour is a serious issue in schools (and getting worse), and this is led by pupils themselves...

> *I definitely think behaviour has gone downhill really quite recently in our school as well - a lot of challenging behaviour we've got at the moment...*
>
> **(Female, Teacher Focus Group, Stevenage)**

> *And there is a real big behaviour issue going on... Just trying to manage kids' behaviour.*
>
> **(Female, Teacher Focus Group,Stevenage)**

School exclusions are the result of either serious misbehaviour, or long periods of poor behaviour. So, we began there, and set out to discover how people felt about behaviour in schools.

In both our focus groups and polling, we saw the same story: most people think behaviour in schools is in a bad way – and getting worse. Our polling showed that respondents across the board had a negative view of behaviour in English schools. Our focus groups reaffirmed this, with a sense from teachers and parents alike that behaviour was a worsening problem.

It is easy to dismiss public sentiment around school behaviour as mere nostalgia for how schools were 'better in my day'. It is also wrong. Not only are teachers reporting a decline in behaviour, students themselves have also named poor behaviour as the most important issue facing schools at the moment, with mental health a very close second (55% and 53% respectively).

Poor behaviour was also the single biggest concern of parents (51%), alongside school funding, and closely followed by the impact of social media on pupils (47%). Furthermore, the public more broadly believe that school students are poorly behaved: 48% of respondents thought that pupils are poorly behaved, compared to 43% who thought they are well behaved.

Teachers tended to take a slightly more systemic view, pointing to the state of the school system more broadly when answering. Teachers considered school funding to be the biggest problem (53%), alongside the impact of social media on pupils, and followed by student behaviour.

Figure 1

Thinking about schools in England, which of the following do you think are the most important issues affecting schools at this time? Please select up to three.
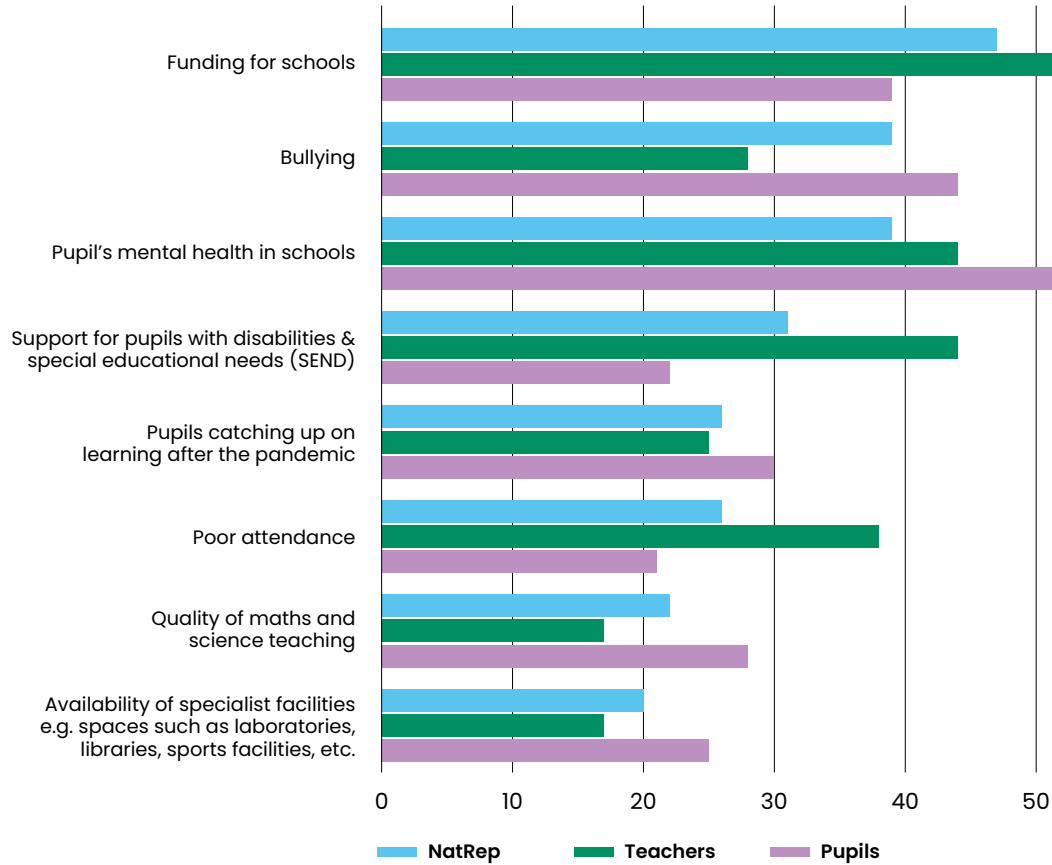
Social class impacts how people perceive behaviour. Respondents in lower social grades are more likely than those in higher social grades to say that pupils in English state schools are poorly behaved.

Figure 2

In general, would you say that pupils in English state schools are well behaved, or poorly behaved?
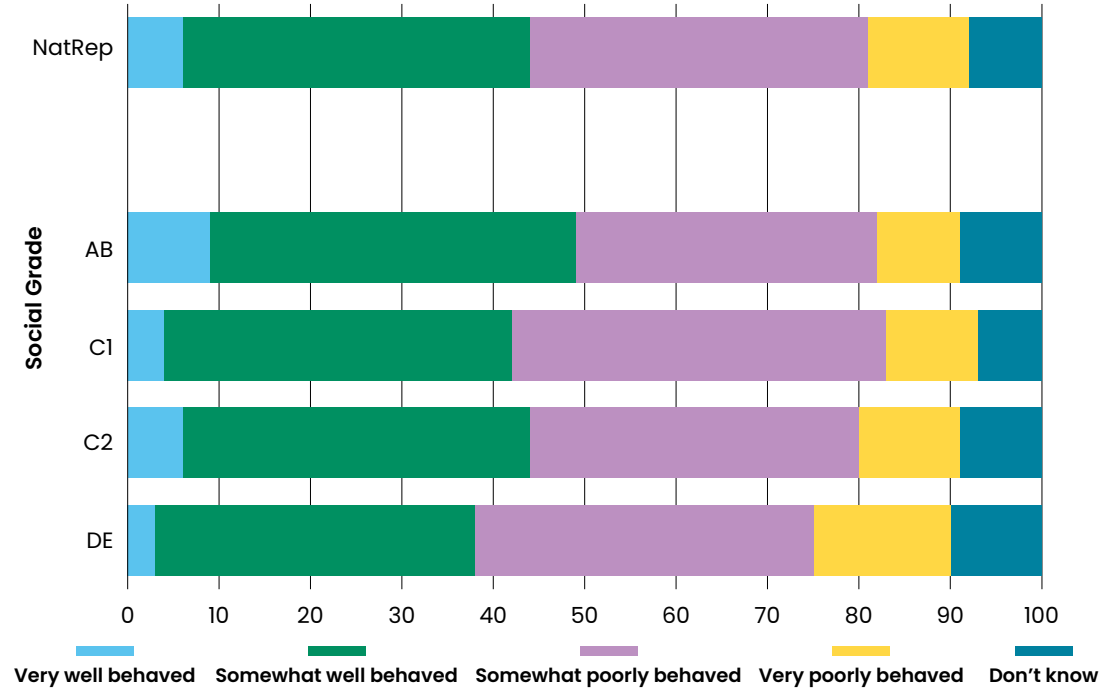
The perception of behaviour in decline makes interventions around exclusions even more important, given that they remain part of the range of sanctions available for schools to respond to poor behaviour with, and this context needs to be the starting point for discussions around the issue.

2. ...but there is a real sense that schools are not fair when determining punishments

...[there is] no consistency from teachers.
(Female, Parent Focus Group, Stevenage)

...a bit of rough and tumble resulted in sanctions that I never had growing up...

(Male, Parent Focus Group, Stevenage)

There are real concerns around behaviour, but there is also a sense from both pupils and the wider public that schools can be unfair when doling out punishments. Pupils simultaneously think that behaviour is poor, while also thinking schools are unfair when making discipline decisions (51%) instead of fair (35%).

Teachers, in contrast, are more split on this question. 45% think schools are fair when deciding upon punishment, and 44% think schools are not fair. This is a recurrent theme throughout our research: teachers are consistently defensive of existing disciplinary practices in schools, and keen to stress that they do not feel that they are displaying bias.

Figure 3

You said you thought state schools in England are generally not fair when deciding how and when to discipline pupils in England. Why is this? Please select all that apply.
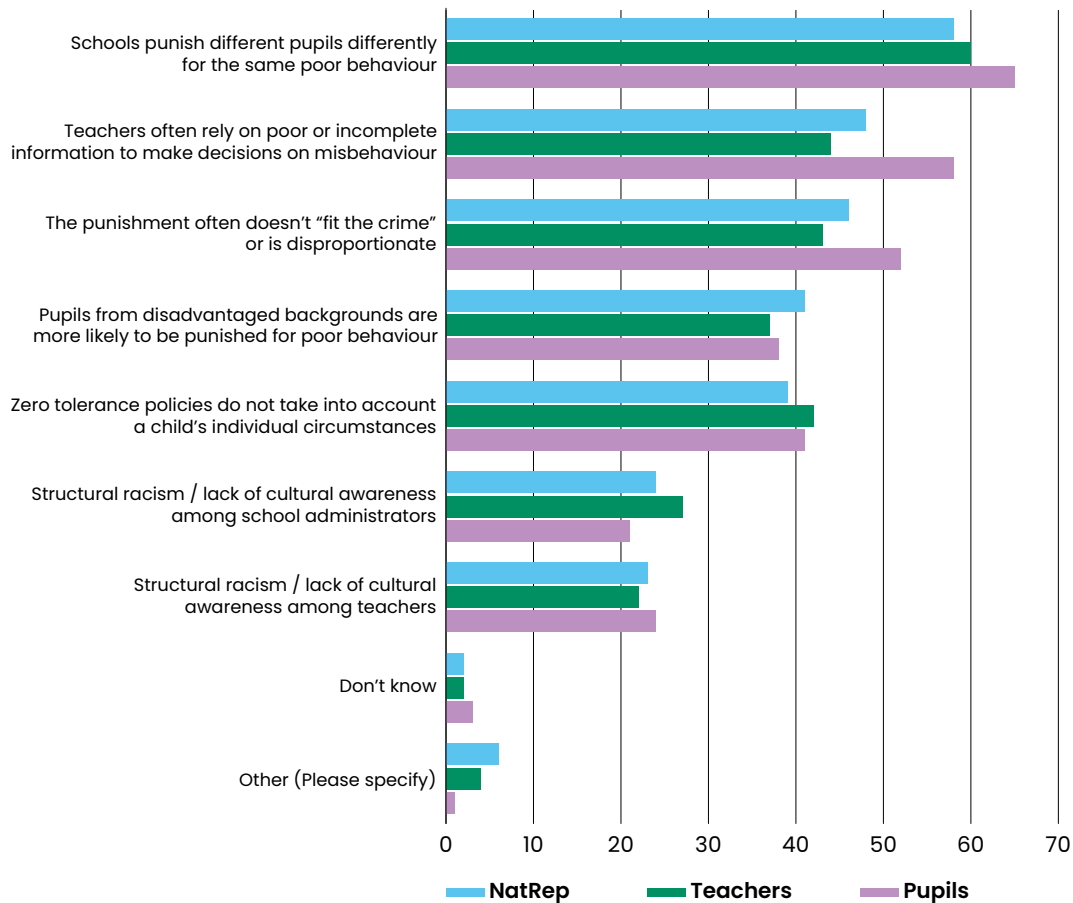
When we take a closer look at the reasons why schools are perceived as unfair, we find that across parents, teachers, and pupils, the driving force is the idea that schools punish some pupils differently for the same poor behaviour, with 65% of pupils citing this reason and 60% of teachers doing the same. Teachers working on poor or incomplete information was second, with 58% of pupils and 44% of teachers agreeing.

However, it is important to note a significant difference between White and non-White pupils on the issue of structural racism. Pupils from an ethnic minority were significantly more likely to point to structural racism among their teachers. Indeed, a majority of non-White students named this as a factor in the unfairness of school discipline practices (52% compared to 18% of White, non-minority pupils). Similar, though slightly lower, numbers perceive racism among school leadership (48% compared to 15% of White, non-minority pupils) as a source of unfairness in school punishment.

Clearly, this perception of bias must be addressed and should inform the ways that schools communicate with their communities about behaviour.

3. Teachers and adults are more likely than pupils to ascribe poor behaviour to social factors

We noted a considerable difference between adults (teachers and the general public) and young people when we asked about the causes of poor behaviour.

Adults had a more social, and arguably more sympathetic, view. Teachers and the public viewed poor behaviour as the result of social factors: for instance, 'a difficult home life' was the primary reason given by both adult groups, followed by the use of social media.

Pupils take a far more individualistic approach to the causes of poor behaviour. They are more likely than the general public, and far more likely than teachers, to attribute poor behaviour to individual choice, such as 'liking to misbehave' or 'wanting to be cool'.

Figure 4

Which, if any, of the following do you think contribute most to the poor behaviour of pupils in state schools? Select up to five.
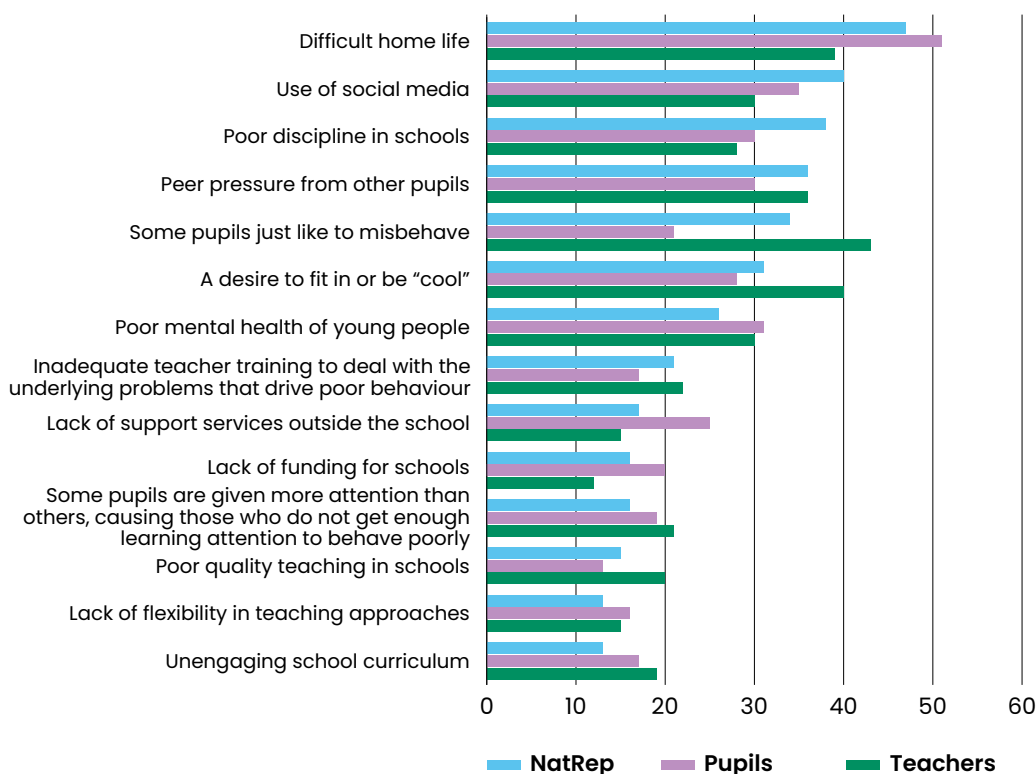
The views of pupils on this issue are complex, and framing and context appear to matter within these answers. Age plays a significant role; pupils aged 13 were more likely to identify to 'just like to misbehave' as their top answer, whereas approaching half of 18-19 year olds cited 'a desire to fit in or be cool'.

Closeness to exclusion appears to have a small impact. Pupils who are not aware of an excluded pupil are more likely than those who are to say that 'some pupils just like to misbehave', but it remains the top answer for pupils who are aware of an excluded pupil (51% to 40%).

Figure 5

Which, if any, of the following do you think contribute most to the poor behaviour of pupils in state schools? Select up to five. [Pupils only]
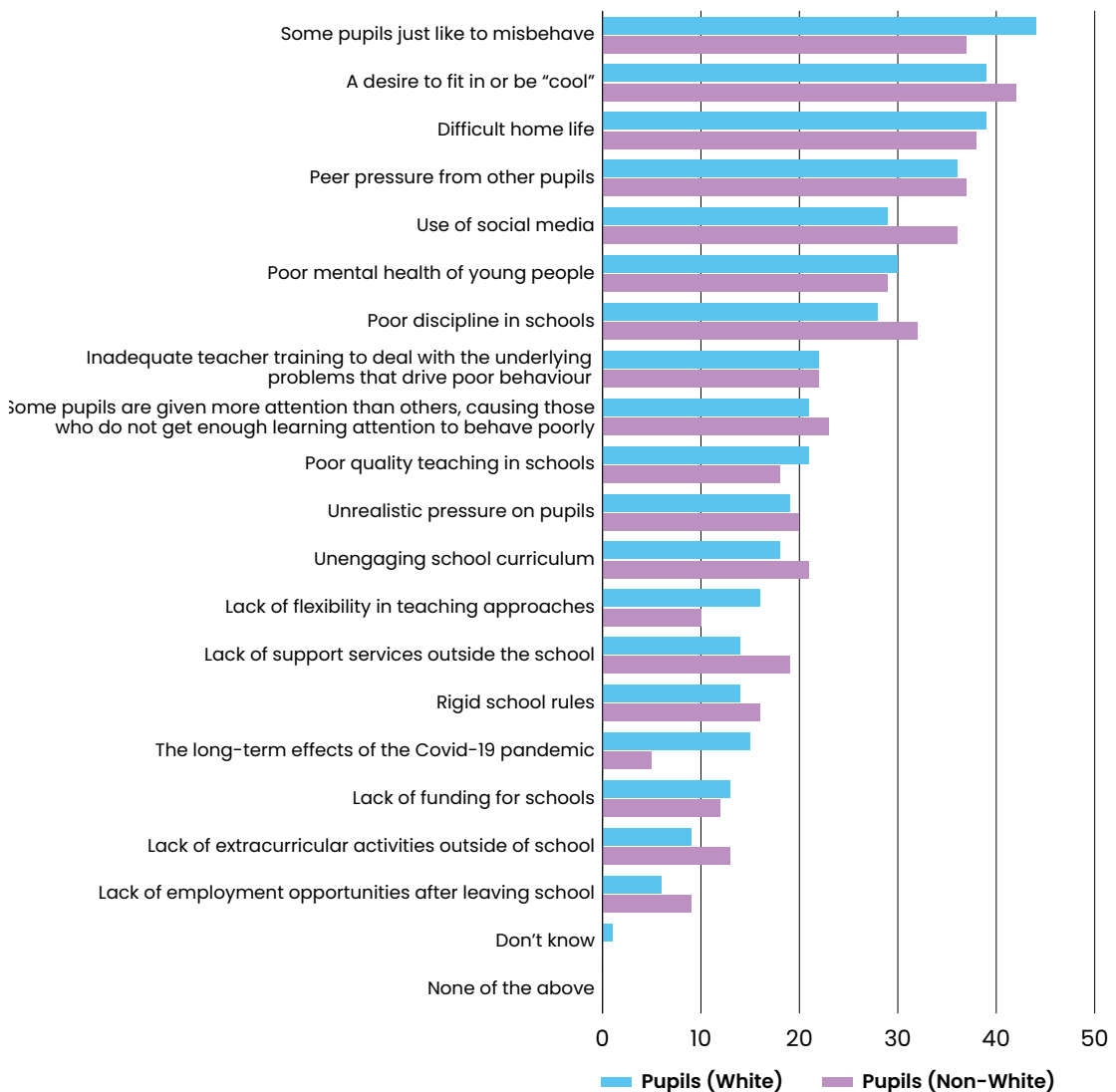
While a poorly-behaved class unquestionably puts strain upon teachers, pupils believe it is ultimately the education and subsequent life chances of other pupils that take the bulk of the impact.

This is further reflected in our polling on the downsides of exclusions. Pupils are the group most likely to show concern around educational outcomes from exclusion: for instance, pupils are more likely than teachers or the public to say that a downside of exclusion is that 'it reduces the educational opportunities of pupils'.

Figure 6
What do you think are the main disadvantages of permanent school exclusion? Please select up to three.

NatRep   Teachers   Pupils
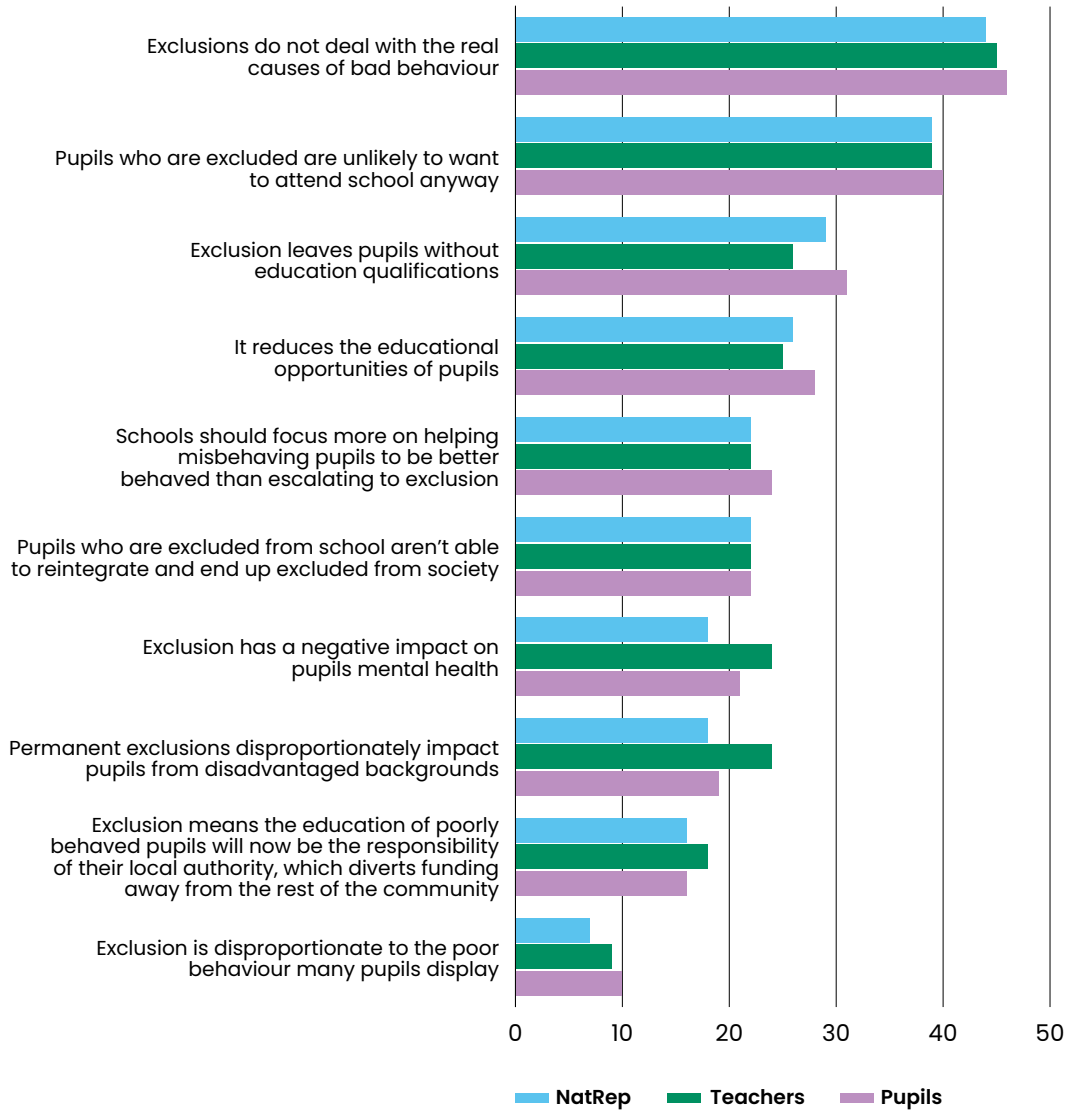
4. Teachers think they are supporting pupils as well as they can, given the resources they have...

> *I think if they are a key target group like PP [Pupil Premium] boys or something like that, they tend to get a lot more protection. It's almost like 'Right, quick: what can we do to not let this person get permanently excluded?'*
>
> **(Male, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)**

Across the board, teachers were far more likely than pupils or the public to say the education system did a good job of supporting pupils from most backgrounds, including those who were less privileged. There are a few groups who teachers were less likely to say they were doing a good job supporting including LGBT+ pupils, pupils with mental health conditions, and GRT pupils. Teachers were least likely to think that schools do a good job supporting pupils from a GRT background (49% think schools are doing a good job, 33% think schools are doing a bad job).[7]

The two groups that the education sector was judged to be doing a bad job with were pupils with mental health issues and those with SEN – unsurprising, given that respondents highlighted a lack of funding for these areas frequently and without prompt.

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7   This finding is largely driven by a higher percentage of 'Don't Know' responses, which in turn is probably due to the fact that the GRT community is a relatively small percentage of the student population.

Figure 7

In general, do you think state schools in England do a good or bad job at supporting pupils from the following groups? [NatRep]
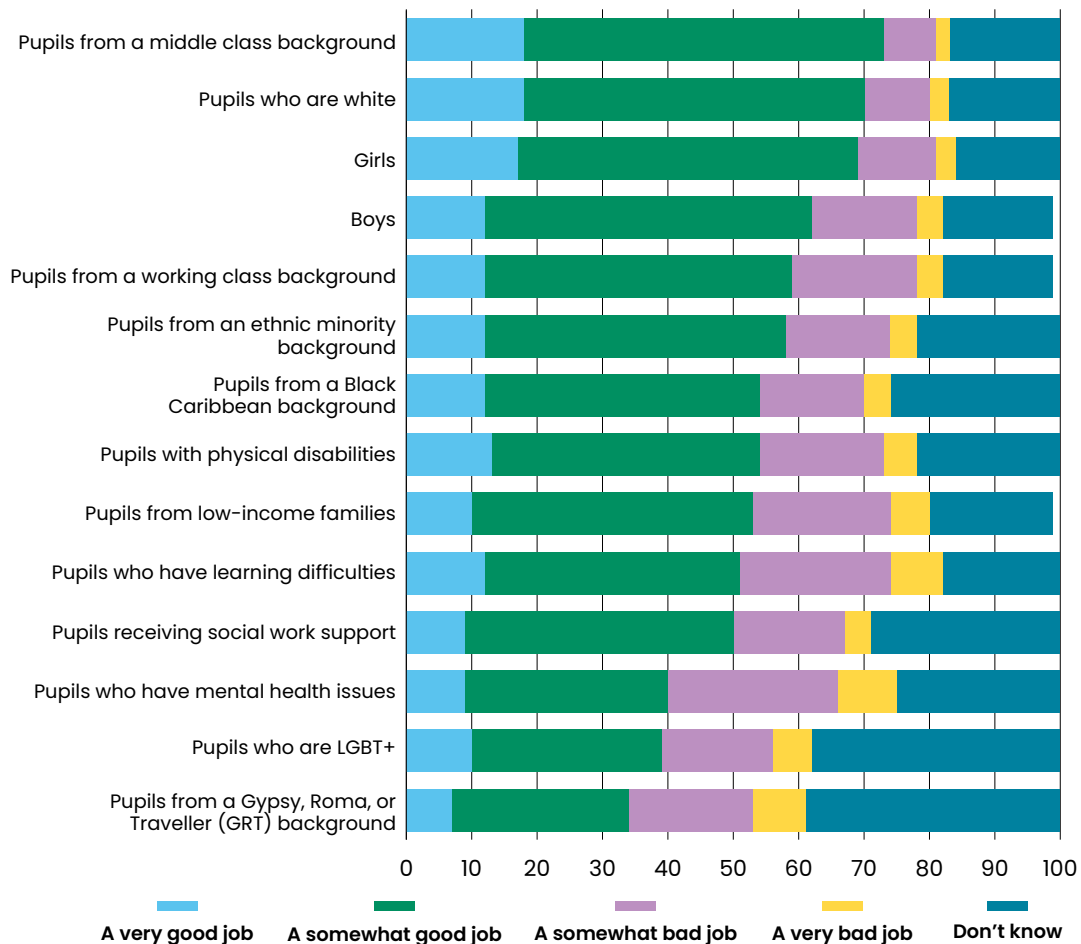
However, as with pupils, ethnicity was a limiting factor for school support, with significant differences between those from White and non-White backgrounds. 27% of ethnic minority respondents said schools did a bad job at supporting ethnic minority pupils, compared to just 18% of White, non-minority respondents. These differences are explored in greater detail later in this report.

Our focus groups showed that discrimination is an incredibly sensitive issue for teachers. Throughout, discrimination in schools was a truly difficult subject to broach. Focus groups that had previously been chatty and relaxed would become palpably tense when discrimination was raised, especially around ethnicity. Most teachers would simply want to move the conversation on – 'I can't really talk about that' was a common response. It is worth noting this makes the insight from this element of our qualitative research fragile: teachers were too nervous to discuss this area as openly as others.

When teachers did speak about bias, there was always a 'but'. There were a few groups of students that teachers identified as being at risk – boys, for instance, as well as economically disadvantaged pupils and pupils from single-parent households – but even when these were noted, teachers would then go to great lengths to explain how they specifically were supporting these pupils.

As the example below shows, one teacher, who had previously agreed that economically disadvantaged pupils could be at greater risk of exclusion generally, noted that he personally marked the books of certain students first, to ensure they received as much of his attention as possible. This story was not unusual in terms of the message behind it: disadvantaged pupils were supported by their teachers, and teachers were doing their best in a system that they felt was challenging.

This was the overall theme we found on this issue: teachers were dedicated to ensuring the best possible outcomes for their pupils and often actively working to try and mitigate disadvantage as they saw it, while being incredibly uncomfortable about discussing some forms of disadvantage and discrimination.

> *I actually mark the books of Pupil Premium students first, because that way you're freshest and can give them the most attention...*
>
> **(Male, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)**

5. ...but almost universally agree that pupils at risk of exclusion can be identified early

> *Going back to year six induction day - you can spot them a mile off.*
>
> **(Male, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)**

> *Twice...we were accurately able to predict that somebody would get sent to prison, because of the way that...just their attitude and their sort of way of acting with other kids and acting with adults; you just thought 'they're gonna do something seriously wrong...'. And then twice they did.*
>
> **(Male, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)**

Although exclusions data shows significant differences in exclusions rates across student demographics, teachers rejected wholesale the idea that they were discriminating against their students and were clearly determined to do well by them. But almost all teachers felt that there is more to be done on a systematic level to prevent exclusions, especially in terms of early intervention.

It is very clear from both the qualitative and quantitative strands of research that teachers feel it is possible to 'tell' that a child will end up being excluded due to a range of behaviours. Specific examples varied across groups, but included children who were persistently late, those who were seen to be susceptible to peer pressure, or those who flout school uniform codes.

Of course, if you walked into almost any school, you'd find some pupils are late, or disruptive, or defying dress codes. Not all of these pupils end up excluded, but teachers were confident that they could often tell who would be. There was limited self-reflection on these responses in focus groups, and more research is needed to see if teachers view themselves as treating these pupils differently – for better or worse.

> *There's a group of girls in Year 7 with really long fake eyelashes and rolling their skirts up already. We were saying 'Imagine them by Y11' – you can call it.*
>
> **(Female, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)**

The clearest example of this was a teacher who told us that they could 'tell a student would end up in prison', and later noted that the student was subsequently imprisoned. It is, of course, worth noting that this was said with the benefit of hindsight, and teachers may well look back on certain pupils differently after hearing about outcomes.

A recurring theme in some groups was that the students likely to be excluded lacked wider social support, particularly from their parents, or in some cases, support from the wider community. Teachers all indicated a desire to do more, but insisted that time and resources were major blockers to the kind of support that would be needed in most cases.

> *You can tell that there's neglect going on…you can see when there's a negative outside influence from outside the school, within the community, which is obviously really challenging for school to deal with because that's, you know…we can only deal with what's in front of us when they're with us.*
>
> **(Female, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)**

> *There are instances where you know students come in Year 7 and actually you're surprised that by the time they get into your 10 and 11, they are having major behaviour issues… and I think that is down to friendship groups and external factors happening at home or outside of school.*
>
> **(Female, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)**

This sense that there are 'early warning signs' for exclusion came out very clearly in our quantitative research. 97% of teachers who knew an excluded student well said that there were signs the pupil was on a path to exclusion, but just 62% of this group said that these signs had been picked up and acted upon.

> *You can assess behaviours early on, and you can perhaps get a feel for the family early on, and then you can make a professional prediction of 'that child won't make it'.*
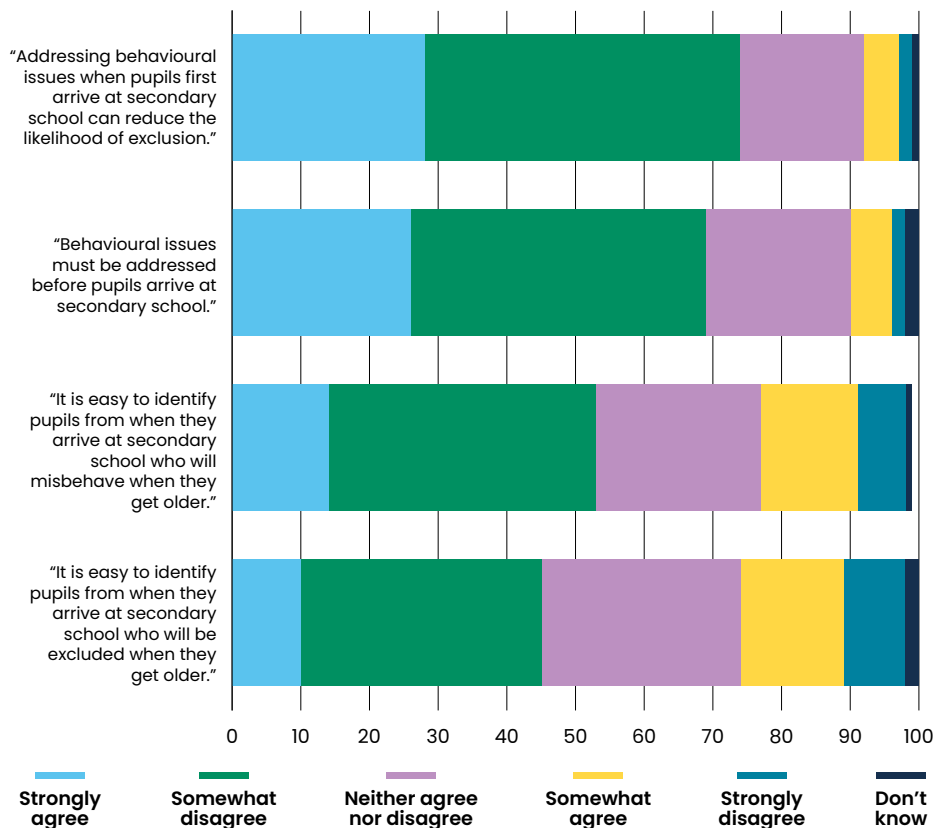
(Male, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)

Teachers think that early intervention is crucial and under-resourced. 64% of teachers think that these behaviours could have been picked up at least several months before the pupil was actually excluded, and a fifth (21%) think the signs could have been picked up several years before exclusion. Nearly half (48%) of this group of teachers think that early intervention by the school would have helped to prevent exclusion.

This desire for early intervention indicates that teachers are aware that more can be done. While this might seem to contrast our earlier finding that teachers think they are doing all they can, a wider view gives a different perspective. Teachers think they are doing all they can with the resources they have. Strong teacher awareness that early intervention might work indicates an understanding that wider society, not just schools or individual teachers themselves, have work to do to help young people who are struggling.

Figure 8

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? [Teachers]

Legend:
- Strongly agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

6. In some cases, expulsion is seen as the only credible option...

> *If it's violent, then I think that permanent exclusion should be done, but I don't see the point in fixed-term exclusion for other stuff.*
>
> **(Female, Parent Focus Group, Manchester)**

> *We reach a point with some students where however much restorative work you do and however hard you try; they do not respond. And the parents do not support and then it leaves you little...you know, where else do you go? Where else do you go with it? Because it's disrupting everybody else's learning.*
>
> **(Female, Teacher Focus Group, Stevenage)**

Across both our qualitative and quantitative research, there was a consensus that exclusions were sometimes a grim necessity. No one was enthusiastic about permanent or fixed term exclusions, but there was a real sense that exclusion - especially expulsion - is the only credible response to extreme bad behaviour.

Figure 9

Which of the following words would you use to describe permanent exclusions? Please select up to three
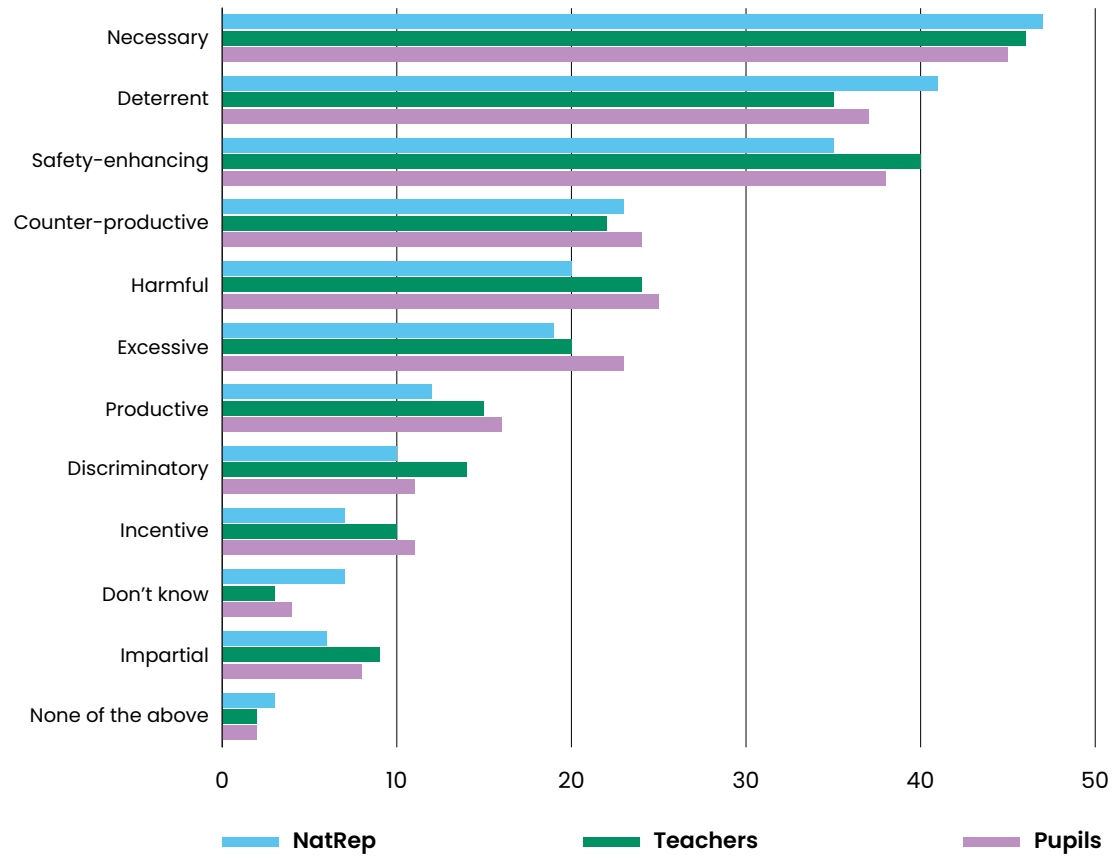
This was also reflected in some of our polling. When presented with a variety of words to describe expulsions, the most common descriptors were necessary, safety-enhancing, and deterrent. Other words like harmful, counter-productive, and excessive were less popular overall.

Figure 10

For each of the following examples of poor behaviour, indicate whether you think school exclusion is an appropriate form of discipline or not. [NatRep]
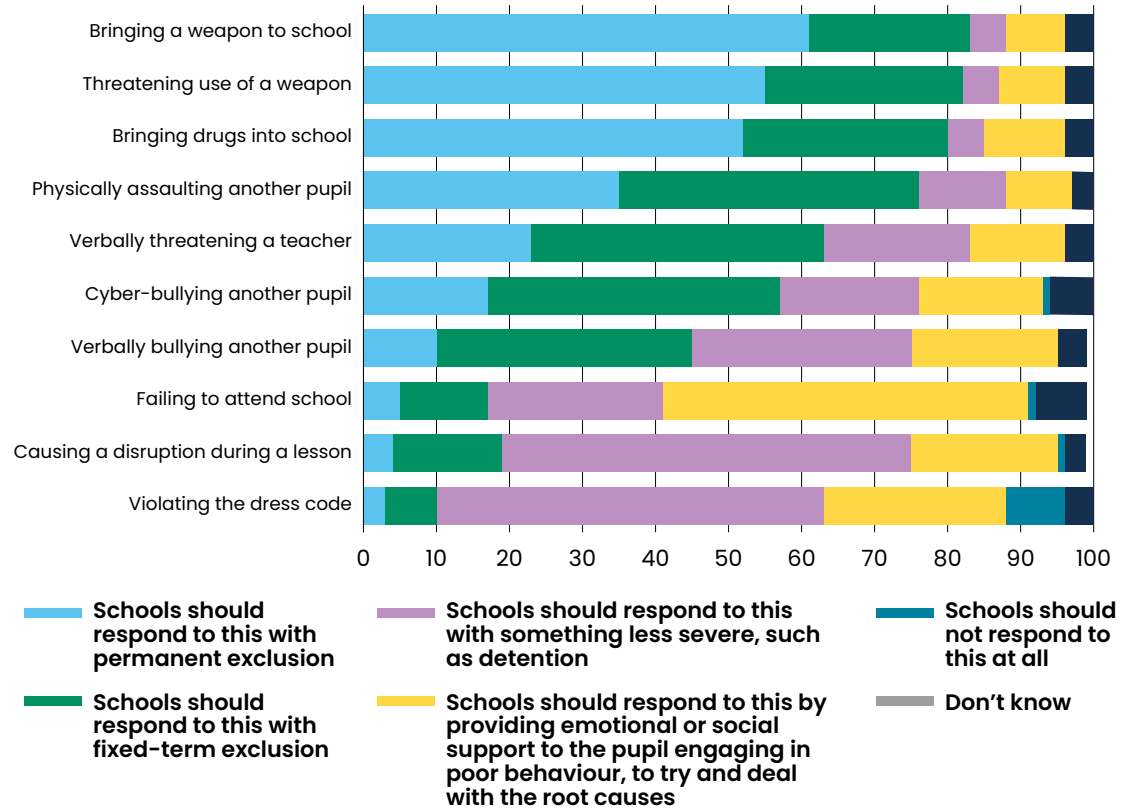

The sorts of behaviour that warranted exclusion were unsurprising. Weapon possession or use and drug possession were both seen as behaviours that should result in permanent exclusion. Verbally threatening a teacher, bringing a weapon to school, physically assaulting another pupil, cyber-bullying another pupil, threatening the use of a weapon, and bringing drugs into school were all seen as behaviours that should result in suspension or exclusion.

While expulsions are seen as the only credible response to some issues, exclusions – both suspension and expulsion - are seen as disproportionate or actively unhelpful for others. For instance, any form of exclusion for dress code violations has very low support across all three groups polled. Furthermore, on some issues – primarily failure to attend school – emotional and social support saw more agreement than any punitive sanction. This could well reflect growing understanding of, and sympathy for, the attendance crisis in schools.

Figure 11

For each of the following examples of poor behaviour, indicate whether you think school exclusion is an appropriate form of discipline or not [% who said permanent or temporary exclusions]
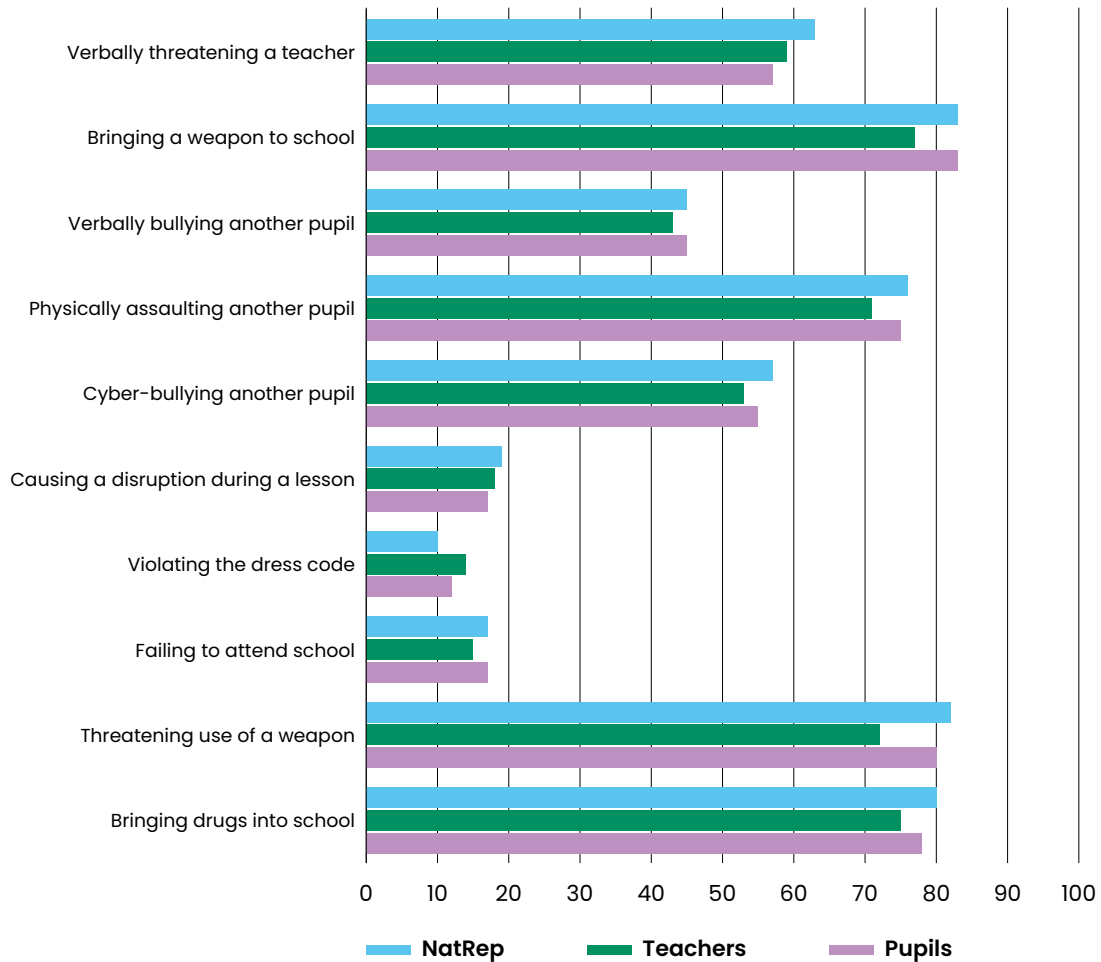
This is in-keeping with the focus group findings, where parents would repeatedly point to issues like violence and drug use as reasons for exclusion, while being less consistent on other issues.

The overall picture was one of support for the concept of exclusions, but concern whenever it came to individual cases. In focus groups, some parents would agree on reasons for expulsion, and then immediately offer exculpatory reasons for why that behaviour could have happened – for instance, pointing out social issues. One such interaction is displayed below.

> *Any kind of violence. At all. Maybe a tier system, but any violence…Drugs, too. Anything there.*

(Male, Parent Focus Group, Manchester)

> *If you set fire to something, or drugs, I'd expect it. But violence? You've got to wonder what's going on at home to cause a kid to be violent…*

(Female, Parent Focus Group, Manchester)

7. ...but ethnic minorities are more likely to perceive exclusions as discriminatory

There is a sense from ethnic minority respondents that exclusions are needed, but a feeling that they are currently discriminatory.

We began this project aware that most discussions of exclusions will, at some point, touch upon the impact of ethnicity however, the data indicates a far more complex picture than is often painted. There are, unquestionably, significant racial disparities in terms of the exclusion rate; pupils from a GRT background are far more likely to be excluded than other pupils, and the rate of exclusion for Black Caribbean boys is notably more frequent than that of their White counterparts.[8] But equally, Asian pupils and Black African pupils are excluded at a lower rate than their White British counterparts, and disadvantage is just as, if not more, associated with exclusion than ethnicity. As referenced earlier, children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) are four times more likely to be suspended and five times more likely to be expelled than their peers.[9] There is a clear intersection between disadvantage, discrimination, and exclusion.

This is reflected in our polling. Ethnic minority respondents were slightly more likely to view expulsions as discriminatory, and more likely to say they felt minority pupils were more likely to be excluded for the same behaviour (40% compared to 26% of White respondents). They were also more likely to say the same about pupils from Black Caribbean backgrounds (45% compared to 27% of White respondents).

Non-White teachers were also much more likely to say they thought minority pupils were more prone to exclusions (45% compared to 27% of White respondents). Interestingly non-White teachers were more attuned to discrimination in exclusions across all factors, not just ethnicity:

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8   See Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, Academic year 2022/23 - Explore education statistics - GOV. UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

9   Ibid.

Figure 12

And in your view, do you think decisions to exclude pupils are ever unfairly motivated by a pupil's [gender/ethnicity/special needs or ability]?
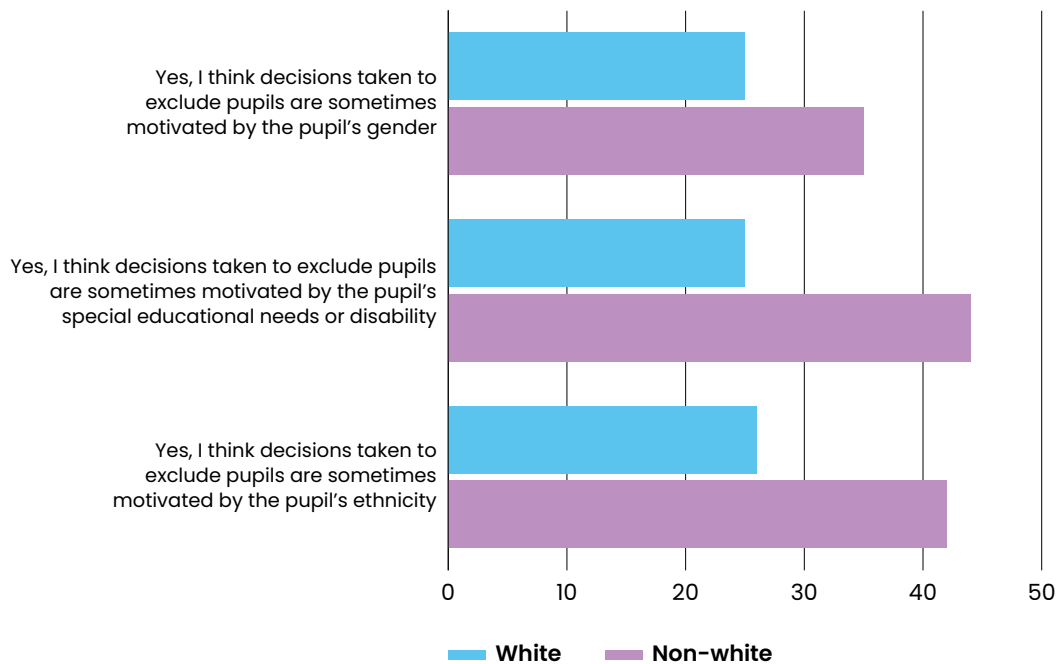

There were also some small but notable differences in how Non-White adults perceived the impact and possible interventions to reduce exclusions. Non-White adult respondents were also notably more likely than White respondents to identify the impact on student mental health (28% vs. 16%) as a major disadvantage of permanent school exclusions, and somewhat more likely to cite behavioural therapy (40% compared to 37% of White respondents) or mental health counselling (36% compared to 33% of White respondents) as reducing rates of exclusion.

There are also real differences around the purpose of exclusions. Non-White teachers were far more prone to say that exclusions were more likely to be used as a punishment or deterrent than White teachers. However, both groups agreed on the need for order and safety in schools.

This finding, combined with wider findings around communication from schools, indicates that more needs to be done to ensure that parents understand what systems are in place, how they work, and are confident about the even application of these systems.

Figure 13
Thinking about your experience as a teacher, what do you think are the main reasons for schools to permanently exclude pupils? Select up to three.
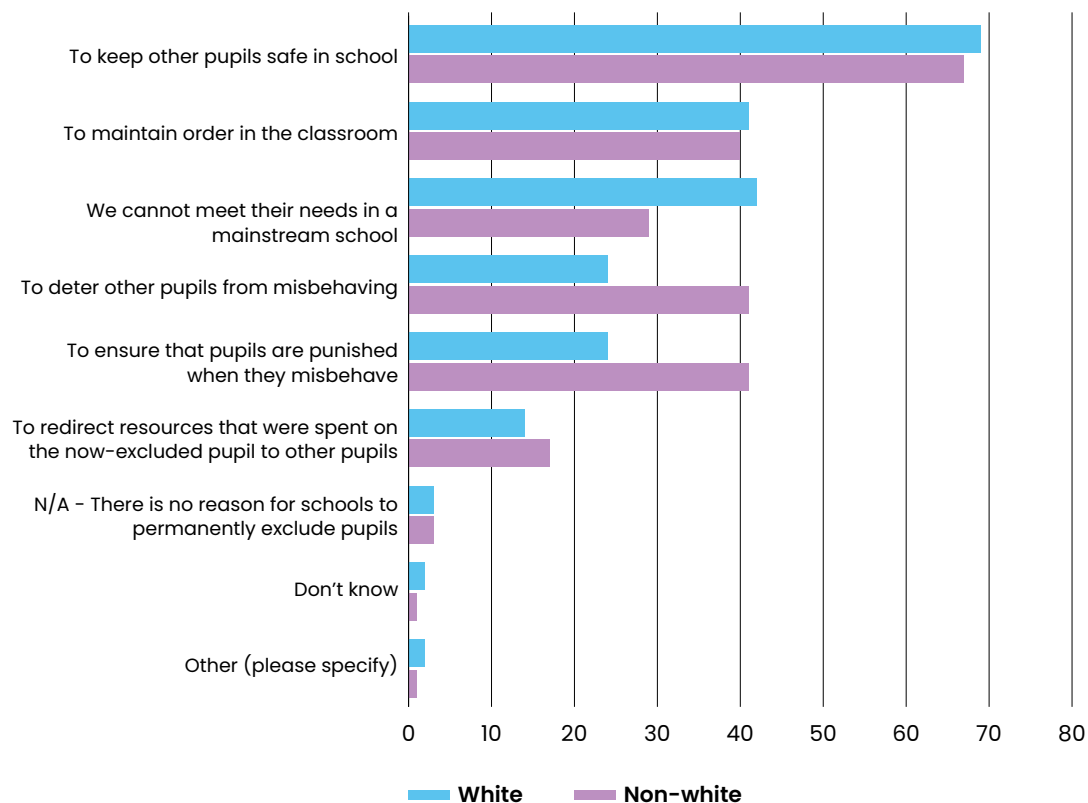
For pupils, home discipline was a major divide. Non-White pupils were much more likely to say, "exclusion means pupils can be properly disciplined by their parents instead of behaving poorly in school" (30% compared to 13% of White pupils).

Despite these findings, there was support for exclusions from respondents identifying as an ethnic minority. For example, non-White adults were more supportive of exclusions than White respondents: over half (51%) of respondents in this group said they thought temporary exclusion was an effective form of discipline, compared to 29% of White respondents, and non-White teachers (49%) were slightly more likely than White teachers (42%) to say they thought suspensions made a lasting improvement on pupil's behaviour.

The emergent picture, then, is that while there is support for exclusions from ethnic minority respondents, there is a sense that they are both discriminatory and failing to address existing downsides of exclusions, especially around mental health and belonging. This must be taken into account when considering actions around exclusions and behaviour.

8. Teachers are more in favour of suspensions than pupils or the public

> *I'll be honest with you; I think I actually said to my head of behaviour the other day – I had a student in my class who…he basically was in my face. And he said, 'what are you gonna do?' And I was like 'Well, actually…not a lot.*

(Female, Teacher Focus Group, Stevenage

While there was clear support from teachers for the concept of exclusions as a necessary behaviour intervention, this was by no means universal, especially when they are temporary. Teachers generally thought that suspensions are an effective form of discipline and tend to support suspensions. When we asked teachers to think of their personal experience, 44% said that suspensions were effective at making a lasting improvement on the pupil's behaviour, compared to just 27% who thought they were ineffective. An even greater share (53%) thought that suspensions were effective in acting as a deterrent to others.

Figure 14

How effective or ineffective do you think [permanent/temporary] exclusion is as a method of discipline for pupils who behave poorly?
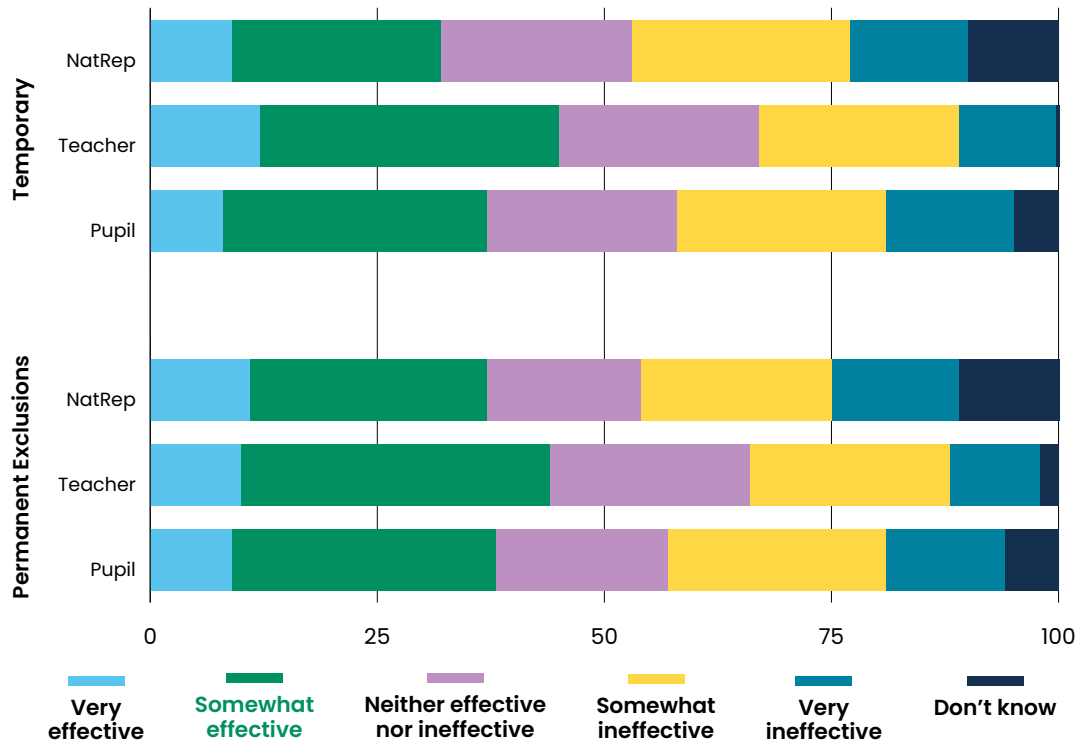
In focus groups, teachers also described the relief that a suspension can bring, referencing it as a way to get classes back on track after being disrupted by poor behaviour, and providing a clear sanction. In some cases, teachers didn't think that the sanction worked to improve behaviour, but simply provided some respite from a disruptive student:

> *...we have students that have multiple fixed term exclusions, which tells me that they're not working because they're out there again... And I think the only benefit we get is that the teachers get a bit of a breather and we're like, thank the Lord we have a day, or we have three days, where we haven't got to deal with that student...the dynamic within the class just changes instantly when you've got a student that is that disruptive and then you have a couple of days without it. It's brilliant.*
>
> **(Female, Teacher Focus Group, Stevenage)**

For teachers, suspensions work even when they 'don't work' – in other words, even when there's little to no impact on an individual pupil's behaviour, they remain useful to provide 'a breather'.

The public don't agree, and are more likely to say suspensions are ineffective than effective (37% vs 32%), and though that is a relatively small difference, we found quite strong feelings around suspension in our focus groups. Parents, in particular, spoke about the relative ineffectiveness of suspensions, often criticising the impact on families. Often, this form of exclusion was perceived as giving children who didn't want to be in school anyway 'what they wanted', or enabling them to sit at home on games consoles rather than in school. Parents with experience of suspension, either first or second hand, also noted that the impact on families could be difficult in terms of time management, employment and other children within the family.

It is important to consider the wider context of schools, and the earlier findings around behaviour being perceived to be in decline, when thinking about how teachers view suspensions. Repeated references to 'breathers' and 'resets' point towards short-term respite more than real solutions.

> *The only reason I would agree with [suspensions] is to push it back onto the parents and make them get involved – the kid's at home, on the Xbox, because parents have to work, and [the child has] got what they wanted*
>
> **(Male, Parent Focus Group, Manchester)**

> *It isn't a punishment for the child – my friend's child got excluded and they lost several jobs due to the exclusion process and the constant need to be at home. It's a bigger picture than 'you're just excluded' – you need to provide the education*
>
> **(Female, Parent Focus Group, Manchester)**

9. There is disagreement around the best ways to improve behaviour in schools...

When asking about how to improve behaviour in schools, we found substantial differences between the public, teachers, and pupils, though there was some consensus among those regularly in a school setting. Teachers (37%) and pupils (36%) alike were most likely to say reducing class sizes would improve overall behaviour in schools. For teachers, this was followed by providing additional mental health support (32%), and providing support for their family to address problems at home (31%), while for pupils, this was followed by tailoring the education system to pupil's needs (32%), providing additional mental health support for young people (32%), and improving relations between teachers and pupils (31%).

The general public, on the other hand, thought that banning mobile phone use in schools would help improve overall behaviour (41%), followed by making class sizes smaller (34%), and teaching pupils self-awareness, social awareness, and communication skills (30%).

Pupils were substantially more likely than teachers or all adults to say that reducing the importance of exams in determining overall grades to reduce pressure on pupils would improve behaviour, and substantially less likely than the public to say that banning mobile phones would have an impact.

Figure 15

What do you think would most help to improve the overall behaviour of pupils in state schools in the UK? Select up to five.
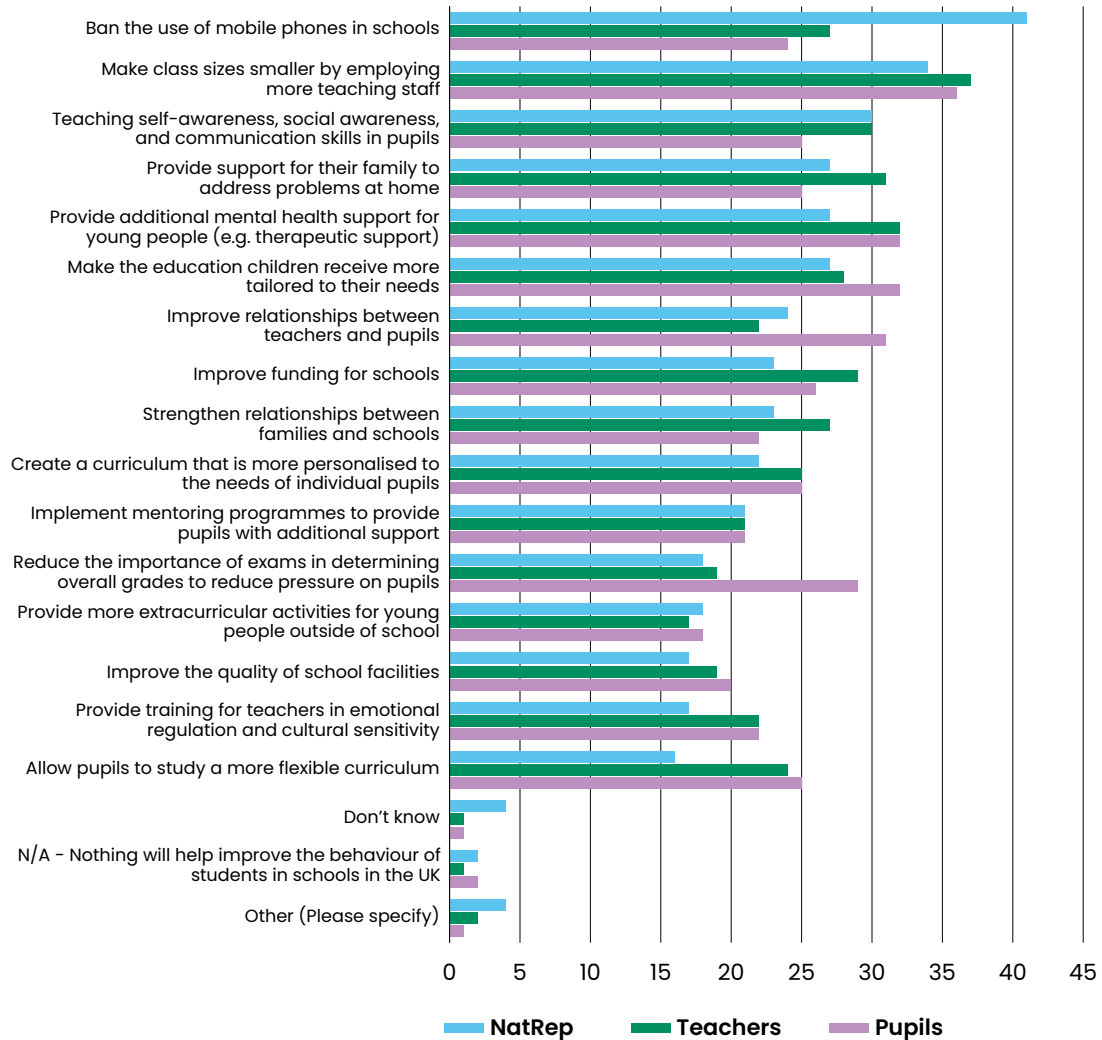

Different demographics have differing views on how to approach improving behaviour. There are particularly interesting differences around the issue of mobile phones in schools; especially when it comes to age differences: 72% of over 65s would ban mobiles, while just 14% of 18–24 year olds would do so.

Age is a point of polarisation on other issues, too. Within the public, the 18-24 demographic have additional mental health support as their top priority, with 45% support, while just 17% of over 65s supported it. Among teachers, 40% of 18-34 year olds said mental health support was key compared to just 25% of teachers aged 55 and above. The issue of class size also triggered real differences in opinion between the youngest and oldest respondents in our public and teacher surveys: 51% of older teachers aged 55 and above cited this compared to 26% of younger teachers age 18-34.

There were some differences between White pupils and pupils of an ethnic minority background, who were more likely to point towards improving relationships between teachers and pupils (37%), providing mental health support (34%), teaching social awareness and communication skills (32%) and provide teacher training in emotional regulation and cultural sensitivity (30%).

Figure 16

What do you think would most help to improve the overall behaviour of pupils in state schools in the UK? Select up to five. [Pupil survey]
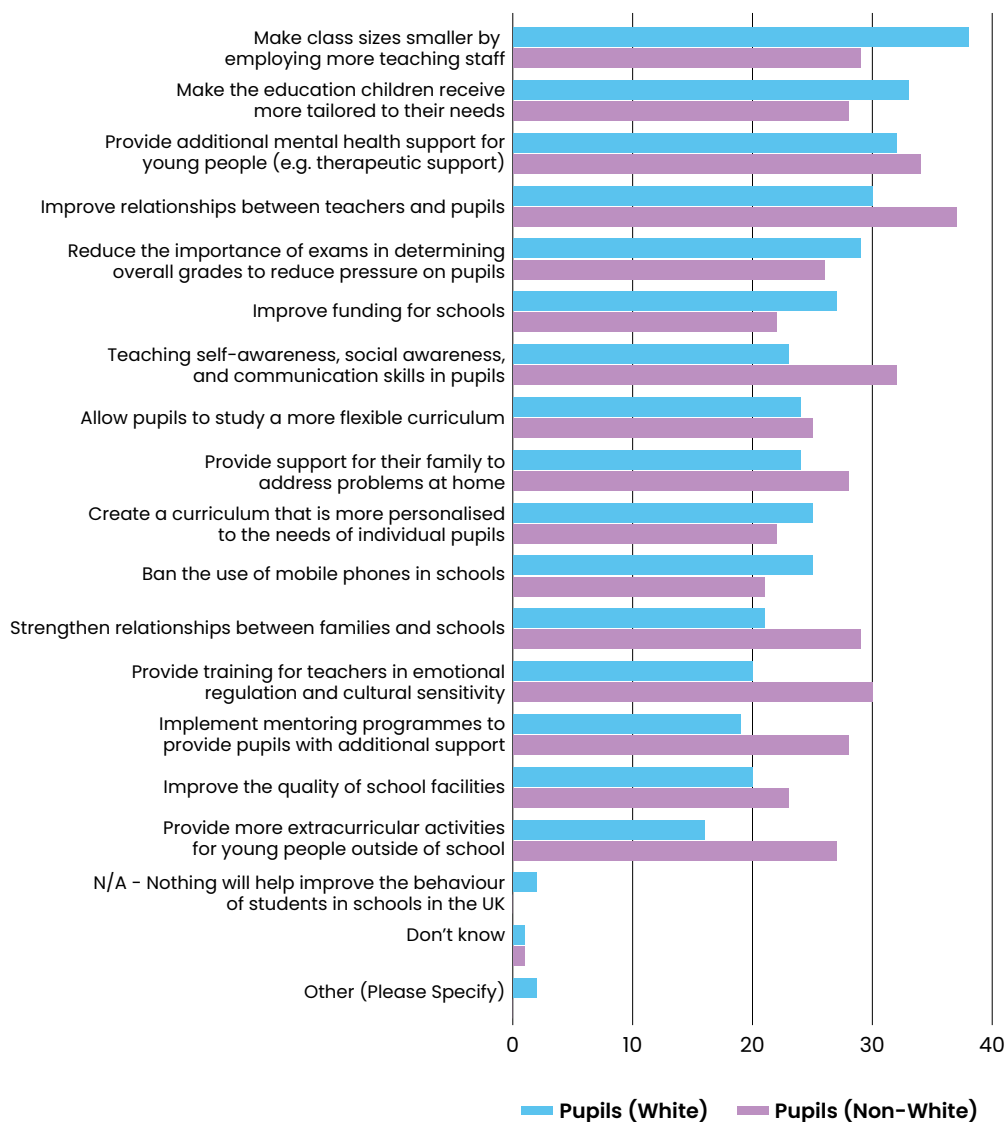
Interestingly, gender appears to be less of a driver here than might be expected. The difference in response to phone bans, class sizes, and teaching self-awareness and communication skills was relatively small between women and men.

Given that each of the key stakeholders have different views on the most effective intervention on behaviour, there is significant challenge in finding both consensus and workable interventions that would have cross stakeholder buy-in.

10. ...but agreement that reducing exclusions should focus on tackling the causes of poor behaviour and providing mentoring and support

For some of those children we might be able...like, with an extra TA we might be able to work with that child to support them.

(Male, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)

While views on how to tackle poor behaviour differed between groups, there was clear support for interventions. Across the public, teachers and pupils, the two most popular ways to reduce exclusions were 'an approach which tackles the causes of poor behaviour', and providing 'mentoring to students who are struggling with poor behaviour'.

Figure 17

Which of the following, if any, do you think would help to reduce the number of pupils who are excluded from schools. [NatRep]
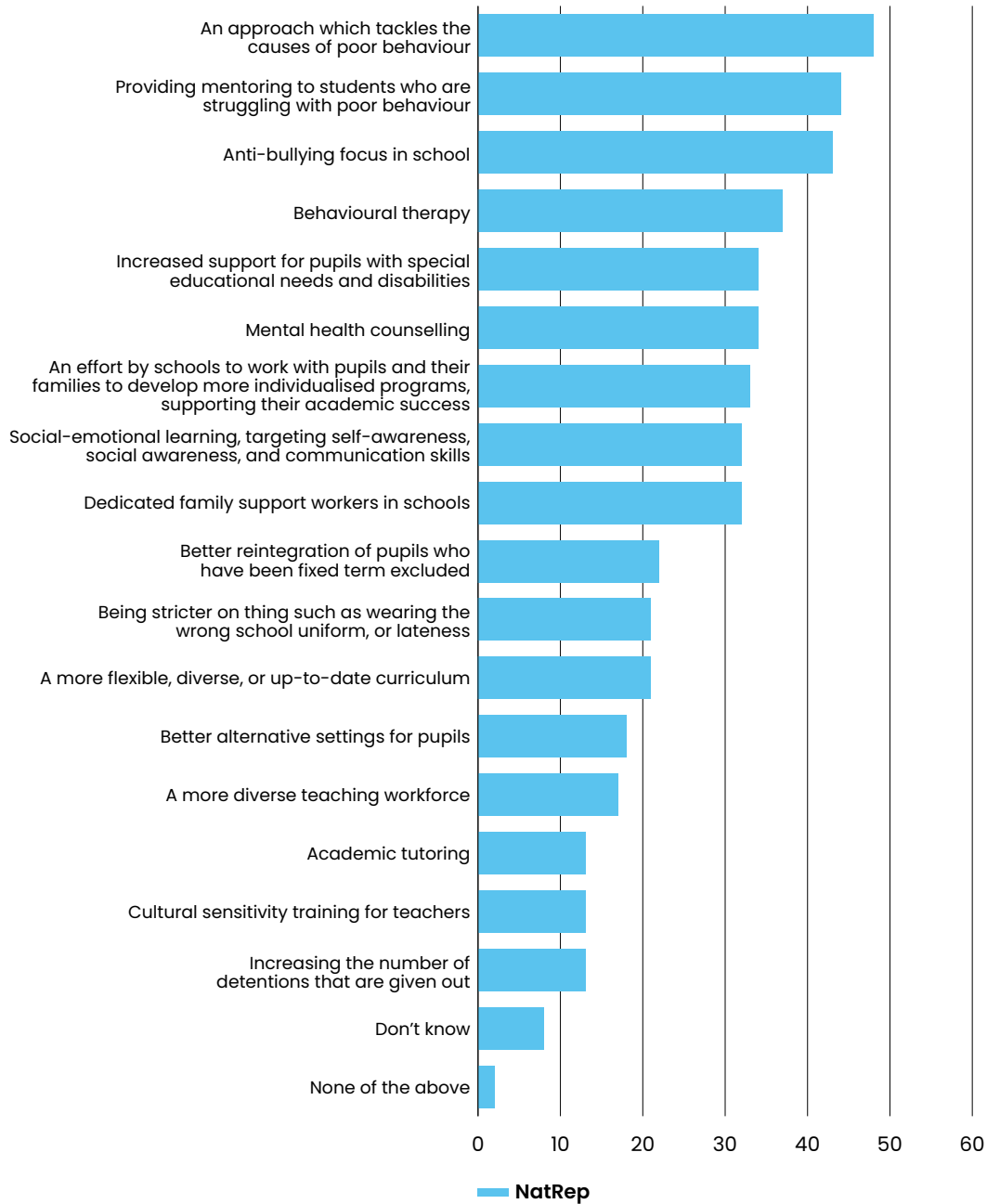
In focus groups, it was clear, especially around temporary exclusions, that exclusions were too often considered to be 'cyclical', with young people needing more support to break that cycle. There was cross-group support for approaches that tackle the causes of exclusions, including by those who saw exclusions as a necessary tool. Parents who had expressed deep support for exclusions were equally quick to tell us that 'it doesn't address the real problem', and both parents and teachers noted that it was often the same pupil or pupils being fixed term excluded, demonstrating that suspensions were not having the desired effect.

Teachers referred to various groups external to schools having positive impact, such as charities providing counsellors, or school assemblies with young people who had managed to overcome difficulties (such as gang involvement). Mentoring was referenced in one of the focus groups without any prompt. When pressed as to what shape this could take, respondents tended to look to local and national institutions to work with schools, for example, local sports teams. There were also suggestions that mentors could come in from trusted national organisations like the Army or the NHS.

It was noted, however, that small-scale pastoral approaches such as counselling had too much demand and had broken down, especially due to the backlog in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

These answers reflected a general feeling in groups that although schools could do more, it wasn't the sole responsibility of schools to solve the problems behind exclusions.

This finding speaks to a sense that there are wider social issues that help to drive exclusions. This hypothesis is backed up by correlations between exclusions and deprivation or discrimination that we outline in the context section. There is also a sense that it is beyond the capabilities of schools to tackle this alone. References to mental health, mentoring, and wider community input indicates an understanding that it will take multiple actors, and perhaps multiple approaches, to solve the problem.

11. Parents need better communication around behaviour policies and expectations...

> *No, I haven't got a Scooby – I wouldn't know if you go to another school where we are, or if you just go through to the local authority to be put into a naughty school...*
>
> **(Male, Parent Focus Group, Stevenage)**

Throughout this report, some of our findings sit in apparent juxtaposition. As indicated above, parents might approve of the exclusions system while rejecting its consequences, or find it discriminatory, while supporting the continuation of exclusions. This demonstrates the complexity and challenges of identifying and implementing solutions in this space.

However, there are two findings that seem to complement each other, as both indicate a desire for more support in the behavioural system. The first is knowledge-based: our research shows that there is a gap in parent's knowledge of behaviour expectations from their child's school. Fewer than half of respondents claimed to have read their child's school's code of conduct. Further research on the topic of how schools communicate both on the topic of behaviour and exclusions, as well as more broadly, would be enormously useful.

Figure 18

Thinking of the behaviour policy at your child's school, which, if any, of the following are true for you? If you have more than one child in school, think of your oldest child. Please select all that apply. [NatRep]

Chart (NatRep, horizontal bar chart, x-axis 0 to 60):

Response	Value
I have read a code of conduct / behaviour expectations for my child	~49
I have read the behaviour policy on my child's school website	~45
I signed a behaviour agreement for my child	~28
I am aware that my child's school has a code of conduct/ behaviour policy but I have not read it	~26
None of the above are true for me	~7
My child's school does not have a behaviour policy	~5
Don't know	~4

NatRep

This manifested further in our qualitative research. Parents in focus groups had a very low level of understanding about the process around exclusions, and frequently did not understand its consequences.

Some parents didn't feel that their school communicated with them in a useful way. They often made the point that a large volume of communication took place, but that communication was insufficiently detailed around behaviour; for instance, noting that a child had received a warning or behaviour point but failing to include the reason why. There was a clear lack of understanding about what would happen if their child was on track to be excluded: most parents could not name any element of the process, and expressed uncertainty about who would be involved.

> *I imagine there'd be steps towards the exclusions process, and there'd be something on the website?*

(Parent Focus Group, Manchester)

> *I get an email off the school every two weeks that I don't read, it's probably in there.*

(Male, Parent Focus Group, Manchester)

> *No, I wouldn't know which part of the school body was involved in it [the exclusions process]...parent governors, do they have a say? Headteachers, do they have a say? They're not up front about it from day one.*

(Female, Parent Focus Group, Manchester)

There was a sense that the system was difficult to navigate and hugely time-consuming. There was consensus within one group that there were 'two kinds' of families. On one side were families who could sustain fighting for a child at risk of exclusion, and on the other side were those that could not. The distinction, it was felt, was more a product of agency than desire to fight: while everyone wants to prevent their child from being excluded, some families have more resources than others at their disposal to take up this battle.

12. ...and there is widespread support for a better system of Alternative Provision (AP), alongside support for bringing students back into mainstream education where possible

> *They can accommodate those students there [AP] as well. I think they're a good idea. I haven't been in one, but from my point of view that sounds good. All children should be in some sort of education.*
>
> **(Female, Teacher Focus Group, Manchester)**

As well as a desire for clearer communication around behaviour and the exclusions process, there is also clear support for better resourced AP, even from those who didn't know much about it. Participants expressed a clear preference for continuity of education wherever possible. Throughout our focus groups, every parent agreed that children deserved an education, and that it was important for families too, with lots of conversations on this topic ending with at least one participant stating 'children should be educated'. This also manifested in a desire to bring students back into mainstream education after time spent in the AP system.

Figure 19

Which of the following do you view as the main advantages of sending excluded pupils to alternative provision schools? Please select up to three.
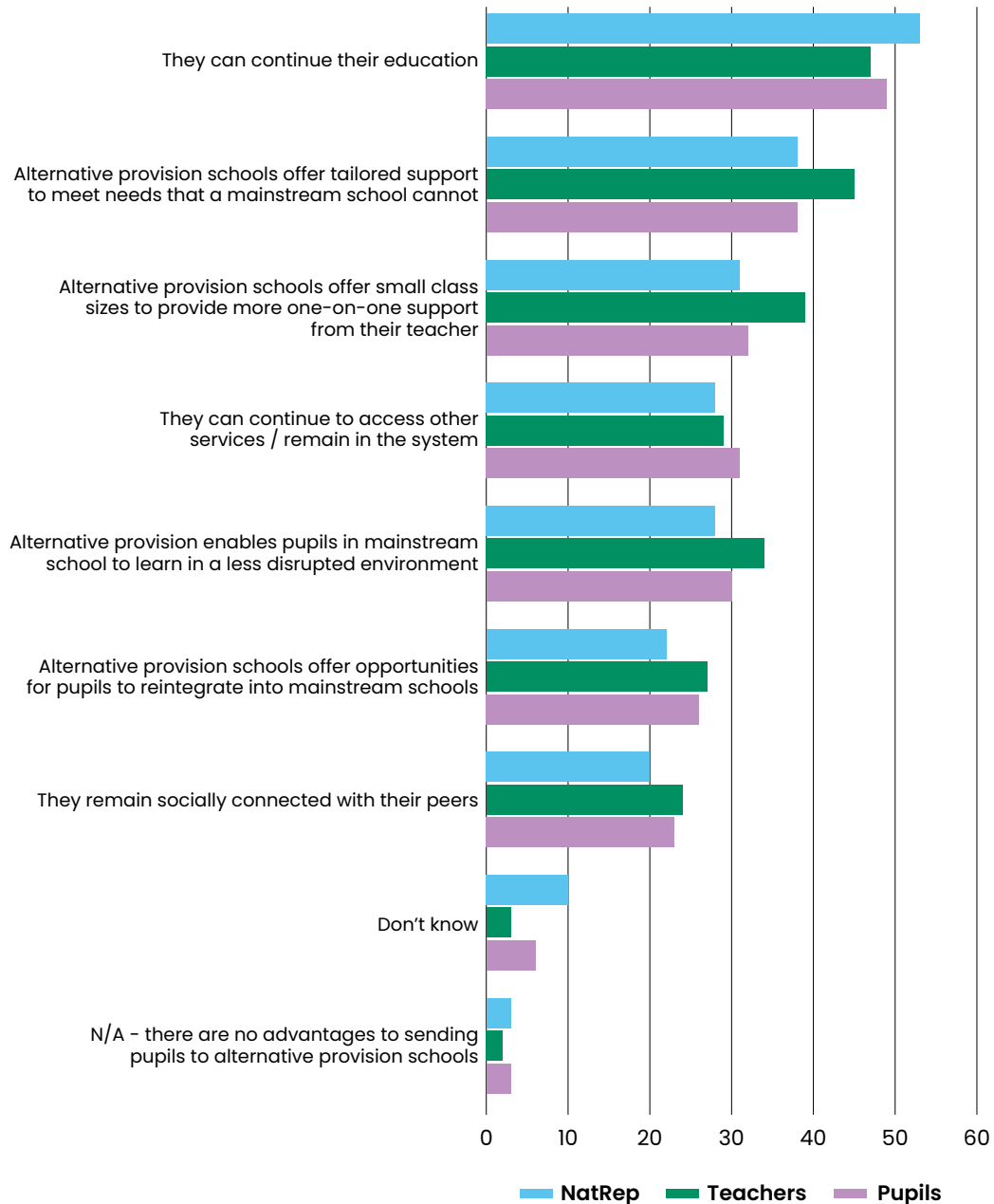
During our polling, AP was explained to participants, and they were then asked questions about it. Across all three groups, bringing students back into mainstream education was considered important, although pupils were slightly less supportive than parents and the public.

Teachers are far more likely to agree with statements around the finer points of provision, such as 'AP schools offer small class sizes to provide more one on one support' or 'AP schools offer tailored support to meet needs a mainstream school cannot'.

In focus groups, participants were less informed about what AP was – it was referred to on one occasion as 'the naughty kid school' by a parent – but participants were supportive of the idea, noting that smaller class sizes and more support would help students, but also wary that poor AP could worsen things for excluded young people.

> *It could be a melting pot – I've seen it, but not first hand, I have a family member who's been through that, and they absolutely do feed off each other and there have been scenarios where a child who potentially didn't have as many issues came out of a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) with more issues than they went in*
>
> **(Female, Parent Focus Group, Manchester)**

There was also a clear sense that the AP system needed urgent reform, and that mainstream schools needed more funding. 40% of teachers and pupils said the UK does a bad job at supporting excluded pupils after they leave school. A third of the general public said the same, while another third responded with "don't know". This presents a challenge for reform of AP, given that there appears to be a chunk of the public who are either entirely unaware of it, and don't see it as an issue with relevance to them.

Both parents and teachers reported experiencing or hearing about pupils being excluded for prolonged periods while educational arrangements were made, or pupils with additional needs going unmet because mainstream settings were just unable to provide them with the support they need. One teacher referred to her school as 'simply holding' pupils due to lack of capacity in the Special Educational Needs (SEN) and AP systems.

> *At the moment we've got two students in our provision that have got guaranteed places at a specialist provision, but it's full. So they can't go there. So because that's full, we are essentially holding them and they're not getting anywhere near what they deserve, and neither are the students around them, because they're being so disrupted by them all the time, and it's not poor behaviour for them at all. It's behaviour they can't control.*
>
> **(Female, Teacher Focus Group, Stevenage)**

While earlier findings show that parents are supportive of exclusions in principle, this finding demonstrates a desire for better AP and a system in which places in AP, or another school, are found as quickly as possible once an exclusion has been confirmed.

> *There's a wider issue for me and that's funding generally. You know, when we talk about like specialist provision and when we talk about additional needs generally within all settings whether it's mainstream or special provision, I don't think there's enough funding being put into schools generally...*
>
> **(Male, Teacher Focus Group, Stevenage)**

Implications for policymakers

Changing the way exclusions work in England's schools is a huge challenge.

There is enormous amount of goodwill towards the idea of reducing how many young people are expelled, but, as our research shows, very little capacity to make it happen. The education system is tired and underfunded, and so too are its teachers. To make matters worse, they are dealing with communities and young people who have been ravaged by both the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. They are working within a growing crisis in SEND education. They are working, in many cases, in areas where behaviour is bad and worsening.

This is a poisonous cocktail that cannot be ignored when discussing the increasing rate of exclusion in our schools. There is no magic bullet that will suddenly reduce the number of young people who face the ultimate sanction. There is no policy lever that will suddenly make everything better.

As things stand, for most school leaders, exclusions are a fact of life.

That is not to say that we should simply accept the status quo. With the correct investment in the right places, and the correct reforms introduced with the right level of time and patience, there is surely a roadmap to reducing exclusions.

Evidence from this report demonstrates that there is appetite for the kind of change that would be needed: among teachers, students and parents alike. But it cannot be a rush job, nor can we imagine a world with no exclusions is possible.

Such an agenda must also come with a big dose of fiscal and political realism. Getting this policy right – which must surely be a social justice priority – demands broad time horizons and an acceptance that it is complex and systemic. The right approach much accept that this is a long-term project that will only mature when the education system is less exhausted. Without systemic thinking, exclusion reduction will not work, and make teacher's lives more difficult.

That is not to say that the foundations cannot be put in place right now. After all, this is the very early stages of a new government, one that has repeatedly argued that it is determined to invest in long-term solutions as part of its "decade of national renewal."

As such, this report is not suggesting immediate policy fixes; instead, it is gently setting out the beginnings of a policy framework that could ultimately change the school system's relationship with exclusion. What is more, it also tallies with what students, parents and teachers believe is the right approach to tackling the issue.

Our key suggestions for policymakers are as follows:

1. **Schools, teachers, and most importantly, students, need and want greater investment at the 'top of the funnel' for the most vulnerable young people.** Better funding is desperately needed to support interventions - especially Social and Emotional Needs and mentoring - designed specifically to prevent the cycle of student decline witnessed too often in schools. Our research found huge appetite for such a national investment.

2. **Relatedly, there needs to be greater investment in, and potential reform of, in-school SEND provision.** This is not fresh news. There is no shortage of coverage and commentary on this issue, and with good reason. This, however, does not make the need for reform on this issue any less pressing or salient. As it stands, there are too many students in our schools who are not getting the support they need to engage with mainstream education and school authority. Our research suggests there would be widespread support for this.

3. **Greater focus on exclusion and related areas across both ITT and CPD.** The Initial Teacher Training curriculum is already full and stretched but, given the lack of knowledge displayed by teachers in our focus groups about exclusions, there seems to be a case for making room for this issue. There should also be more consideration given to CPD, to ensure that existing teachers have a grasp of exclusions more broadly, their own school or Trust's processes, and the kinds of interventions that might reduce the need to exclude.

4. **Greater investment in AP, with focus not only on expanding provision but also on the practice and pedagogy in AP settings.** Our research had parents and teachers recanting stories of children who, having been removed from mainstream settings as the result of a sanction or additional needs, had nowhere to go. Schools are not holding pens for young people, and it is at once damaging to a child's education, disruptive to the wider school community, stressful for families and carers, and demeaning to schools themselves to utilise them as such. More AP places must be available, either in specialist provision or separate provision within mainstream settings, and there must be far more consideration of both what best practice looks like and how to effectively share this as part of a programme of high standards in AP.

5. **Encouragement of 'routes back' into mainstream for young people who have been excluded, where this could be a positive option for the young person.** Part of long-term thinking around AP should acknowledge the transformative power of well-delivered, high-quality work in the AP system. Sometimes, this will need to be over the long term. In other cases, however, there is desire for 'inclusive exclusion' – work to help young people who have been excluded to address problems and re-integrate into mainstream. The route between AP and school must become a two-way road.

6. **Improve the way in which schools communicate behaviour policies and exclusion policies with parents.** Our research found that parents do not have a good understanding of their school's exclusion policy – and that the same is true of teachers themselves. Many schools are simply posting it on their website, or in emails that, in parents' words, 'they won't read'. This means that in some cases, the first time a parent is learning how the exclusion system works is as their child is going through it. This is corrosive to the relationship between schools and parents (at a time where this relationship is already stretched) and means that parents with the greatest social agency and capital are the best equipped to deal with the system. This is clearly unfair.

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