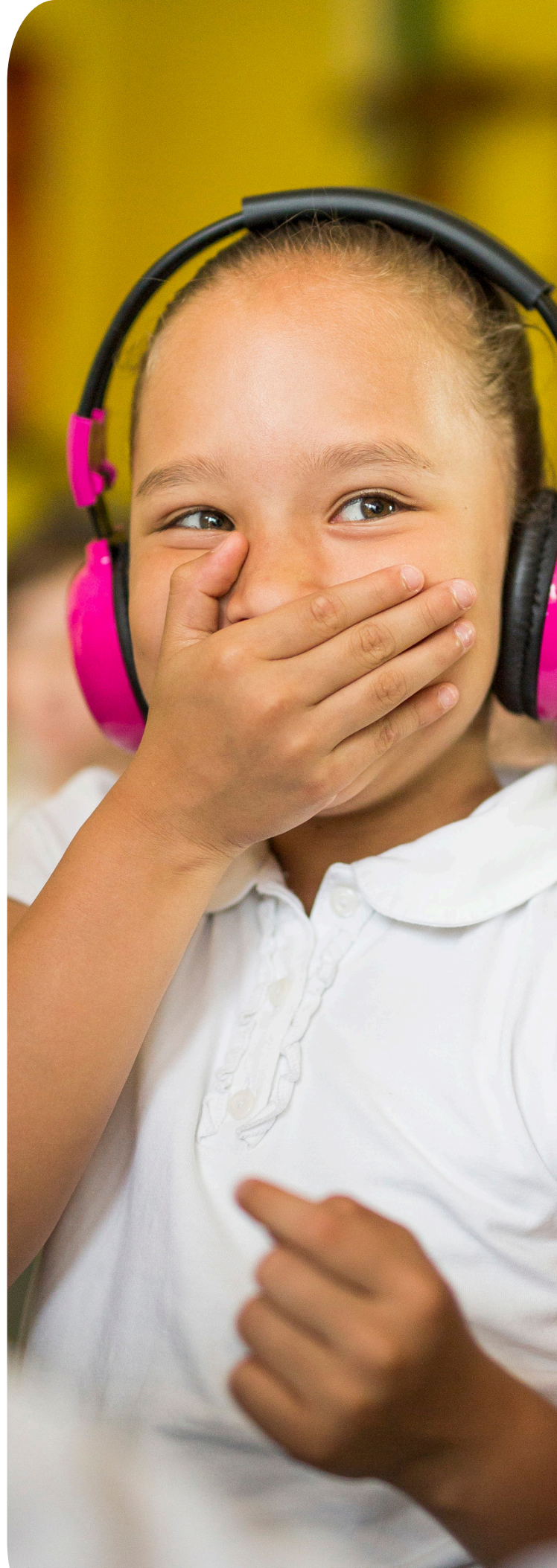


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What Does the Education White Paper Mean for Primary Schools?

A Headteacher's Guide

POLICY | CURRICULUM | LEADERSHIP



A Message from Tilly, Our CEO



In February 2026, the Department for Education published '**Every Child Achieving and Thriving**' - the most significant education policy document in a generation. If you are a primary headteacher, you have probably read the headlines. You may have read the foreword. You may, if you have had a spare hour this term, have worked your way into the detail.

This article is for those who haven't yet had that hour, and those who want to think through what it actually means in practice - not in Whitehall, but in a primary school, with real children, real teachers and real budget pressures.

We have read it carefully. Here is what it says, what it requires, and what it makes possible.



The Starting Point: A System That Has Failed Too Many Children

The White Paper does not open with congratulations. It opens with an honest assessment of where the system has fallen short. Secretary of State Bridget Phillipson's foreword is unusually direct: rising school absence, families withdrawing from education, disengagement increasing, and children whose outcomes are still - too often - determined by background rather than ability or effort.

The statistics in the executive summary are worth sitting with. One in five children misses a day of school every fortnight. The UK ranks last out of 27 European countries for how happy 15-year-olds feel at school. The primary attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers widened before the pandemic and has not recovered.

This is not a comfortable read. But it is an honest one. And it is the foundation from which the White Paper builds its case for change.



The Seven Shifts: What the White Paper Is Actually Asking For

The White Paper organises its ambitions around seven interlocking priorities. These are not separate policy strands - they are aspects of a single vision for what primary education should look like. Here is a plain-English summary of each:

1. From narrow to broad curriculum

The dominance of Maths and English - at the expense of History, Geography, Science, RE, PSHE and the arts - has produced children who can pass tests and cannot contextualise what they know. The White Paper calls for a genuinely rich curriculum that builds knowledge and skills across all subjects. Enrichment - the trips, the experiences, the cultural encounters — must become a universal entitlement, not a privilege.

2. SEND inclusion in mainstream

The explosion of children in specialist settings reflects a failure, not a success. The White Paper's ambition is that every child can attend their local school and have their needs met there. This requires investment in teacher training, adaptive pedagogy and the physical and organisational conditions for inclusive practice. It is a significant ask - and a moral one.

3. Closing the disadvantage gap

The attainment gap is both an attainment problem and a life experience problem. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds arrive at school with less cultural capital, a less rich vocabulary and fewer reference points for the curriculum they encounter. The White Paper wants schools to address both - academic outcomes and the experiential foundations on which they rest.

4. Belonging and re-engagement

A child who does not feel they belong at school will not learn effectively at school. The White Paper treats engagement not as a nice-to-have but as a precondition. It calls for schools to be anchor institutions in their communities - places that families trust and children want to attend.

5. Active, enquiring learners

Children who debate, question and pursue their own inquiry are not a luxury product of high-performing schools. They are the goal of every school. The White Paper is explicit that passive reception of information is not enough - children need to be active participants in their own learning, set up for a lifetime of curiosity.

6. Teacher quality and workload

The best teaching is what closes every gap the White Paper identifies. But teacher retention is worst in the schools that need the most stability - those serving the most disadvantaged communities. Reducing workload, improving support and keeping great teachers in challenging schools is not a workforce issue. It is a pupil outcomes issue.

7. Schools as community anchors

The White Paper extends the school's role beyond the school gates. Schools that draw families in, that rebuild trust with communities that have withdrawn from education, and that connect children's school lives with their home lives - these schools achieve more than those that treat education as something that happens between 9 am and 3 pm.

What This Means for Your School - Practically

Every headteacher reading this will be asking the same question: what do I actually need to do differently? The honest answer is that the White Paper does not prescribe implementation. It sets a direction and leaves schools to find their own path.

But here are four questions worth asking of your current provision:

1. Is your curriculum genuinely broad - or is Maths and English crowding out the foundation subjects in practice, even if not in policy?
2. Are your SEND pupils experiencing the same curriculum as their peers - or a version of it? And is that version reducing their sense of belonging rather than supporting it?
3. Are your disadvantaged pupils building the cultural capital and life experience that will contextualise their academic learning - or is enrichment still the thing that gets cut when budgets are tight?
4. Are your teachers planning creative, engaging lessons - or spending their evenings managing the administrative load that prevents it?

These are not comfortable questions. But they are the right ones. And the White Paper gives headteachers the policy authority to prioritise the answers.



The now>press>play Connection

We are, of course, a company - a social enterprise, to be precise. Our purpose is driven by impact, not shareholders. So let us be transparent about what follows.

now>press>play was not designed in response to the White Paper. It was designed in response to the same question the White Paper asks: what do children who are being failed by the current system actually need?

We started with that question in 2012, when our founders - a teacher, a theatre director and a social entrepreneur - decided that the read-write curriculum was leaving too many children behind.

The White Paper has arrived at the same answer. Immersive, multi-sensory, movement-based experiences that extend life experience, build vocabulary, include every learner equally, and make teachers' lives easier, not harder. That is what we do. We are glad the policy has caught up.

"In my 20 years in education, never has a product had such an impact. Three years after introducing it, it is still constantly used and loved by pupils and staff alike. It has a huge impact on our curriculum for pupils of all ages."

Deputy Headteacher, Primary School

A Final Thought

The White Paper is a statement of ambition. Whether it becomes a statement of achievement depends on what happens in classrooms - in the decisions headteachers make about curriculum, about inclusion, about which resources they invest in and which they set aside.

The children described in the White Paper's opening pages - the ones who have disengaged, whose families have withdrawn, who are being educated outside mainstream schools - are not abstract policy problems. They are in your school. They were in ours, too, when we started.

The question the White Paper poses is simple, even if the answer is hard: what will you do differently for them?

See how now>press>play maps to every White Paper priority. [Download our full White Paper alignment document](#) - including evidence, teacher quotes and curriculum mapping - and share it with your leadership team.

We're always glad to talk to headteachers who are asking the same questions.

[Book a leadership call](#)