

**Reading in KS3:**

# **Challenge, impact, outcomes**

This white paper aims to explore the KS3 landscape and discuss the broader implications of developing an effective reading culture.

# About Reading Solutions UK

At Reading Solutions UK, one of our core values is making a difference. We do this by providing Reading Plus, an evidence-based online reading programme, to schools to develop students' fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Collaboration and integrity are at the heart of everything we do. We are passionate about supporting schools with a singular focus on making a difference to students' life chances through reading.

[readingsolutionsuk.co.uk](https://readingsolutionsuk.co.uk)

## Contributors

### KS3 educators

Early in 2023, Reading Solutions UK collected over 100 survey responses from educators responsible for delivering the KS3 English curriculum across the UK. This included Classroom Teachers, Key Stage Coordinators, Heads of Literacy, and Senior Leaders (Assistant Principals/Headteachers/Heads of Departments, etc.).

In addition, two Senior Education Leaders were asked for their perspectives on key themes arising from the survey.

### Lizzie Rhodes

National Lead for Student Inclusion, Secondary phase at Oasis Community Learning.

### Gaurav Dubay

Director of English at Windsor Academy Trust and Evidence Lead in Education (St. Matthew's Research School). At the time of this white paper's research, Gaurav was Head of English at King Edward IV Academy Trust.

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# Introduction

## Fitting KS3 into 2023

Since 2014, Reading Solutions UK has adapted to the ever-changing teaching landscape through significant (occasionally turbulent) change.

From curriculum redesign, a new grading system for GCSEs, a Government report highlighting KS3 as 'Wasted Years', a global pandemic (which brought many new challenges), a rise in online learning and digital resources, and an additional Government white paper offering recommendations.

The most notable impact on the teaching landscape in recent years has been the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators have adjusted to a range of challenges, such as:

- National lockdowns.
- Home learning and a digital curriculum.
- A widening disadvantage gap.
- Dramatic declines in SEN outcomes.
- Pervasive learning loss caused by the pandemic.

## A growing concern for KS3

In September 2022, Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman reported that the 2022 KS2 SATs tests showed that nearly 175,000 students did not meet the expected standard (EXS) in reading. This meant that around a quarter of all Year 7s had a reading age below 11<sup>1</sup>.

This number has since grown as the 2023 national SATs results showed students who met the EXS in reading was 73%, down from 75% in 2022.

As the resellers of the online reading development programme, Reading Plus, we know first-hand through conversations with our partner schools, the need for solutions to accelerate reading gains, close the gap, and encourage reading for pleasure.

One of our core values is making a difference, and we do this through research and sharing best practices. Therefore, we wanted to explore today's teaching landscape, hear teachers' views on the claims and solutions offered by the Government, and share proven strategies.

In this white paper, we investigate:

- The legacy of The Wasted Years (a Government report commissioned by then Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw, released in 2015), which expressed concerns that students in Years 7 – 9 were often given significantly less focus in terms of teaching, curriculum planning, and intervention.
- The promise of the Government white paper Opportunity for All (released in 2022).
- The implications and impact of the intervening eight years on teachers.

# Reading, from the Wasted Years to Opportunity for All

**2009**

The Government abolished the KS3 SATs, citing student's '*pervasive anxiety*' around the assessments.

**2014**

A new National Curriculum is launched, driving to improve standards in education.

**2015**

The Government published the report KS3: The Wasted Years. With Ofsted focusing on GCSE outcomes when judging the impact of a school curriculum, the prioritisation of KS4 by school leaders is seen as unsurprising by many.

**2016**

Changes to the National Curriculum are implemented as the Standards and Testing Agency launches a new format for SATs testing at KS2. In addition, scaled scores (indicating whether or not a child has reached the expected standard in reading, writing, spelling and grammar, and mathematics) replace the use of levels for reporting attainment at the end of Year 6.

**2017**

English language, English literature, and maths GCSEs moved to a new grading system of 9 to 1, replacing the previous A\* - G scale.

**2019**

The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to adopt an adaptive digital curriculum to ensure minimum impact on learning whilst providing evidence-based teacher assessments for the end of KS2, KS4, and KS5, replacing traditional examinations. Alongside this, a successful transition between Key Stages was navigated, addressing possible attendance and social and emotional issues caused by the interruption of face-to-face learning.

**2022**

Schools reopened fully following the pandemic. Year 6 students sat the national SATs test for the first time in three years.

**2023**

Current Year 10 students were the first to take reformed GCSEs since the KS2 SATs overhaul – having missed out on the Government's KS3 curriculum reforms, which The Wasted Years report identified.

## Where are we now?

The Wasted Years report released in 2015 found that secondary schools needed to place more attention on students' transitional needs and a higher emphasis on KS3 teaching and assessment to ensure students made the best possible progress.

Over half a decade later, The Opportunity for All white paper was released by the Government (2022). The Government intended to build on plans set out in the Levelling Up white paper for 90% of students leaving primary school to meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths by 2030<sup>2</sup>.

In 2022 and 2023, 59% of KS2 students met the expected standard in all of reading, writing and maths, down from 65% in 2019<sup>3</sup>.

For secondary schools, the Government set out aims for the national GCSE average grade in English language and maths to increase from 4.5 in 2019 to 5<sup>4</sup>.

2023 national GCSE results showed that grades in English at both 7 and above and 4 and above have improved since 2022 and are now closer to pre-pandemic levels (2020). However, maths grades have fallen further since 2022, at both grade 4 and grade 7<sup>5</sup>.

To achieve these aims, the Government committed to creating:

- A fully trust-led system by 2030, where all schools should be, or working towards being, in a multi-academy trust (an aim which has since been retracted).
- A new arms-length curriculum body.
- New solutions for attendance and behaviour<sup>2</sup>.

It was also noted, however, that to achieve these aims, more was needed in terms of educators' pay and incentives to retain and attract teachers.

So, where are we now, what challenges do students and educators face, and how can we solve them?

# The reality of KS3 today

In primary schools, teachers have dedicated curriculum time to teach children how to read. However, when a child reaches secondary school, the responsibility often lies with the English department.

Although some cross-curricular efforts held promise, many secondary school teachers have historically not seen themselves as literacy experts. As such, the challenge of literacy today is greater than ever<sup>6</sup>.

## What are the shared challenges currently facing KS3 educators?

Early in 2023, Reading Solutions UK collected over 100 survey responses from educators responsible for delivering the KS3 English curriculum across the UK.

This included Classroom Teachers, Key Stage Coordinators, Heads of Literacy, and Senior Leaders (Assistant Principals/Headteachers/Heads of Departments, etc.) specifically focusing on transition, skill gaps, challenges, priorities, and reading strategies.

In addition, Senior Education Leaders were asked for their perspectives on key themes arising from the survey.



### Lizzie Rhodes

Trust Leader, Lizzie Rhodes from Oasis Community Learning, analysed and evaluated the survey results, providing parallels to the Oasis MAT. The trust consists of 52 academies across five regions in the UK. Of their 33,000 students, 47% are disadvantaged, 43% are from ethnic minorities, 33% are EAL, and 14% are SEN.



### Gaurav Dubay

Evidence Lead in Education (ELE) with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Director of English at Windsor Academy Trust (at the time of this white paper's research, Gaurav was Head of English at King Edward IV Academy Trust) contributed from the perspective of a multi-cultural, selective school, which serves a population with 44% EAL and a higher-than-average pupil premium.

# The disadvantage gap

The Wasted Years report highlighted that some leaders did not utilise the pupil premium effectively in KS3 to ensure that gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers continued to close on the transition to secondary school<sup>7</sup>.

This is echoed throughout Government research, which showed that pre-pandemic, disadvantaged students were less likely to achieve GCSE grades 4 or above in English and maths (45% versus 72% of all other students) in KS4<sup>8</sup>. Students with specialist needs were less likely to meet or to achieve GCSE grades 4 or above in English and maths (27% versus 71%) in KS4<sup>8</sup>.

Post-pandemic, in 2022, the KS4 disadvantage gap index was at its highest level since 2011/12, rising from 3.7 in 2019 to 3.84 in 2022<sup>9</sup>.

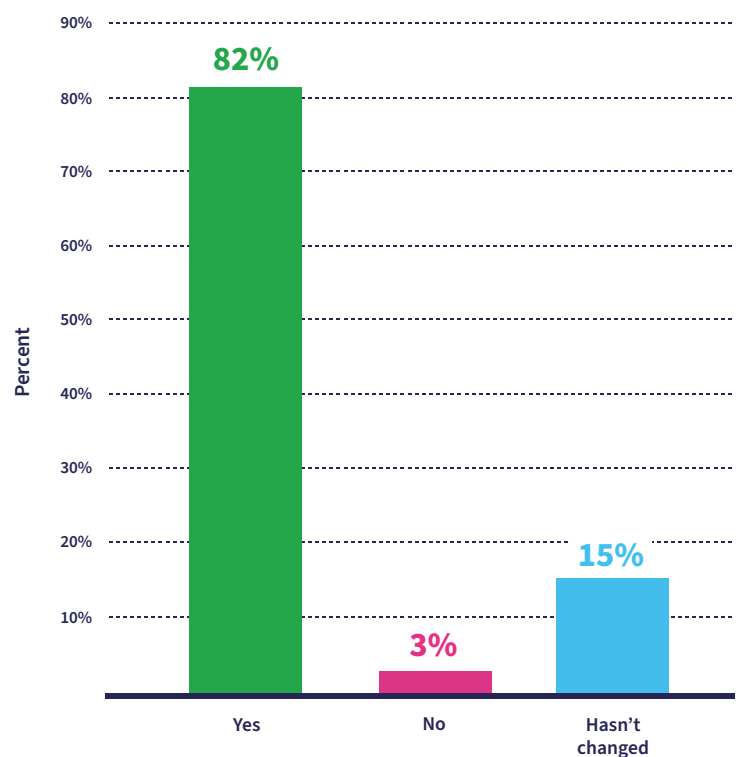
## Reading Solutions UK (RSUK) survey results:

82% of survey respondents said the disadvantage gap had widened in their schools due to COVID-19.

This is unsurprising given the disparity in the quality of homeschooling students received during the pandemic. Respondents cited that reading at home was encouraged for some students, in which case their levels didn't fluctuate too dramatically. Others, particularly those classified as disadvantaged, struggled to access online learning and resources and were not actively encouraged to participate in educational activities at home.

Additionally, access to technology during the pandemic widened the 'Digital Divide'. Data showed that around 1.7 million UK households were offline, and one in five homeschooled children did not have access to an appropriate device in 2021<sup>10</sup>.

For teachers, the challenge is to reengage disconnected and reluctant students who struggle with independence.



Q: Has the reading gap for disadvantaged students in your school widened because of Covid?

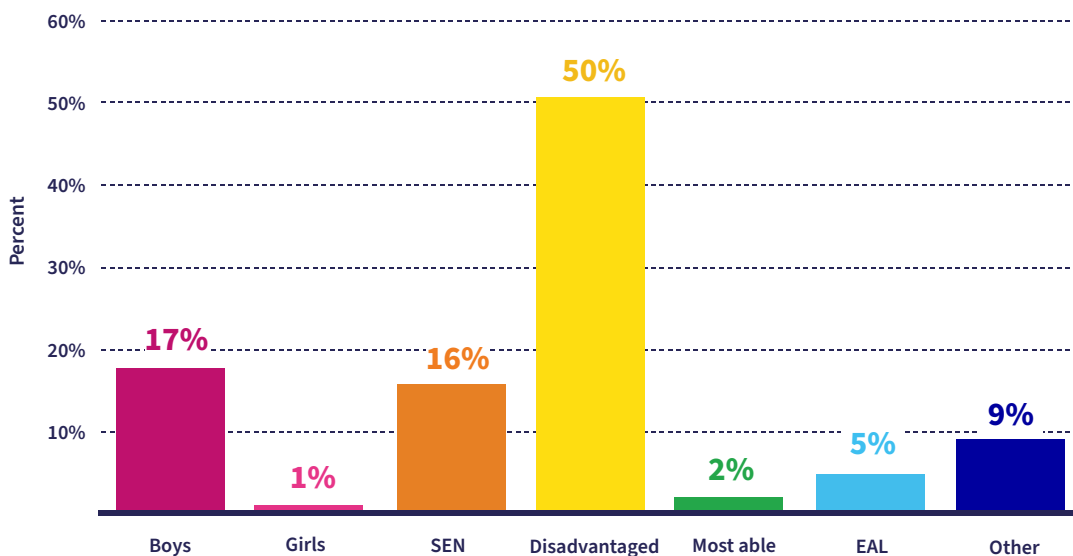
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*A lack of engagement with online learning during lockdown has created a culture of apathy amongst students allowed to do nothing at home. We must reignite their interest.*

**- KS3/4 Head of English/Literacy Lead, Tyne and Wear (survey respondent)**



## Catch-up concerns



Q: Which cohort is causing the most concern regarding catching up with reading?

50% of teachers were concerned about their disadvantaged cohort being able to catch up with reading.

Boys (17%) and SEN students (16%) were also high priorities. These priorities are not new but have been exasperated due to the pandemic.

In their Opportunity for All white paper, the Government said they would ‘pay particular attention to supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable groups who have often suffered most in recent years [due to the pandemic]<sup>2</sup>. To improve attainment for this particular cohort, the Government recommended schools use their Pupil Premium funding to fund evidence-based, targeted activities<sup>2</sup>.

Comments from survey respondents also related to broader issues such as generational poverty.

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*We are very aware that education is the root out of poverty, but when dealing with years of low attainment/low esteem within families, it can be difficult to engage families, a hungry child cannot focus in class. Deprivation is a huge barrier to learning.*

- Head of English/Literacy Lead, Lancashire (survey respondent)

For Head of English Gaurav Dubay, English as an Additional Language students are the cohort causing the most concern. He said:

*“We do very well with our disadvantaged students as a department, but it’s partly because we offer early interventions for the students within the first three or four weeks of starting. Interventions start in class first through differentiation. We want students to leave the class with no gaps whatsoever. So, we’re very deliberate in our planning.”*

# Gender

In 2023, overall GCSE outcomes were higher for girls than boys. 71.7% of female and 64.9% of male students in the United Kingdom achieved a grade 4 or higher at GCSE level<sup>11</sup>. Historically, girls academically outperform boys at GCSE level.

A YouGov survey found that there has been a rise in secondary teachers reporting that boys have become more reluctant in recent years. The same study found that one in three secondary school teachers believes that boys view being asked to read as a “punishment”<sup>12</sup>. This echoes some of the sentiments of our survey respondents.

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*Boys have consistently underperformed - this is an area of national concern and is also reflected in our school. This problem emerges in our feeder schools, and the gap continues to grow throughout KS3 and KS4.*

**– KS3 Head of Department, Dorset (survey respondent)**

## Closing the gap

Nadhim Zahawi (the fifth Secretary of State for Education in eight years) pledged in 2022 to “continue to address the educational and emotional impact of the pandemic, particularly for more disadvantaged and vulnerable children”

Announcing the “levelling up mission”, his aspiration was for 90% of students to meet the expected standard of reading, writing and maths by the end of KS2 by 2030<sup>2</sup>.

For secondary students, the Government aims to increase the national GCSE average grade in both English language and maths from 4.5 in 2019 to 5 by 2030<sup>4</sup>. Ofqual sought to return, in 2023, to GCSE and A level results that would align with those from pre-pandemic years<sup>2</sup> (which they did).

By raising the aspirations of KS2 children, it is hoped this will positively impact GCSE outcomes. A correlation between low attainment at KS2 and low attainment at KS4 was evident in the 2019 national outcomes. Of those students who did not meet the expected standard in KS2, just 21% achieved a grade 4 or above in English language, and 14% in maths at KS4 in 2019<sup>2</sup>.

Head of English Gaurav Dubay describes how using an online reading development programme has supported closing the gap for his students:

*“For us, the thing that’s been most helpful in identifying reading gaps is an adaptive programme called Reading Plus because it provides in real-time, specific reading skills that we need to work on. This also works at a cohort level. The classroom interventions are focused and have been particularly effective.”*

Trust Leader Lizzie Rhodes commented:

*“Children identified as needing additional support with decoding will use a phonics programme, such as Ruth Miskin’s Fresh Start or Corrective Reading.*

*“For students who no longer need phonics, we have comprehension programmes. We use Reading Plus as one of those, and that’s great as it allows us to target a wide range of children because it is responsive to their needs and meets them where they are. So, we’re able to provide lots of targeted support.”*

# Accessing the KS4 curriculum

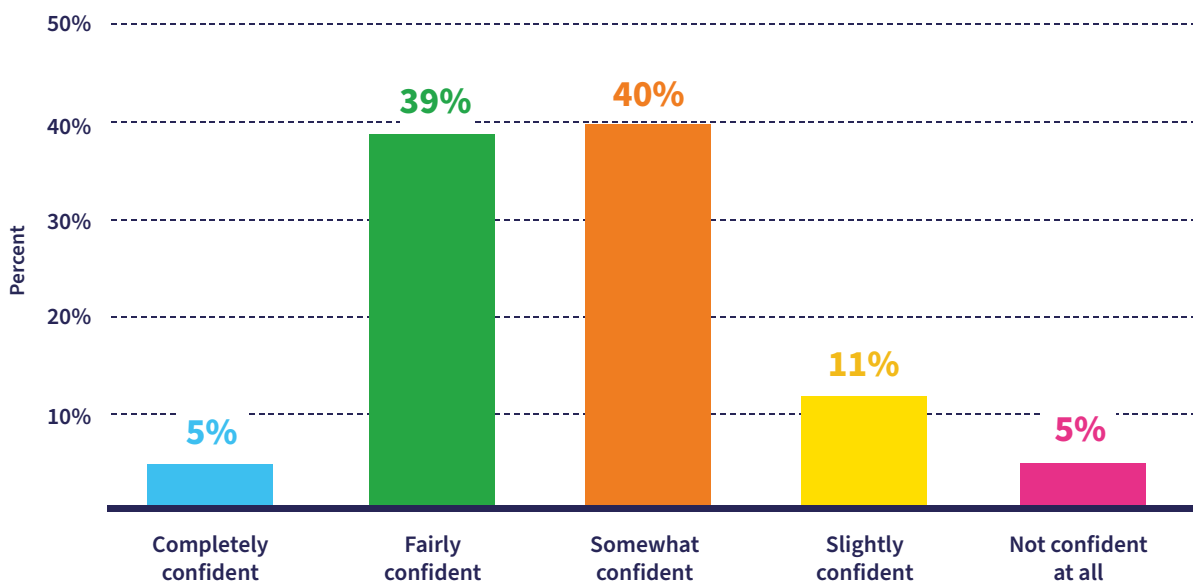
In *The Wasted Years* report, inspectors found that systems and procedures to assess and monitor students' progress were not as well developed or robust in KS3 as they were in Key Stages 4 and 5.

Interventions often focused on students in Years 10 and 11 who were not progressing enough. These older students were prioritised more than those in the lower years<sup>7</sup>.

The Government recommended that secondary school leaders ensure that the curriculum offered at KS3 is broad and balanced and that teaching is of high quality and prepares students for more challenging subsequent study at KS4 and KS5<sup>7</sup>.

Post-pandemic, in 2022, the Government pledged to deliver a new arms-length curriculum body that works with teachers nationwide to co-create free, optional, adaptable digital curriculum resources to deliver a rigorous, high-quality curriculum. The aim was for teachers to utilise readily made resources to save time planning and reduce their workload so that they can spend more time teaching.

To achieve this, the curriculum body will work closely with the Education Endowment Foundation and Ofsted to ensure the best available evidence informs its work and aligns with best practices<sup>2</sup>.



Q: How confident are you that your KS3 students will be able to access the KS4 curriculum?

In our RSUK survey, a “*challenging KS3 curriculum*” was cited several times in response to preparing students for KS4. Several respondents commented that progress stagnated in Y9 and above as students didn’t have an appropriate reading age in Year 9, and no reading-age testing was conducted at KS4.

“

*Some of the curriculum is very challenging, and attainment in poetry and 19th-Century literature has been particularly affected.*

– **KS3 Head of Department, Dorset (survey respondent)**

Only 5% of respondents were completely confident that their KS3 students could fully access the KS4 curriculum.

There were concerns that SEN, boys, and EAL students would struggle to access it. For reading, students faced various challenges, including (in order of priority) text types, vocabulary knowledge, and inference and deduction.

Students face academic challenges as they transition from primary to secondary. They have to adjust to a range of teachers and new text types, which are often more complex and denser than those they’ve accessed in primary school. Such challenges can create a ‘*literacy gap*’, meaning that many students making the transition struggle to access the secondary school curriculum<sup>13</sup>.

“*Unable to access academic texts*” was a statement reiterated by several RSUK survey respondents.

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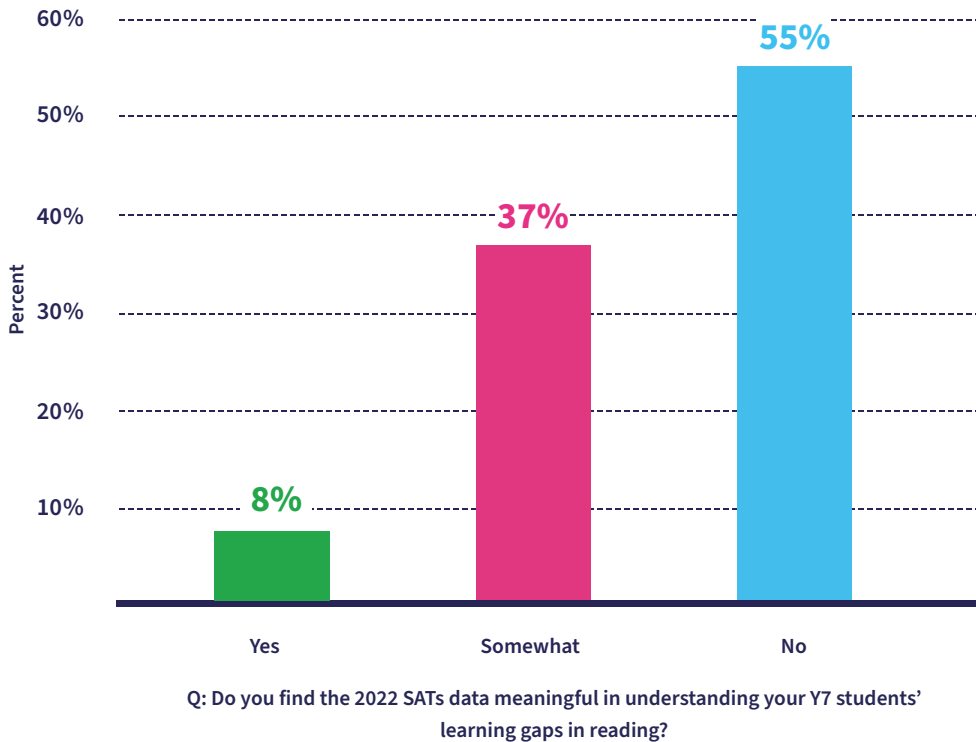
*Some KS3 pupils will be able to access the curriculum without issues; however, many students will struggle to access the KS4 curriculum in history. The text is always of higher reading skill in exams than most students in the year group have.*

- **Head of Year, Nottingham (survey respondent)**

## KS3 utilisation of the KS2 SATs data

RSUK research showed only 8% of those surveyed believe the KS2 SATs data is meaningful.

Some senior leaders surveyed as part of The Wasted Years report said SATs results were unreliable. 91% of respondents also stated they administer their own baseline testing when students enter the school<sup>7</sup>.



There was a certain amount of distrust from respondents in our RSUK survey regarding the level or expected standard achieved by Year 7 on their exit from Year 6. They cited the 2022 SATs results as “unreliable” due to the pandemic’s learning loss, especially given that students were tested with a paper intended for 2020 that made no concession for learning loss.

A better explanation for the uncertainty over the efficacy of the KS2 Reading SATs data, is that secondary schools are merely provided with a score to indicate whether the child was at, below, or above the expected standard. They are not supplied with the skill-gap knowledge that question-level analysis can provide - information that would allow them to plan and differentiate accordingly.

Trust Leader Lizzie Rhodes reiterated that many secondary schools do their own testing. She said:

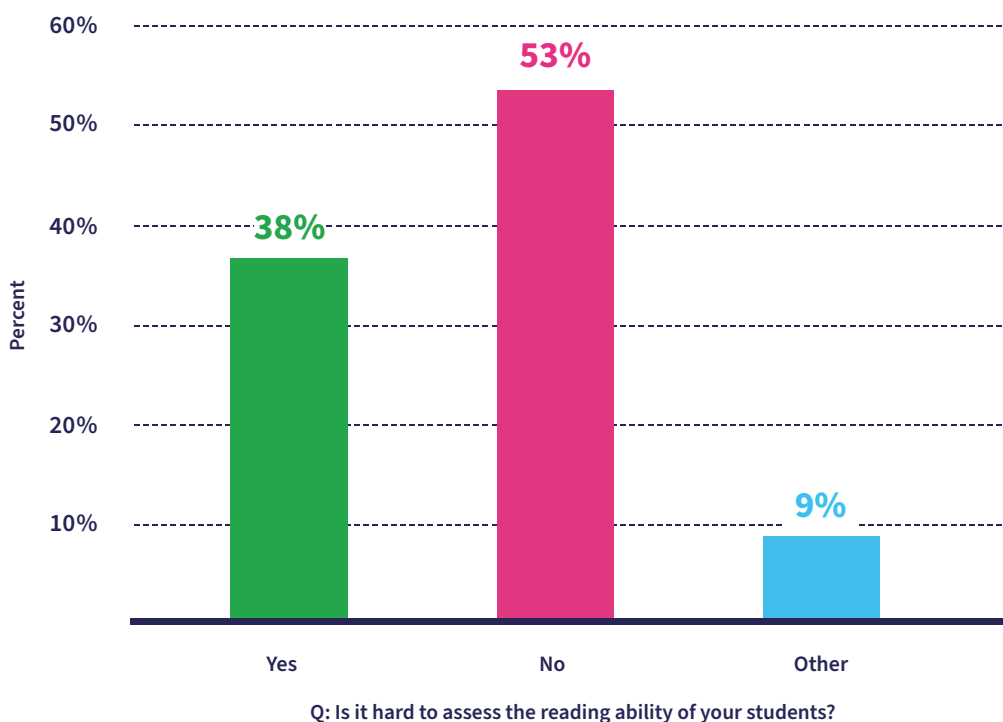
*“We prioritise additional reading assessments as part of our transition arrangements so that we know more about our students’ reading ability and can target interventions for those needing them. We couldn’t do that off the back of SATs alone.”*

## Assessing KS3 students

Using robust assessments to monitor students' progress is not a new phenomenon. The Government recommended it in 2015 (The Wasted Years report) and again in their 2022 white paper.

They expect schools to 'use robust, reliable assessment to identify children who need extra help and offer targeted, evidence-based support to these children'<sup>2</sup>.

The Government also stated that 'all schools should monitor students' progress in English and maths using robust assessment'<sup>2</sup>; however, almost 40% of our RSUK survey respondents reported that assessing reading was more difficult than ever.



All respondents said their secondary schools pay for additional assessments through G.L. or CAT, which are taken directly after the SATs or several months later. This is the case for Oasis Community Learning, as Lizzie Rhodes discussed:

*"We do reading age assessments twice a year in KS3 in September and July to get a clear picture of students' needs. We also do a mid-year assessment for reading for targeted intervention groups."*

## Collaboration with feeder schools

As part of The Wasted Years report, inspectors found that *‘too many secondary schools did not work effectively with partner primary schools to understand students’ prior learning and ensure that they built on this during KS3’*<sup>7</sup>.

The report did not offer solutions, and it could be argued that effective collaboration depends on budget, time, and people, resources which are limited in some schools.

Handsworth Grammar School in Birmingham has 113 feeder schools, too many to collaborate with effectively. Instead, Gaurav Dubay said:

*“We deliberately pinpoint several schools to get an idea of what is happening in primary schools, not necessarily in terms of data but ideas related to the curriculum and current trends.”*

A lack of Government and Ofsted guidance about structures regarding transitions between primary and secondary was a cause of concern for Lizzie Rhodes. She explained:

*“It varies not only on a secondary-by-secondary level but also on individual relationships. Suppose you’re a secondary school with 30 feeder schools. In that case, you might get great information from five schools, average information from 10 schools and nothing from the other 15 because each school must set up mechanisms for sharing that information.”*

The Government set out in their 2022 white paper for *‘all schools to be in, or joining, a strong trust by 2030’*; however, this legislation has since been amended as in February 2023, Schools Minister Nick Gibb said that *“over time”, the government “would like all schools to be in a strong multi-academy trust, because we see the positive impact it can have on children’s lives”*<sup>14</sup>.

Schools will no longer be forced to join a trust. The Government’s aim instead, as issued by Nick Gibb, is to *“support the growth of strong multi-academy trusts through the regulation and commissioning review”*<sup>14</sup>. The idea is for all children to benefit from being taught in a family of schools. Schools which will provide a high-quality and inclusive education within the resilient structure of a strong trust, sharing expertise, resources and support to help teachers and leaders deliver better outcomes for children.

# Educators' knowledge of silent reading fluency in KS3

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), in the context of literacy, describe reading fluency as “reading with accuracy (reading words correctly), automaticity (reading words at an appropriate speed without great effort) and prosody (appropriate stress and intonation)”<sup>15</sup>.

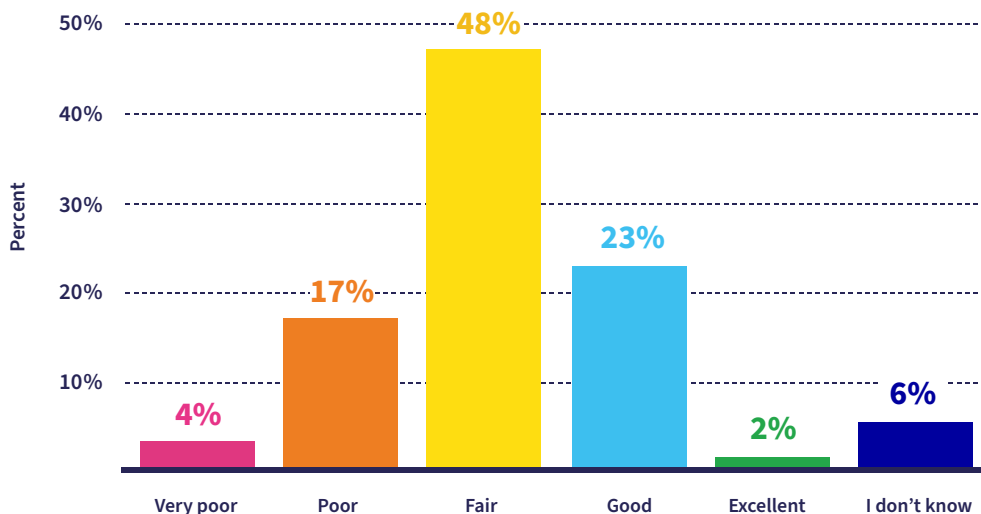
Fluent reading can occur orally or silently. Students build foundational skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics skills in oral reading. During this time, they learn to decode words, combine sentences, and make it through their first books<sup>16</sup>.

Oral reading fluency measures have been widely used for years to monitor students' reading development, as it is easy for teachers to track their students' speed, accuracy, and expression as they read aloud. It is immediately apparent when a student doesn't read a word or sentence correctly, and a teacher can intervene appropriately and quickly.

Effective silent reading fluency on the otherhand, is relatively unexplored. It is difficult for teachers to monitor and intervene. It is an unseen and unheard skill that is taught the least yet tested the most. It is necessary to become a proficient reader. Research indicates that it has the unique value of students reading up to 30% more than they would if they read aloud<sup>17</sup>, so perhaps it is an area that needs more curriculum focus.

Evidence suggests that to develop students' reading fluency, systematic instruction in guided or scaffolded silent reading would be beneficial and important for students to receive in addition to oral reading<sup>18</sup> and reading comprehension<sup>19</sup>.

When fluent readers read silently they recognise words automatically, group words quickly, and gain meaning from text. Students must continually master all of these skills while engaged with reading to become proficient silent readers.



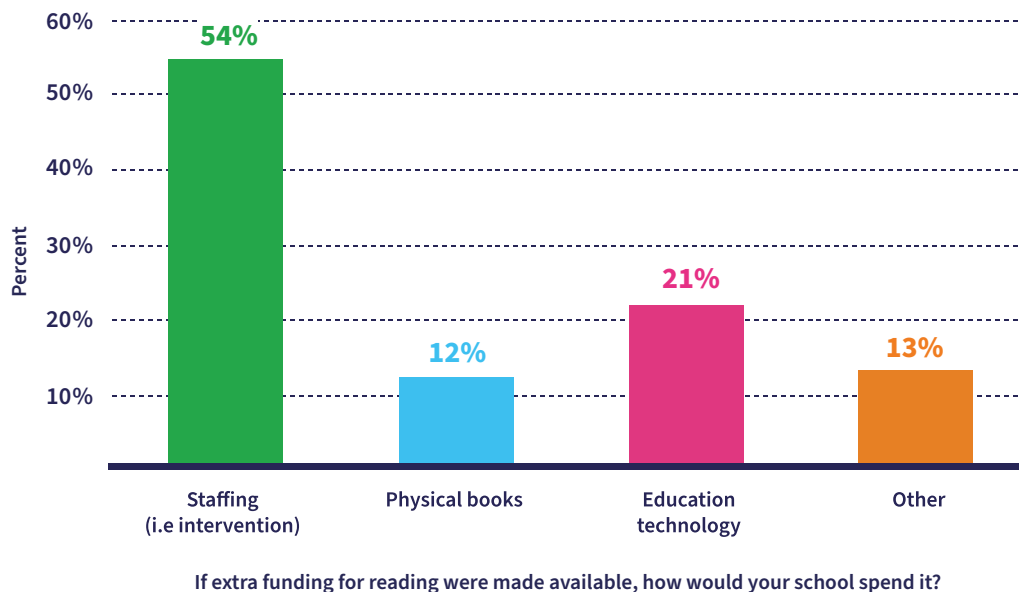
Q: How would you rate the understanding of silent reading fluency in your school?

21% of secondary schools surveyed said that their staff do not understand the pedagogy of silent reading fluency.

This is understandable, as it is not a requirement of teacher training for KS3-KS4; however, the inherited deficits of learning loss would suggest that this should now be a priority.



## Resources required



54% of those surveyed said that if they were to receive additional funding, they would use it for staffing.

However, they highlighted the difficulties in recruiting or attracting the best applicants. Once intervention staffing is in place, the time constraints of the curriculum make it extremely difficult to employ them effectively.

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*Our biggest need is more staff hours to work with small groups of students who are less able to focus in our existing interventions and need smaller group support.*

- KS3/4 Head of English/Literacy Lead, Dorset (survey respondent)

The Government recognised that the pandemic had created challenges for teachers. In response, their 2022 white paper stated they were ‘determined to make teaching an attractive, high-status profession where every teacher receives world-class training’<sup>2</sup>. They would achieve this by implementing the following:

- 500,000 teacher training and development opportunities by 2024.
- Specialist training to drive better literacy.
- £30,000 starting salaries to attract and retain the very best teachers<sup>2</sup>.

The Government hope that by 2030, every child will be taught by an excellent teacher trained in the best-evidenced approaches. Evidence shows that the quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for children<sup>20</sup>, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Being taught by a high-quality teacher can add almost half a GCSE grade per subject to a given student's results<sup>21</sup>.

### 21% of educators would invest in additional funding in EdTech.

Access to a “*hybrid of home and school learning*”, and “*engaging and original texts*” was seen as essential in the modern age. It was also suggested that for many students, home-learning made them over-reliant on parents/carers, whilst EdTech encouraged greater independence.

### 12% of educators would invest in more physical books.

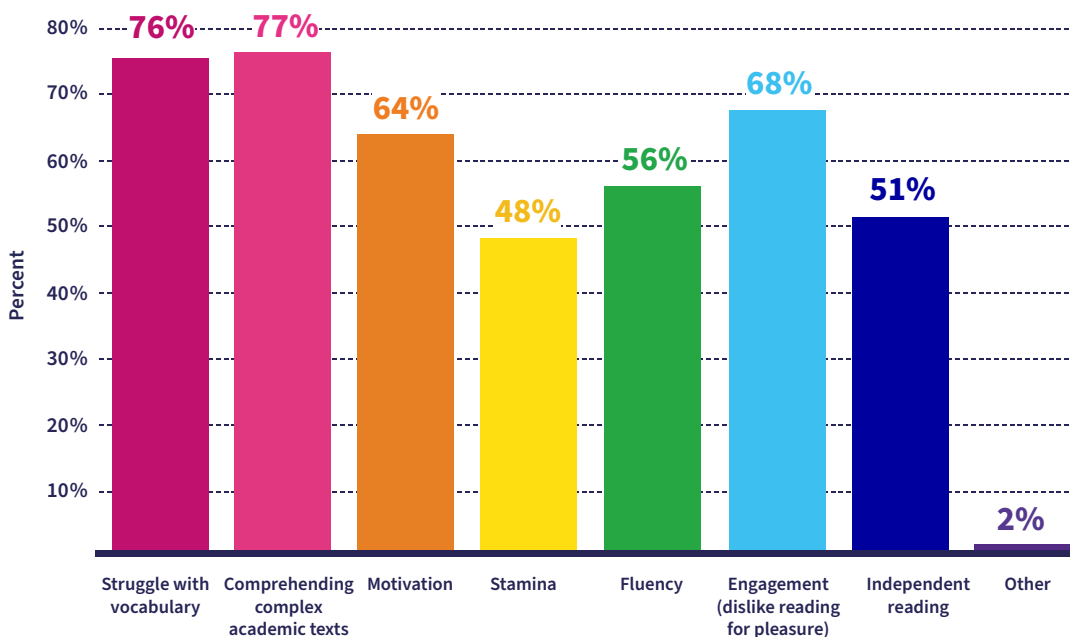
The cost of physical books was a barrier for many respondents. Some cited the price and quantity needed for all students was too great. An emphasis on reading in one academy in Lancashire has meant they get through books much more quickly than in the past, but they have no means of buying or accessing new books. Others noted the need for “*new and exciting texts*” to encourage reading for pleasure.

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*We do not have a library and need a quiet area where students can feel comfortable to read. We need money for books and staffing to support intervention, and we need support with parents and carers to engage them in reading and to understand the benefits of reading.*

- KS3 Assistant Head, Yorkshire (survey respondent).

## Main challenges for students



Q: Regarding reading, what are the main challenges for students?

Educators believe their students' top reading challenges are:

1. Comprehending complex academic texts.
2. Vocabulary knowledge.
3. A lack of engagement (dislike reading for pleasure).
4. Motivation.
5. Fluency.

### Accessing academic texts

These issues are intrinsically linked. Academic reading is challenging because it requires students to engage with complex texts actively. Effective readers continually draw upon their prior knowledge of the world and language and their awareness of subject-specific vocabulary to develop their understanding<sup>22</sup>. The more they know, the less their attention struggles with processing new information or vocabulary<sup>23</sup>.

Struggling readers face a different teacher in each subject and are expected to access texts with subject-specific language written in various structures. If they lack academic vocabulary knowledge and fluency, they will struggle to comprehend and finish the text, resulting in disengagement across all subjects.

Reading may not be considered a priority for subject-specialism teachers (of which some trusts have hundreds), however, if struggling students aren't identified, they will be unlikely to access the whole curriculum.

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*Some teachers are very good at identifying learning gaps, but we have 100+ teachers with various specialisms. For some, reading isn't even on the radar, so they don't take steps to address it in lessons.*

**- KS3-5 Head of English/  
Literacy Lead, Yorkshire  
(survey respondent)**

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*Students in Year 9 particularly seem to have a notable vocabulary deficit compared with their peers and struggle to comprehend the syntax of more complex texts, as well as the words used.*

- KS3/4 Teacher, Hampshire (survey respondent)

## Text types

Text types and choices, particularly at KS4, were an issue worth noting. New KS3 texts have been added to the curriculum, which enthuses students. However, when students reach KS4, one survey respondent commented that the *“traditional GCSE texts are deployed and deemed irrelevant to today’s students and disrupted students’ willingness to read and engage”*.

The 2023 updated Department for Education Reading Framework states that *‘at KS3, students should: develop an appreciation and love of reading and read increasingly challenging material independently through... choosing and reading books independently for challenge, interest, and enjoyment’*<sup>24</sup>.

In reality, our RSUK survey data highlighted a lack of engagement in reading as a top concern. The pandemic has also significantly impacted students willingness to engage and their enjoyment of reading. This is a national sentiment as The National Literacy Trust found in 2023 that only 2 in 5 (43.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoyed reading in their free time - the lowest level reported since 2005<sup>25</sup>.

## Reading for pleasure

For Head of English Gaurav Dubay, reading for pleasure is a priority as he understands its impact on academic success. He shared:

*“Our students are very scientifically minded. Many come from backgrounds that value science and maths but don’t value English. And so, for us, we have to build that culture from day zero. So, we spend a lot of time developing reading for pleasure.”*

Senior Leader Lizzie Rhodes noted that social-emotional learning alongside missed teaching has significantly impacted students’ desire to engage with reading. She told us:

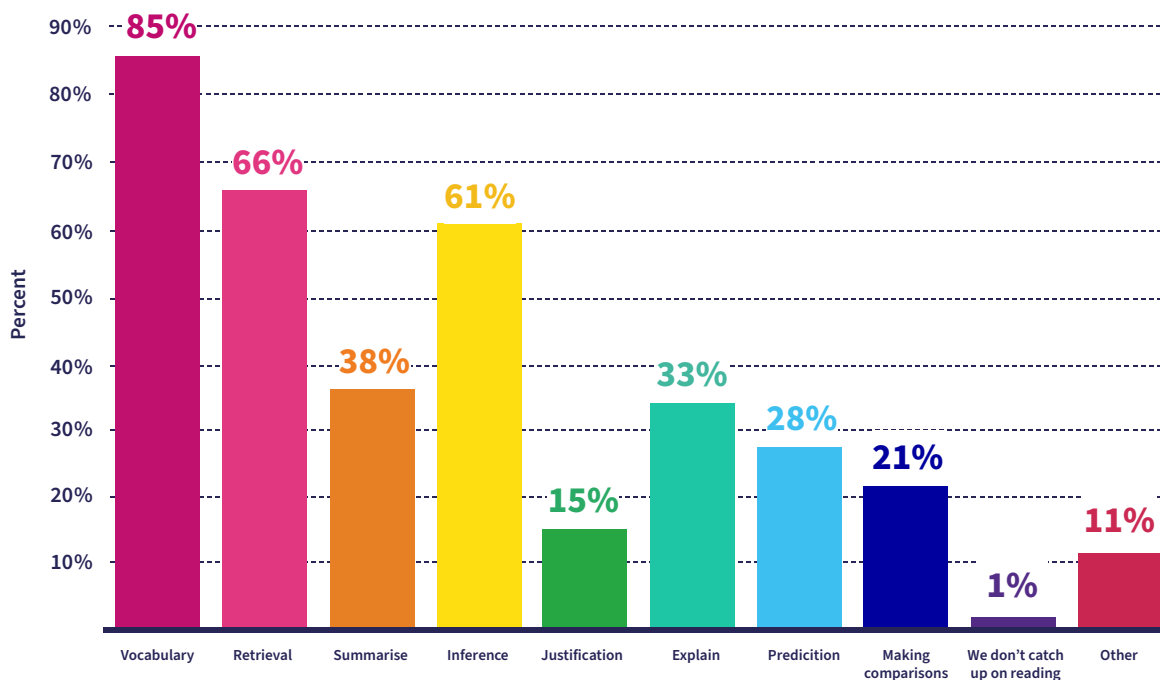
*“We’ve got a lot of children whose reading is really behind where it needs to be - children who feel disengaged from education, who find it so difficult that they don’t even know how to start to reengage.”*

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*An incredible amount of students have no interest in reading independently, and we are finding this much harder to promote with students than we have done previously.*

- KS3/4 Head of English/Literacy Lead, Greater London (survey respondent)

## Reading priorities in KS3



Q: Which reading skills are you currently focusing on?

Given the main reading challenges of students, it's no surprise that the top three reading skills KS3 leaders prioritised were:

1. Vocabulary.
2. Retrieval.
3. Inference.

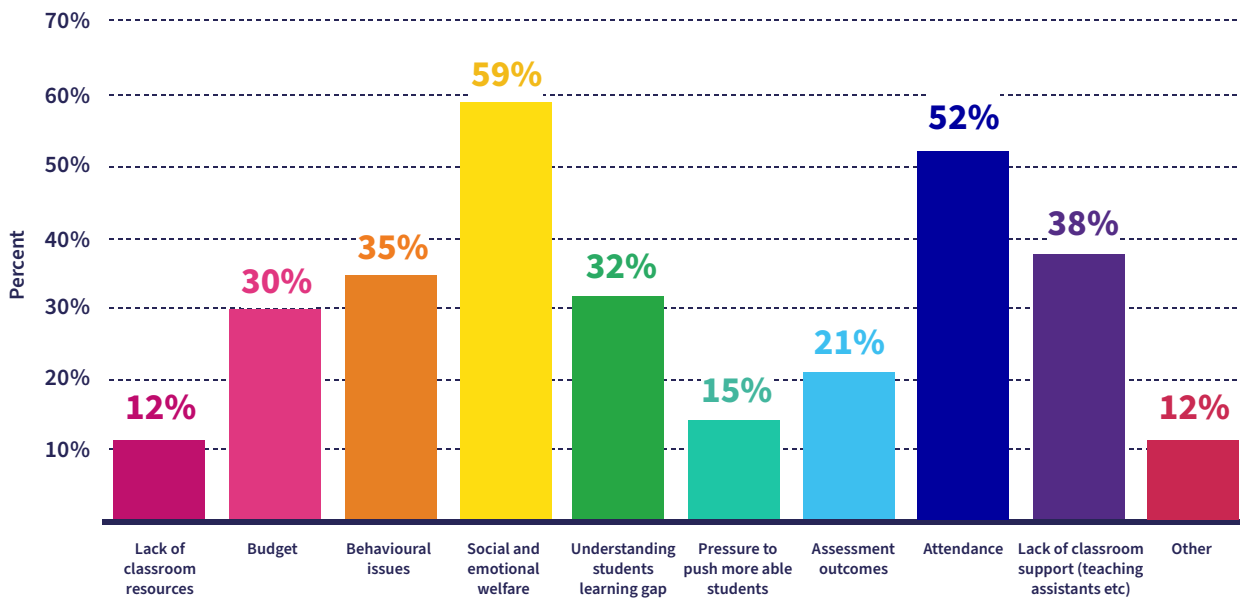
Respondents also cited fluency and comprehension as concerns. Many respondents were confident in their curriculum to teach students the reading skills required for KS3. One academy in Kent has a weekly standalone lesson for all Y7, focusing solely on comprehension. Some respondents said that they didn't believe their strategy was right for their KS3 students and that although these skills are all part of the curriculum, the inability to implement changes based on assessment data due to time constraints had them questioning if the approach was actually making an impact.

“

*We aim to embed the skills students need in KS4 as soon as they join us in Year 7. All lessons in KS3 and KS4 have some time allocated to apply the skills and build on previous learning.*

- Head of English/Literacy Lead, Tyne and Wear (survey respondent)

# Main challenges for teachers



Q: In terms of teaching, what are your main challenges?

Beyond the academic, the greatest challenges teachers face were:

1. Social and emotional welfare.
2. Attendance.
3. A lack of classroom support.

## Social-emotional welfare

Children and young people's lives have been fundamentally changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research from the Centre for Mental Health shows that 1.5 million children and young people under 18 will need new or additional mental health support due to the coronavirus pandemic in England<sup>26</sup>.

Although some children and young people generally coped well during the pandemic, the loss of education, disruptions to routine, and lack of activities led to some children developing physical and mental health problems. Gaurav Dubay said:

*"Our Year 8 cohort seems particularly disadvantaged in resilience since the pandemic. Mental health in a school like ours has been a huge issue since the pandemic; it has increased in significance but not necessarily visibility. That's part of why we're working so hard on reading for pleasure because it is also an outlet."*

*"In terms of academically, we're very good with the pedagogy and class strategies. It's now how we can use the interventions to support the broader pastoral issues at the root of many academic problems."*

Ofsted reported that the pandemic had disproportionately affected children and young people with SEND. In particular, the negative experiences of children and families, including missed and narrowed education, the absence of essential services such as physiotherapy or speech and language support, and long waiting times for assessment and treatment, has had a detrimental impact on the already complex support system for children and young people with SEN<sup>27</sup>.

Trust Leader Lizzie Rhodes explained:

*“Engagement and attendance are significant challenges for us, and we are also focusing more on SEND and children with additional needs. Many more children have communication and social-emotional needs following the pandemic, which causes barriers to learning.*

*“Teachers need to have a whole level of skill that they didn’t previously require around meeting the needs of children who may be highly distressed a lot of the time, who may be pre-verbal, struggle to communicate, and who might need physical support.*

*“I think the biggest challenge at the moment is ensuring that you’ve got an excellent curriculum that continues to drive forward the outcomes whilst not leaving children with additional needs behind.”*

## Attendance

Attendance has been a key challenge since COVID-19 for many of our survey respondents.

Our research revealed that attendance was worst in Year 9, perhaps due to this being a year group who didn’t sit SATs and who had their first two years of transition to secondary education most disrupted.

Disadvantaged students witnessed the highest drop in attendance, whilst Year 8 were identified as the KS3 cohort requiring the most support for social and emotional wellbeing. The challenge is for teachers to rebuild students’ self-efficacy to become independent learners. Most respondents revealed they are turning to external agencies for academic, social, and emotional interventions.

Students with social, emotional, or mental health needs face greater barriers to attendance than others<sup>27</sup>. In response, the DfE published attendance guidance titled ‘Working together to improve school attendance’. They aim to ensure all students receive the support they need to remove these barriers, including those with mental health and wellbeing-related challenges<sup>29</sup>.

## Behaviour

Many respondents to our survey had grave concerns about behavioural issues, particularly in the lower school.

The main reasons for the decline in behaviour since pre-COVID were:

- “A lack of staffing”.
- “New teacher’s inability to control the class”.
- “Students’ lack of social awareness”.
- “Complacent and reluctant students”.

“

*Although more experienced staff can manage, we find behaviour very challenging for new teachers. Students in the lower school are far worse behaved and less socially aware than previous cohorts.*

- Head of English/Literacy Lead, Greater London (survey respondent)

Students with poor attendance and behaviour will not reach their full potential, no matter how great the curriculum. Persistent absence impacts attainment and children’s safety. Students with no absence at KS4 are almost twice as likely to achieve five or more GCSEs than children who missed 10-15% of lessons<sup>30</sup>. Disruptive behaviour is the most common reason for suspensions and permanent exclusion<sup>31</sup>.

In their fourth annual State of the Nation report, which focuses on trends in mental health and wellbeing in the academic year 2021/22, the Government stated they are supporting schools and colleges to promote and support the mental health of children and young people by:

- Providing a grant for schools to train a mental health lead.
- Developing an online hub hosting a wide range of practical and evidence-informed resources.
- Increasing the number of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs).
- Their Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum strongly focuses on mental health and wellbeing.
- Sharing mental health resources for children and young people, parents, carers, and school and college staff to get the needed advice and help<sup>28</sup>.



# Reading approaches in KS3

Reading strategies implemented by KS3/4 educators across the UK included:

- Whole staff continuing professional development (CPD) on current literacy programme.
- Utilising EEF's reading resources.
- Phonics for EAL new arrivals.
- E-Books.
- A library refurbishment including a new range of accessible and engaging books.
- After-school reading clubs.
- Paired reading - volunteers in Y10 work with small groups of Y7 and Y8 students with reading once per week.
- Reciprocal reading library lessons which focus on a different text to the class book.
- Tutor time reading scheme - every child reads four books a year in a guided reading session.
- Small group interventions.
- Support staff book club.
- Online resources.
- Reading for pleasure time in tutor time.
- EAL intervention support.
- One-to-one reading provisions for students with the lowest reading ages.
- Specialist provision for those reading over two years behind (30 students per year).
- Intervention groups with English teachers.
- Use of online reading programmes.

# Fluency in KS3

## How is understanding reading fluency instrumental for educational growth?

The Durrington Research School (in December 2021) said: *'Reading fluency seems to have become a buzzword of late among school leaders of literacy, especially in secondary schools...'* and that a multi-faceted approach to teaching reading is required<sup>32</sup>.

Fluency is complex and relies upon effective left to right scanning automatic word recognition and understanding of vocabulary, alongside decoding unfamiliar words based on social and cultural contextualisation. A fluent reader can recognise words automatically, group words quickly and gain meaning from a text. Reading fluency has the greatest impact on comprehension as fluent readers can focus their attention on what the text means; as such, they are more likely to enjoy reading.

Fluency with narrative texts in primary school does not guarantee that students will be fluent readers of secondary school texts<sup>33</sup>. The reading needs of older readers (including those in upper primary) differ from those of younger students.

Reading fluency is a significant variable in secondary students' reading and overall academic development<sup>34</sup>. Students need to read and comprehend more informational texts and less narrative fiction. They are also faced with the increasing language demands of the secondary curriculum. An understanding of Tier 3 vocabulary is required<sup>35</sup>. These are low-frequency words central to understanding concepts within various academic subjects, such as 'osmosis' in science.

Fluency is not just a concern for students with an identified learning gap. 70% of non-proficient readers are not yet fluent, whilst 30% of proficient readers are also not<sup>36</sup>. Fluency requires the ability to read with accuracy and at an appropriate speed – the process should be effortless and literally flow.

Students with poor reading fluency may get left further behind without additional help to address the gaps in their reading skills. They are unlikely to exhibit easy-to-spot signs, widening the gap year on year<sup>33</sup> and significantly impacting their academic success.

# Improving fluency with an online reading programme

## Reading Plus

For educators concerned about their students' fluency, vocabulary knowledge, and ability to comprehend complex texts, Reading Plus is an adaptive online reading development programme which accelerates reading progress, closes the gap, and encourages reluctant readers.

The core components of Reading Plus teach children the skills they need to read with comprehension as they are exposed to word reading skills (decoding, full word recognition, fluency) and language comprehension (inferencing, comprehension monitoring, text structure, and vocabulary) in line with the 'Reading Comprehension House'<sup>36</sup>. It supports the English curriculum for students to:

- Read easily, fluently, and with a good understanding.
- Develop the habit of reading widely and often for pleasure and information.
- Acquire a wide vocabulary.
- Conventions for reading (inference).
- Appreciate our rich and varied literary heritage.

## Sustainable implementation

The EEF's Secondary Framework suggests that once an approach has been identified and matched to students' literacy needs, it is important to take the time to train the staff involved, monitor the delivery of the approach, and consider how to sustain it over time<sup>38</sup>.

Reading Solutions UK offers a customer support service to all Reading Plus partner schools in addition to monitoring usage and licence utilisation to ensure schools maximise their partnership with us.

The customer support team:

- Offer free training and online support.
- Provides administrative support and uploads all student data to ensure a seamless implementation.
- Performs monthly support checks to ensure our customers accounts run smoothly.
- Identifies students in need of additional support and offers guidance.
- Runs termly competitions and provides ideas to encourage usage and increase motivation.
- Offer free progress and skills gap reports.

# Efficacy study in partnership with Derby Research School and Spencer Academies Trust

For the academic year 2021/22, Reading Solutions UK partnered with Derby Research School and Spencer Academies Trust in a Reading Plus efficacy study.

The aim was to show that students who used Reading Plus achieved more significant gains in their reading proficiency than students who did not use the programme. We also wanted to measure the impact on disadvantaged students.

The study involved 470 Year 6 students from six schools. Past SATs reading papers were used to assess students in September 2021 and December 2021, and the official SATs paper in May 2022. This allowed the opportunity to compare data from the study against national data.

## Summary of findings

- On average, students who used Reading Plus made more significant progress in their reading ability than non-users.
- Control school students scored higher on average in their first test than students using Reading Plus. However, after one term of usage, Reading Plus students closed this reading gap achieving the same scores as control school students.

## Demographic findings

- Disadvantaged students using Reading Plus made 97% more progress than disadvantaged students in the control schools.
- Students identified as SEN who used Reading Plus significantly improved throughout the study and achieved 119% more progress than SEN students in the control schools.
- EAL students in the Reading Plus schools made 50% more progress than EAL students in the control schools<sup>39</sup>.

“

*“By using Reading Plus, we feel that students who transition into KS4 are better prepared in their increased fluency and the range of texts they can access.”*

- Curriculum Lead of English, Farringdon Community Academy (Reading Plus customer)

# Pedagogical evaluation

Education Alliance Finland provides a product evaluation and certification service based on global quality standards for learning solutions. In late 2022, they evaluated the pedagogical design of Reading Plus.

## Summary of results:

- Reading Plus' pedagogical approach is 95%. Results of 95%+ are classified as outstanding; the product is exceptionally innovative and provides high educational value. The content is delivered in an extremely meaningful and engaging way.
- Reading Plus' learning engagement score is 4.06/5. This means the programme is well supported; several well-executed features support this aspect of user engagement<sup>40</sup>.

# Conclusion

## Where next?

Emerging from Covid, the term '*new normal*' was used to describe the adjustments being made as the Government transitioned into their '*living with Covid*' phase.

It was widely acknowledged that although we need to move on from the pandemic, we must (as 'The Opportunity for All' white paper states) '*support children to recover from its educational and emotional effects*'<sup>2</sup>.

Recovery requires addressing digital poverty (where young people have limited access to broadband and suitable devices), learning loss, attendance, attitudes to learning, social and emotional wellbeing, staffing, intervention, curriculum, and widening achievement gaps. These are nothing new, but the legacy of COVID-19 has undoubtedly exacerbated the issues.

Fluency, though, as the overriding skill required across multiple subjects, which is intrinsically linked to improving the experience of and motivation to read, may be the key to narrowing gaps in KS3.

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