Education's Overlooked Middle Child

RECLAIMING KEY STAGE 3



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PF Global

IN COLLABORATION WITH ib

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Foreword



As Director General of the International Baccalaureate, I have the opportunity to interact with education systems of all sizes and philosophies around the world. I visit remarkable schools where young people are thriving and fulfilling their potential. I also encounter patterns of underperformance, where – despite the incredible efforts of dedicated teachers – systems are not getting the very best out of their young people.

One such area is early secondary – the middle years, as we call them in IB circles, or Key Stage 3 as they are known in England.

Similar challenges arise across the globe during the middle years. Engagement, belonging, attendance and outcomes too often decline. The consequences can be deep and long-lasting, since early secondary is a foundational phase in development.

When a school system gets these years right, it goes a long way towards baking in long-term success. Years 7 to 9 represent far more than a bridge between primary education and GCSEs; they are a crucial period in which students develop the knowledge, habits, confidence and curiosity that will shape their future learning. Increasingly, neuroscience supports the vitality of these years in adolescent development, too.

This is why it was so important for the IB to support this essential research study into exactly what is happening during Key Stage 3 in England's secondaries by talking to teachers, students and parents. We believe this work will make a meaningful contribution to the vibrant debate in the UK around this phase of education, one that has been highlighted by both the independent Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes and the Ofsted inspectorate.

The top-line findings of this research should cause deep concern. In PF Global's conversations with teachers, many expressed concern over a lack of purpose and focus during these middle years. Teachers, students and parents see a lack of clarity about the purpose of these years, what success looks like and how this period can be a distinctive time when young people flourish.

But recognising this lack of direction gives us the opportunity to address it. And this research work also hints at how schools in England – and around the world – can do just this.

Key Stage 3 should be the phase when secondary education is broadest. Young people should encounter the arts, sciences, humanities, languages, maths, technology, physical education and opportunities for personal development. It is when they should try as many new subjects and experiences as the education system can allow. It should be when nothing should feel impossible.

These should also be the years when we help students develop a love of learning. If they experience this phase simply as utilitarian preparation for later assessments, we risk diminishing their curiosity, energy and commitment. Instead, these should be the years where students can become curious, resilient and excited for life beyond the classroom.

This report represents fresh insight for those that care about English schools and their students. I hope educators and policymakers in England and beyond will use these findings to give the middle years the attention and ambition they deserve.



Olli-Pekka Heinonen
Director General for the International Baccalaureate

Executive Summary

Key Stage 3 should be the point at which education really opens up to pupils. They are taught a broader curriculum, they have subject-specific teaching often for the first time, and they have increasing levels of independence. But in practice, Years 7 to 9 remain one of the least clearly defined parts of the system, and the point at which many pupils and their parents disengage with school. Without a clear articulation of its objectives, Key Stage 3 is often less of a priority for schools than Key Stage 4. It has become the overlooked middle child of the education system.



This report's central finding is that Key Stage 3 lacks a clear and shared purpose of its own. Pupils, parents and teachers expect it to achieve several things: build strong academic foundations, prepare pupils for GCSEs, develop independence and confidence, and link learning with life beyond school. However, there is no common framework to help balance these aims. In practice, GCSE preparation fills the void.

That absence of purpose drives the other findings in this report. The demands of Key Stage 4 determine both the purpose of Key Stage 3 and the priority it receives. Pupils' experiences become dependent on their individual school, subjects and teachers, all of which are highly variable, with some groups having a consistently worse experience. And although teachers recognise many of the problems, the system limits their capacity to develop and implement a coherent alternative.

Commissioned by the International Baccalaureate and conducted by PF Global, this research brings together the perspectives of pupils, parents and teachers on the Key Stage 3 years. It draws on polling of 2,090 pupils, 810 teachers and teaching assistants, and 743 parents with experience of Key Stage 3; twelve focus groups with pupils, parents and school staff; and six interviews involving members of an Early Secondary Advisory Group, which also met to test the emerging findings and recommendations.

Four key findings are presented, as follows:

01 Key Stage 3 lacks a clear and shared purpose of its own

Parents distinguish between what Key Stage 3 *currently* does and what they *want* it to do. One quarter identified GCSE preparation as its current main purpose, but only 11% believed this should be the priority.

Teachers also want change, but, alongside parents, disagree about its direction. While 57% would keep GCSE preparation central and give Key Stage 3 a clearer identity, 26% would place greater emphasis on skills, character and wider development, and 14% want a distinct curriculum with aims separate from GCSE preparation. Only 2% believe the current approach is satisfactory.

In the absence of an agreed alternative, GCSE preparation becomes the main *raison d'être* of these years. Preparation for GCSE examinations and specifications is one of the leading factors determining Key Stage 3 curricula, selected by 57% of teachers. Pupils have taken this on too, with some describing withdrawing effort from subjects they did not intend to take at GCSE.

Across the polling and focus groups, there was demand for something broader than this. Pupils, parents and teachers wanted Key Stage 3 to provide strong academic foundations while giving young people opportunities to explore interests, apply their learning, develop greater independence and begin to understand their own strengths.

However, enrichment cannot carry the full burden of making education feel relevant and enjoyable for pupils. Practical work, subject trips, projects and other enriching experiences were valued highly by parents, pupils and teachers, but treating these as optional additions leaves the everyday curriculum delivery unchanged and makes access dependent on available time, staffing and money.

02 The demands of Key Stage 4 dominate both the purpose of Key Stage 3 and the priority it receives

Schools are held accountable for GCSE outcomes, while the contribution made to these outcomes during Key Stage 3 remains largely invisible. Although 83% of teachers were confident that their school could measure pupils' attainment reliably and consistently, there is no shared framework for what progress across the phase should mean or measure. More than a third of teachers, 37%, said the absence of formal external assessment meant that Key Stage 3 received less attention and resource in their school.

This comes through in the allocation of attention and resources teachers spoke about. Compared with the exam years, 40% of teachers said Key Stage 3 received less leadership time and attention, while 19% said it received more. 30% said it received less funding and resources, compared with 17% who said it received more. More than half said teaching Key Stage 4 was considered more desirable than teaching Key Stage 3.

03 Pupils' experiences vary significantly, and some groups fare consistently worse

Many pupils rated the teaching they received positively, including 70% in Year 7, 62% in Year 8 and 60% in Year 9. However, the decline across these years is notable, and pupils' accounts revealed substantial variation between schools, subjects, classes and teachers. They described orderly and engaging lessons with some teachers, and disruption, repetition or extended periods of supply teaching with others.

This variation exists in the transition into secondary school, where 44% of pupils said it took them a few months or longer to feel settled. Pupils also struggled to link individual subjects and topics with the wider purposes of education. Only 36% could see the relevance of their learning to life beyond exams or a future career.

These average figures mask a consistently poorer experience among some groups. Girls were more likely than boys to report high test pressure, fear of being judged, lower enjoyment and taking longer to settle. Among pupils with SEND, 46% said they felt less confident than previously, compared with 22% of pupils without SEND. Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to be bored in lessons, enjoy school less than when they started and dread attending.

04 Teachers recognise the problems with Key Stage 3, but the system limits their capacity to rethink it

Teachers were more than twice as likely to say that pupil engagement worsened across Key Stage 3 as they were to say that it improved. Among those who observed a decline, most said it began in Year 8. However, 89% also said Key Stage 3 worked well in their own school, although only a quarter said it worked very well.

This apparent tension in teacher perceptions partly reflects the absence of a shared definition of success for the phase. In a system organised around later exams, 'working well' may mean delivering the established curriculum and preparing pupils adequately for GCSEs, rather than achieving a broader set of aims for the phase. When asked what would improve Key Stage 3, teachers tended to prioritise immediate pressures such as class sizes, behaviour, staffing and earlier intervention.

Schools formally possess considerable curriculum autonomy, but it does not always feel usable to teachers. Only 19% of teachers reported having a great deal of freedom over how they taught Key Stage 3. Trust policies, prescribed schemes of work, assessment systems, workload and concerns about later results all influenced what it felt possible to change. Where strong practice does exist, it tends to remain isolated and does not spread effectively across the system.

Implications for policy and practice

From these findings, we identify six implications for policy and practice. The renewed national focus on Key Stage 3 creates an opportunity to establish a shared framework and purpose for the phase and help schools navigate the tensions between consistency and autonomy, knowledge and application, engagement and attainment, and continuity with the phases on either side. Without that framework, curriculum and assessment reform, the national enrichment framework and the Key Stage 3 Alliance risk generating significant activity without substantially improving pupils' experiences of Years 7 to 9.

Introduction

Key Stage 3 covers three of the most formative years in a child's education. Between the ages of 11 and 14, pupils move from primary into secondary school, where learning is organised around distinct subjects and they must build relationships with many more teachers. They are also navigating early adolescence, developing greater independence, forming new friendships and relationships, and beginning to make choices that will influence their later education, careers and lives.



What is already known about Key Stage 3

Despite this, Key Stage 3 has historically received less attention from policymakers, researchers and the wider education system than the phases on either side of it. It has become the middle child of the school system. Primary education is driven by a strong national focus on early literacy and numeracy, culminating in statutory assessment at the end of Key Stage 2. Key Stage 4 is structured around GCSE courses and the accountability measures attached to them. The Key Stage 3 years, meanwhile, have no statutory national assessment and a less clearly articulated role within the system.

Concern about the consequences of this is not new. In 2015, Ofsted published *Key Stage 3: the wasted years?,* drawing on inspections, surveys and visits to 40 schools[1]. It concluded that Key Stage 3 was not a sufficiently high priority in many secondary schools. Inspectors found weaknesses in the transition from primary school, teachers who did not challenge pupils sufficiently, and limited use of assessment information. The report also warned that some schools were narrowing the curriculum or beginning GCSE preparation early, limiting pupils' access to the breadth of subjects intended for Key Stage 3.

Since then, there has been much greater attention on Key Stage 3 curriculum quality across the school system. The introduction of Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework in 2019 placed curriculum intent, implementation and impact at the centre of inspection. Ofsted's subsequent evaluation found that curriculum quality had improved in the schools it revisited between 2018 and 2024. Schools were more likely to offer ambitious, carefully sequenced curricula, and leaders had developed a stronger focus on curriculum design.[2]

However, much of this work has focused on the quality of individual subject curricula, often judged partly through how coherently they build towards later study. It has paid less attention to the purpose and coherence of Key Stage 3 as a distinct phase, or on how the different parts of pupils' experience of early secondary fit together. A school may have well-sequenced schemes of work in individual subjects without having a clear idea of what pupils should gain from their first three years of secondary education as a whole.

Other research has highlighted further issues with the Key Stage 3 years. The transition from primary to secondary school is widely recognised as a critical point in pupils' education. Pupils have to adjust to much larger institutions, more teachers, new peer groups and significantly greater demands on their time. The Education Endowment Foundation is currently undertaking a dedicated evidence review to establish what is known about how schools can improve pupils' transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3, and thereby improve outcomes.[3]

Recent research has also highlighted a wider decline in pupil engagement during secondary school. The 2025 report *Mind the Engagement Gap,* drawing on survey responses from around 100,000 pupils, found sharp falls in enjoyment, trust and safety following the move from primary school. The decline was particularly pronounced for some groups, including girls and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.[4] Wider national trends in absence, suspensions and children's wellbeing have also added to concern about pupils' experiences of early secondary education.

1 Ofsted (2015). *Key Stage 3: the wasted years?* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459830/Key_Stage_3_the_wasted_years.pdf

2 Ofsted (2025). *To what extent has curriculum quality changed in schools since the introduction of the Education Inspection Framework?* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-quality-evaluating-the-impact-of-the-education-inspection-framework/to-what-extent-has-curriculum-quality-changed-in-schools-since-the-introduction-of-the-education-inspection-framework

3 Education Endowment Foundation (2026). *Supporting transitions between educational phases to improve learner outcomes.* https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/transitions-between-educational-phases

4 Research Commission on Engagement and Lead Indicators (2025). *Mind the Engagement Gap.* https://www.impactedgroup.uk/research-campaigns-and-resources/mind-the-engagement-gap-a-national-study-of-pupil-engagement-in-englands-schools



Despite this existing research, understanding of Key Stage 3 education remains limited. Studies have tended to look at transition, curriculum, attainment, attendance or wellbeing separately, rather than a coherent picture of how these elements interact. There is comparatively little evidence about how pupils, parents and teachers experience these years, how different aspects of the experience interact, and what drives the relative lack of priority given to this phase.

A new policy focus on Key Stage 3

After a long period in the margins of national debate, Key Stage 3 now appears to be moving back up the policy agenda. The independent Curriculum and Assessment Review, published in November 2025, identified Key Stage 3 as a critical part of pupils' educational journey, and called for schools to give greater priority to a rich and stretching curriculum during this phase. It raised concerns about curriculum narrowing and the pressure to begin GCSE content early.[5] The Government's response accepted the need for renewed attention on these years and committed to introducing a statutory reading assessment in Year 8, intended to identify pupils who need additional support before they begin their GCSE courses.[6]

The Government's 2026 schools white paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving,* widened the focus beyond attainment. It set out an ambition to move children's school experience from 'narrow to broad' and rebuild engagement between schools, pupils and communities. Its programme includes reforms to curriculum and assessment, SEND provision, attendance, enrichment and the wider support available to schools.[7]

The Department for Education has also established a national Key Stage 3 Alliance through its RISE school improvement programme. The Alliance has been tasked with encouraging innovation and strengthening the evidence base on Key Stage 3, with an initial focus on engagement and belonging, literacy and numeracy, assessment and data, and pathways to adult life.[8] A new national enrichment framework, published in June 2026, has created a further expectation that schools should consider the experiences and opportunities pupils receive beyond classroom teaching.[9]

5 Department for Education (2025). *Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report
6 Department for Education (2025). *Government Response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b2a4a14b040dfe82922ea/Government_response_to_the_Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review.pdf
7 Department for Education (2026). *Every Child Achieving and Thriving.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6996ee6a047739fe61889e05/Every_child_achieving_and_thriving_web_accessible_version.pdf
8 Department for Education (2026). *RISE attainment improvement: Key Stage 3 Alliance.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rise-support-for-improving-attainment-in-schools/rise-attainment-improvement
9 Department for Education (2026). *The enrichment framework for schools and colleges.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-enrichment-framework-for-schools-and-colleges

Key Stage 3 has spent years as the 'middle child' of the school system, receiving less attention than the primary and GCSE years around it.

These developments reflect a real recognition that the Key Stage 3 years require greater attention. However, they do not yet add up to a settled position on what Key Stage 3 is for. The unresolved question is how the various components should fit together and what schools should prioritise when objectives compete for limited time, staffing and resources. There is a risk that Key Stage 3 becomes the focus of several parallel reforms without a clear articulation of the phase they are intended to improve.

What this project set out to understand

This project was commissioned by the International Baccalaureate and conducted by PF Global. It was designed to build a fuller understanding of how pupils, parents and teachers experience Key Stage 3 in England, and of the wider factors shaping those experiences.

The research set out to explore:

- What pupils, parents and teachers believe Key Stage 3 is for, and the extent to which their expectations align;
- How pupils experience the curriculum, teaching, assessment, transition and wider life of school during Years 7 to 9;
- How experiences differ between groups of pupils, including by gender, disadvantage and SEND;
- How accountability arrangements, staffing decisions and resourcing pressures influence the priority schools give to Key Stage 3; and
- What teachers and school leaders believe would improve the Key Stage 3 years, and what currently makes this difficult.

This report presents the findings from the research and draws out some implications for national policy and for schools and trusts. It will be followed by an *Early Secondary Playbook,* developed in collaboration with education experts, including multi-academy trust leaders, which will identify practical approaches that schools and trusts could consider.

Methodology

This report draws on a mixed-methods research programme conducted between May and September 2026. It combines national polling of pupils, parents and teachers; focus groups with pupils, parents and teachers; and interviews with members of an Early Secondary Advisory Group.



While focus groups allowed participants to describe their experiences in detail, the polling examined how widely particular views and experiences were shared, including differences between groups. The interviews then helped situate the findings in the wider school and policy context.

PF Global analysed the evidence from each strand separately before comparing across the research. PF Global is a member of the British Polling Council and a company partner of the Market Research Society. The research was conducted in accordance with their standards. Participation in the qualitative research was voluntary, appropriate consent was obtained, and participants could withdraw at any point. Identifying information has been removed from the report.

POLLING

Pupils

A total of 2,090 pupils aged 11 to 18 in England were surveyed between 3 and 13 August 2026. The sample included a booster of 995 pupils currently in Years 7 to 9, allowing the research to examine the experiences of pupils within Key Stage 3 in greater detail, and in comparison to pupils in other stages. Older pupils were also included so that they could reflect back on their recent experience of the phase.

The sample was weighted to nationally representative proportions by socioeconomic grade, region, education, gender and age, and included pupils attending state comprehensive and non-selective schools, grammar schools and private schools. Some questions asked older pupils to look back on their experience of particular school years. These responses provide a retrospective assessment rather than tracking the same pupils over time.

The survey included self-reported measures of SEND and family economic circumstances. Socioeconomic grade was determined using the National Readership Survey classification, based on the occupation of the main income earner. This is different from eligibility for free school meals and should be interpreted accordingly.

School staff

A total of 810 teachers and teaching assistants in England were surveyed between 3 and 26 August 2026. Teachers made up 81 per cent of the sample and teaching assistants 19 per cent. Of all respondents, 584 were currently teaching Key Stage 3.

The sample included respondents from different regions, school types, subjects, roles and levels of experience. The data is unweighted. The findings therefore describe the views of those who participated and should not be treated as precise estimates of the views of all teachers and teaching assistants in England.

Throughout the report, the term ‘teachers’ is generally used to refer to this combined sample. Where the views of teachers and teaching assistants differed materially, this is identified in the text.

Parents

Questions were included in an online omnibus survey of 1,972 UK adults, conducted between 13 and 16 August 2026. The overall omnibus sample was weighted by interlocking age and gender, region and socioeconomic grade to nationally representative proportions.

Questions about Key Stage 3 were answered by 743 parents whose children had experienced the phase. The group eligible to answer differed between questions. Some were asked of all parents with relevant experiences, while others were asked only of parents whose child had reached a particular point in their education. The base size for each result is therefore reported in the accompanying data tables.



FOCUS GROUPS

PF Global conducted twelve focus groups in July 2026: four with pupils, four with parents, and four with teachers and school leaders.

The four pupil focus groups involved pupils from Years 7, 8 and 9. Two were held in a school in County Durham and two in a school in Bristol. All groups took place in person. The participating schools selected pupils to take part, with each group reflecting the wider intake of the school concerned.

The four parent groups were held online. They included one group of parents with children in Year 6, two with children in Years 7 to 9, and one with children in Years 10 to 11. Participants were drawn from the North West, North East, South West and West Midlands, and spanned Social Grades A to E. Participants were recruited independently using screening questions and quotas intended to secure a mix of backgrounds and experiences.

The four teacher groups were held online. Two involved classroom teachers and two involved heads of year or leaders with responsibility for Key Stage 3. Participants worked across a range of subjects and school contexts in the North West, North East, South West and West Midlands. Again, participants were recruited independently using screening questions and quotas intended to secure a mix of backgrounds and experiences.

All groups used a semi-structured discussion guide and were moderated by trained researchers. Discussions were recorded and transcribed with participants' consent before being analysed thematically. Quotations are included throughout the report to illustrate participants' experiences and reasoning.

INTERVIEWS

An Early Secondary Advisory Group was convened to bring together school and trust leaders, academics, sector representatives and policy experts. Seven members took part in semi-structured interviews between July and September 2026. Again using a discussion guide, these interviews explored the purpose of Key Stage 3, the factors influencing current provision, and possible implications for policy and practice.

Findings

Our research identifies four findings. Key Stage 3 lacks a clear and shared purpose; the demands of Key Stage 4 fill that gap; pupils' experiences vary widely and unequally; and the system limits teachers' capacity to rethink the phase. These findings show why the challenges facing Key Stage 3 cannot be addressed in isolation.



FINDING 1: Key Stage 3 lacks a clear and shared purpose of its own

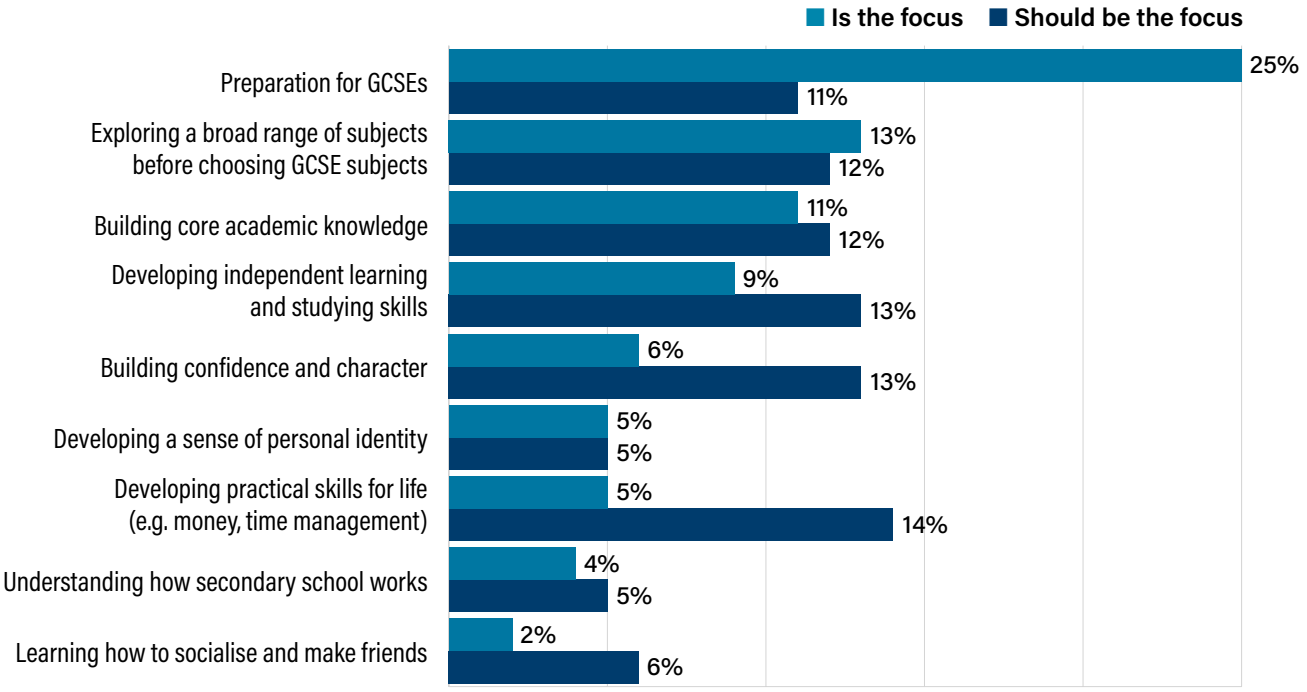
1.1 Pupils, parents and teachers have different ideas about what Key Stage 3 is for

The parent polling shows a clear gap between what parents believe Key Stage 3 currently does and what they want it to do. 25% of parents identified 'preparation for GCSEs' as its current main purpose, almost twice the proportion selecting any other option. But only 11% thought GCSE preparation should be the phase's main purpose.

However, parents did not agree on a single alternative. Asked what the main purpose of Key Stage 3 should be, 14% chose 'developing practical skills for life', 13% 'developing independent learning and study skills', 13% chose 'building confidence and character', 12% 'building core academic knowledge', and 12% 'exploring a broad range of subjects before choosing GCSE subjects.' A further 8% said they did not know.

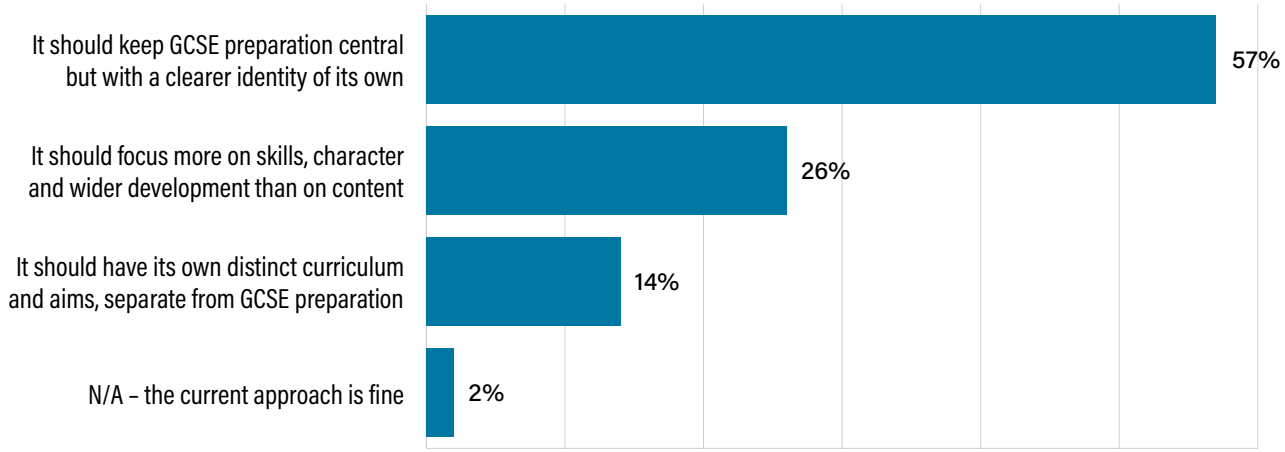
The same lack of consensus also exists amongst teachers. When asked how Key Stage 3 should be changed, 57% said GCSE preparation should remain central, but the phase should have a clearer identity of its own. 26% wanted a greater shift towards skills, character and wider development, while 14% supported a distinct curriculum with aims separate from GCSE preparation. Importantly, only 2% believed that the current approach was satisfactory. Teachers therefore shared a strong appetite for change, but differed on how closely Key Stage 3 should remain tied to GCSEs.

What should the main purpose of Key Stage 3 (Years 7-9) be?
What currently is the main purpose of Key Stage 3?



Q. And what should the main purpose of Key Stage 3 (Years 7-9) be? Base: all parents (1,181):
Q. And, in your view, what currently is the main purpose of Key Stage 3? Base: Parents with children who have experienced KS3 (738).

Which comes closest to your view on how KS3 should be shaped?



Q. Which comes closest to your view on how KS3 should be shaped?
Base: All secondary teachers excluding assistants (586).

These different positions came through strongly in the teacher focus groups. In one discussion, three members of staff gave three very different answers to the same question about the purpose of Key Stage 3.

Pupils also gave different accounts of what Key Stage 3 was for. Some understood it mainly as preparation for GCSEs. Others emphasised its wider role in helping them mature, form relationships and learn how to interact with different people.

> *"For me, it's about getting them GCSE-ready ... it's about thinking about the skills that they need."*
>
> Head of religious studies, state faith school, Greater Manchester

> *"I think ... fostering a love for the subject at that stage ... because you just have a bit more time than you do at GCSE ..."*
>
> Head of Year 8 and English teacher, state faith school, London

> *"Our main focus at Key Stage 3 is routines, behaviour ... developing character, engaging in extracurricular."*
>
> Head of Year 8 and maths teacher, state community school, East London

> *"Year 7 and 8 is supposed to build you up to GCSE level."*
>
> Year 9 pupil, County Durham

> *"You do come to learn, but I think it's really important to make friends, definitely. Because if you don't, you're just going to be alone."*
>
> Year 9 pupil, County Durham

These views were not always fully developed, but do show that pupils experienced Key Stage 3 as serving several different functions, without necessarily understanding how those functions fitted together.

1.2 In practice, Key Stage 3 is often defined by preparation for GCSEs

When teachers were asked what most influenced the design and delivery of their Key Stage 3 curriculum, 57% selected 'preparation for GCSE examinations and specifications'. Only 'the national curriculum', selected by 64%, ranked higher. 'Pupil enjoyment and engagement' was selected by 41%.

The focus groups explored what this looks like in practice. Teachers spoke about wanting to use Key Stage 3 to develop pupils' curiosity and interest in their subjects, but also described GCSEs driving both curriculum design decisions and the language they used with pupils years before GCSE courses began.

Pupils had noticed this emphasis. In focus groups, they often judged the value of subjects according to whether they planned to continue them at GCSE or expected to use them in a future career. One Year 9 pupil described putting less effort into subjects they did not intend to choose for GCSE.

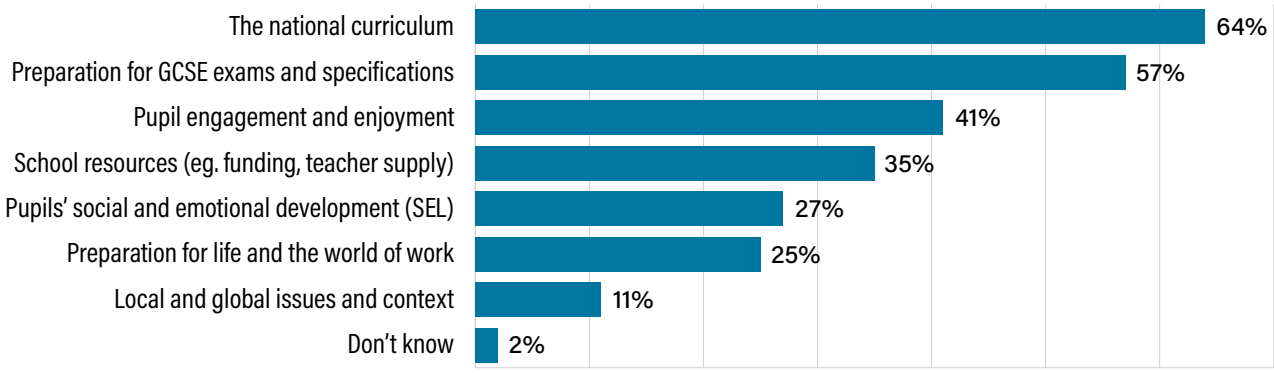
This seems to create a hierarchy within the Key Stage 3 curriculum, where subjects that pupils expect to take at GCSE become most important, and others receive less attention and focus. This means that although the curriculum may appear broad on timetables, it is narrowing as a consequence of pupils understanding a subject's value through the lens of future GCSE exams.

> *"I hear myself saying, 'You need this for GCSE'. And I feel horrible saying it. I'm like, actually, you need this because it's just good to learn it. It's important to understand the world around you."*
>
> Head of Year 8 and English teacher, state community school, Telford

> *"Lots of subjects I just don't really put much effort into because I know I'm not going to take them for GCSEs and I don't care about the subject."*
>
> Year 9 pupil, Bristol

> *"The big risk is that Key Stage 3 is just the first stage of preparation for GCSEs."*
>
> Member of the Early Secondary Advisory Group

Which of the following most influence how the Key Stage 3 curriculum is designed and delivered at your school?



Which of the following most influence how the Key Stage 3 curriculum is designed and delivered at your school? Base: all teachers (810).

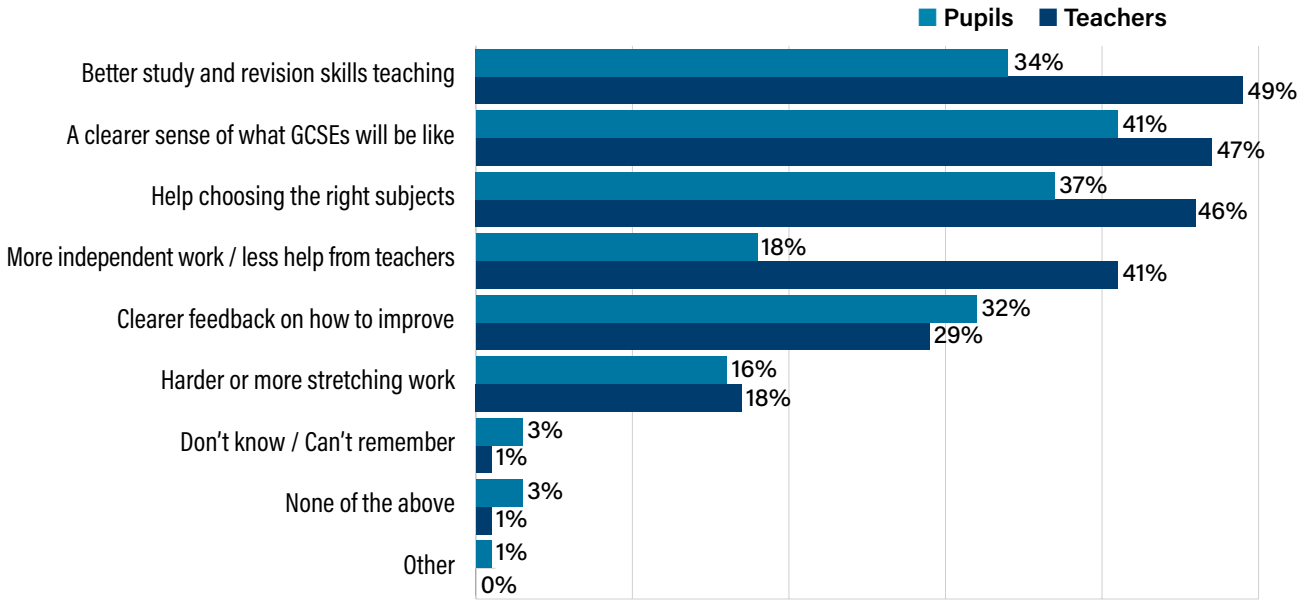
1.3 Across pupils, parents and teachers, there is demand for a broader articulation of what pupils should gain from Key Stage 3

Despite the lack of an agreed purpose for Key Stage 3, pupils', parents' and teachers' ambitions clustered around some common themes: strong academic foundations, opportunities to explore different subjects, greater independence, practical application, and wider personal development.

Parents clearly articulated both academic and developmental ambitions. They wanted Key Stage 3 to prepare pupils for later study, while also giving children space to find their strengths, form relationships and learn to become more independent.

Pupils and teachers also wanted preparation for what comes next to involve more than just covering GCSE content. When asked about what students think about their lessons, 80% of Years 7-9 students say they'd like a bit or a lot more hands on, practical learning. 50% of teachers also chose this option when asked what would improve pupils' preparation for GCSEs. Beyond this, the two groups placed emphasis on different elements. Teachers were more likely than pupils to prioritise 'better study and revision skills teaching' and 'more independent work or less help from teachers'.

Thinking back to Years 7, 8 and 9, which of these do you wish there'd been more of to get you ready? What would most improve how KS3 prepares pupils for GCSEs?



Q. Thinking back to Years 7, 8 and 9, which of these do you wish there'd been more of to get you ready? Select all that apply Base: All pupils (2,090): Q. What would most improve how KS3 prepares pupils for GCSEs? Select up to three. Base: All teachers (808).

"Finding your feet and understanding a bit more about who you are becoming and making friends...and finding out what sort of person you want to be."

Mother of a Year 6 pupil, Birmingham

1.4 Enrichment is often used to provide what pupils are missing from everyday teaching and learning

Participants used the word 'enrichment' to describe two different parts of school life.

The first was extracurricular provision: clubs, sports, performances and other activities outside normal lessons. Parents and pupils described how these sorts of opportunities helped their children form friendships, build relationships with staff, and feel part of the school community.

The second was learning that was linked directly to the curriculum: practical work, subject trips, projects and opportunities to apply knowledge outside of the classroom. Pupils valued these experiences because they helped them make abstract content understandable and gave them access to parts of subjects that could not be reproduced through written work alone.

In the pupil focus groups, these were among the experiences pupils most often wanted more of.

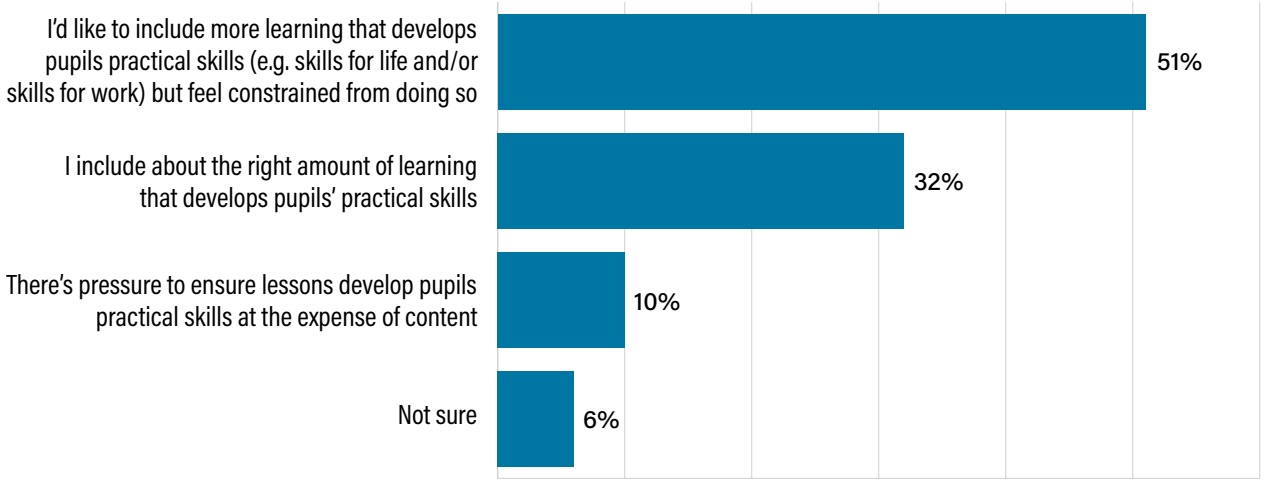
The teacher polling suggests that many schools would like to provide more of this kind of learning. 51% of teachers said they wanted to include more learning that developed practical skills but felt constrained from doing so. 32% believed they were currently providing about the right amount.

In focus groups, teachers identified time, staffing, facilities and funding as barriers to delivering this. They also often spoke about the practical and enriching experiences as additions to be provided once the central demands of teaching had been met.

> *"I mean I think trips are really good. I think it's nice to just like see it for yourself."*
>
> Year 9 pupil, County Durham

> *"My son likes football, so he's part of the school team. Because of that, he had that sense of belonging."*
>
> Father of a Year 7 pupil, Birmingham

Thinking about your KS3 lessons, which comes closest to your view?



Thinking about your KS3 lessons, which comes closest to your view? Base: All teachers (810).

"I've been teaching 18 years ... [the enrichment budget] has over halved in the last 6 years."

Head of Key Stage 3 English, state community school, Wigan

"I need money and I need time to put those enrichment opportunities on so that I can have the theatre trips, I can have the theatre companies, I can do all those lovely enrichment things that will help foster that love of learning alongside the skills and things they need. But for that, I need time and money, there's never enough of it."

Head of English, state community school, Staffordshire

When enriching experiences depend on leftover time and resources, access to them becomes unequal and vulnerable to wider pressures. In addition, practical application, enjoyment and opportunities for pupils to see themselves in their learning become concentrated within 'enrichment', while the everyday curriculum is treated as a fixed body of content to be covered. A stronger Key Stage 3 would build these qualities into everyday teaching, while also providing wider experiences beyond lessons.

Zooming out: the system view

Key Stage 3 is expected to build strong subject knowledge, prepare pupils for later study, support their transition into secondary school, develop greater independence for pupils, and widen their horizons. A shared framework is needed to explain how these purposes fit together and what every pupil should expect to gain by the end of Year 9. Without one, GCSE preparation will continue to dominate because it carries the clearest external incentives. Such a framework should establish a common entitlement, while leaving schools and trusts room to decide how it is delivered in their context.

2%

of teachers believe the current approach to KS3 is satisfactory

57%

of teachers said GCSE preparation most influenced their KS3 curriculum design

41%

of teachers said pupil enjoyment and engagement influenced the design of their KS3 curriculum

51%

of teachers wanted more practical learning but felt constrained from providing it



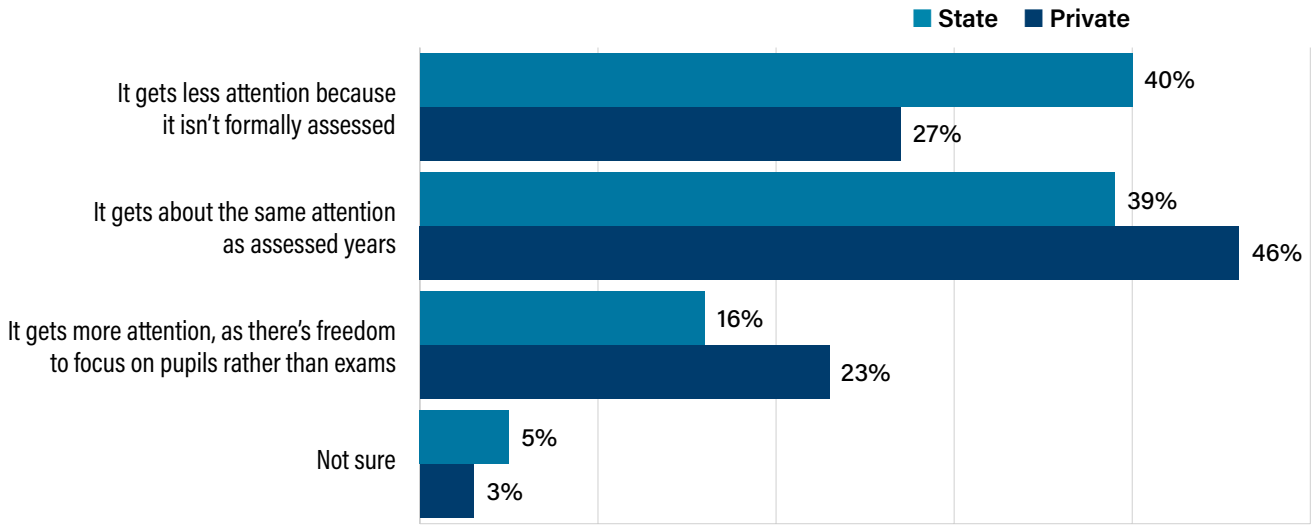
FINDING 2: The demands of Key Stage 4 dominate both the purpose of Key Stage 3 and the priority it receives

2.1 Accountability pressures encourage schools to work backwards from GCSEs

Secondary school accountability is dominated by outcomes at the end of Key Stage 4. Progress 8 measures pupils' attainment between the end of primary school and GCSEs, but the contribution made during Key Stage 3 is not separately measured. National Key Stage 3 tests ended in 2008, and national curriculum levels were removed in 2014. Schools assess pupils during Years 7 to 9, but there is no common external measure carrying the weight attached to GCSE results.

A substantial minority of the teachers in our poll believed that this affects the priority schools give to the phase. 37% said the absence of formal external assessment meant that Key Stage 3 received less attention and resources in their school. This rose to 40% among teachers in state comprehensive and non-selective schools, compared with 27% in private schools.

Do you think the absence of formal external assessment at KS3 affects how much attention and resources it gets in your school?



Q. Do you think the absence of formal external assessment at KS3 affects how much attention and resources it gets in your school? Base: All teachers (810) - State (603), Private (117).

> *"The end prize is GCSE. Therefore, what we need to do is get kids practised at GCSE papers. Of course, that wasn't only in Year 11. That was in Year 10. And guess what happened then? Year 9, Year 8, Year 7."*
>
> Member of the Early Secondary Advisory Group

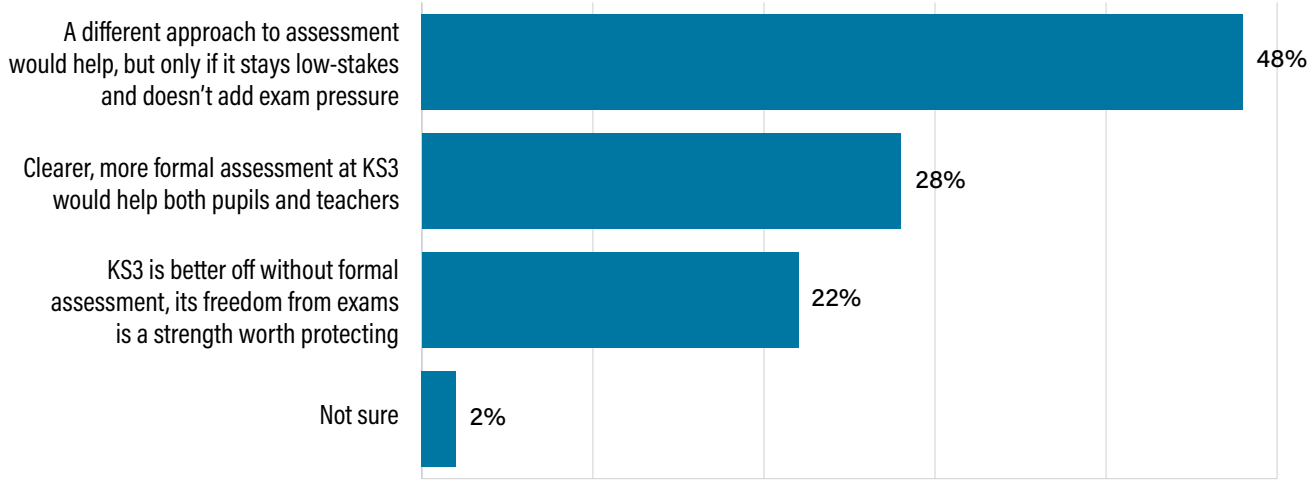
This does not mean that schools do not assess progress during Key Stage 3. 83% of teachers were confident that their school could measure pupils' attainment reliably and consistently. The issue is partly the relative weight attached to that information when compared with externally reported GCSE outcomes. However, confidence in the consistency of an assessment system does not tell us what it is designed to measure or whether it is appropriate. Members of the Early Secondary Advisory Group raised concerns that, without a shared account of progression during Key Stage 3, schools can fall back on adapted versions of GCSE content, assessment formats or grades. This can produce results that appear precise but are difficult for pupils and parents to interpret during Years 7 to 9. This research did not examine how widespread that practice is. It does, however, highlight an important question about whether assessment during Key Stage 3 reflects the aims of the phase while remaining coherent with what pupils learn before and after it.

The 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review identified this pressure, and concluded that the volume of Key Stage 4 content, combined with the high-stakes nature of the phase, could lead schools to curtail Key Stage 3 so that GCSE teaching could begin early.

Half of the teachers in our poll also believed that the step from Key Stage 3 to GCSE courses was too large for many pupils. Beginning GCSE preparation earlier can therefore appear to be a practical response to curriculum volume and pupils' readiness for GCSE teaching, as well as to accountability pressure.

The evidence does not suggest that teachers want a new set of high-stakes Key Stage 3 examinations. Only 28% supported more formal external assessment. 48% instead preferred a low-stakes approach that would provide useful information without adding more exam pressure, while 22% wanted the phase to remain free from formal external assessment.

Thinking specifically about assessment at KS3, which comes closest to your view?



Q. Thinking specifically about assessment at KS3, which comes closest to your view? Base: All teachers (810).

2.2 Staffing, leadership attention and wider resources are concentrated on exam years

Teachers reported a clear difference between the resources given to Key Stage 3 and the resources given to Key Stage 4 within schools. 40% said Key Stage 3 received less teaching time and attention from school leaders than Key Stages 4 and 5, while 19% said it received more. 30% said it received less funding and resources, compared with 17% who said it received more.

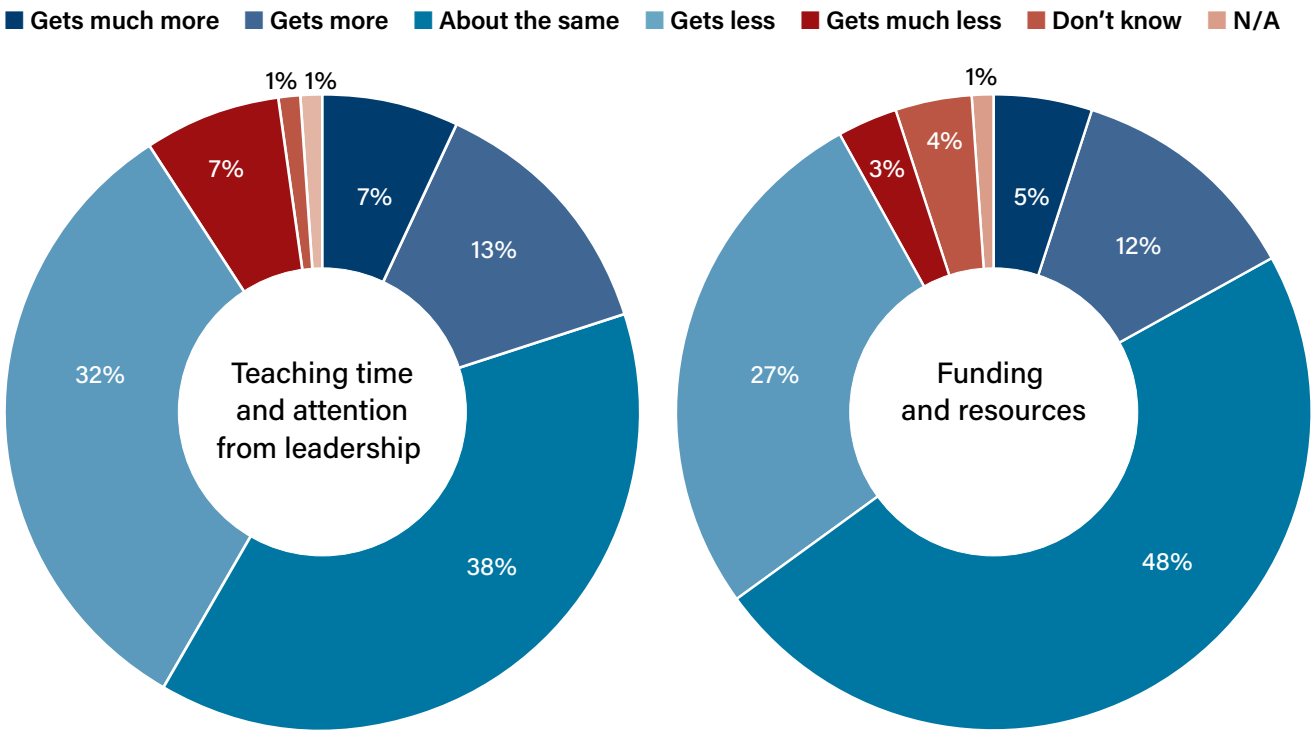
In focus groups, teachers described the hierarchy.

Teaching Key Stage 3 also appears to be less popular amongst teachers. 53% of teachers polled said teaching Key Stage 3 was regarded as less desirable than teaching Key Stages 4 or 5. Only 8% said it was seen as more desirable.

The evidence about teacher experience was more mixed. 30% said staffing at Key Stage 3 was weighted towards experienced teachers, while the same proportion said it was weighted towards early-career or less experienced teachers. However, teachers in state schools were more likely to report that Key Stage 3 was weighted towards less experienced staff than teachers in private schools: 35% compared with 15%.

> *"Everything has to go to Key Stage 4 because you have to get those results every year. What time is there left then to look at Key Stage 3? It's often very little, and bottom of the priority list."*
>
> Head of Key Stage 3 and religious studies teacher, state faith school, Greater Manchester

Compared with the exam years (KS4 and KS5), how does KS3 compare at your school for each of the following?

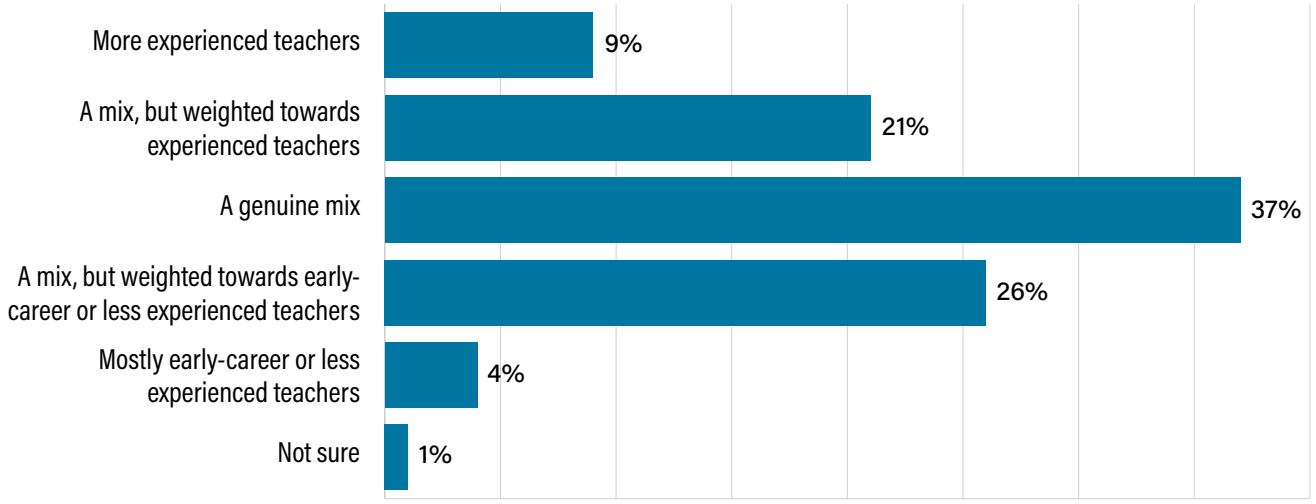


Q. Compared with the exam years (KS4 and KS5), how does KS3 compare at your school for each of the following?
Base: All teachers (810).

In focus groups, some pupils and parents described the consequences of staffing shortages and instability during Years 7 to 9.

These experiences weren't universal, but where they occurred, they had a substantial effect on learning.

In your experience, which teachers most often teach KS3 classes?



Q. In your experience, which teachers most often teach KS3 classes? Base: All teachers (810).

> *"I think teachers being absent is a really big problem. I've had days where I've had a substitute teacher for every lesson. There's been months in Year 7 when they couldn't hire a teacher for my English. So for 6 months they didn't have an English teacher."*
>
> Year 9 pupil, Bristol

Zooming out: the system view

Key Stage 3 will continue to lose out while the strongest incentives in secondary education are attached to outcomes at the end of Year 11. Giving the phase greater priority therefore requires more than asking schools to devote additional attention or resource to it. The system needs a clearer account of progression during Years 7 to 9, with assessment, inspection and school improvement aligned around it. This should recognise the role of Key Stage 3 in preparing pupils for GCSEs, while defining progression in ways that reflect the phase's agreed purpose and the developmental needs of adolescents. It should make the contribution of Key Stage 3 to later outcomes clearer without creating another set of high-stakes tests or pulling GCSE content and assessment methods into this phase.



37%

of teachers said the absence of formal external assessment means KS3 gets less attention and resources

28%

of teachers supported more formal assessment, bringing greater structure to Key Stage 3

22%

of teachers wanted Key Stage 3 to remain free from formal external assessment

53%

of teachers said teaching KS3 was seen as less desirable than KS4 or KS5

FINDING 3: Pupils' experiences of Key Stage 3 vary widely, and some groups have a consistently worse experience

3.1 The transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 takes longer than the system commonly assumes

Moving to secondary school is a major change for pupils, who have to navigate a much larger institution, move between classrooms, have multiple teachers, and are expected to manage their time and equipment more independently.

For a substantial minority, that adjustment takes months. 36% of teachers say most pupils take a few months or longer to cope with the move, compared with 16% who say most pupils settle very quickly.

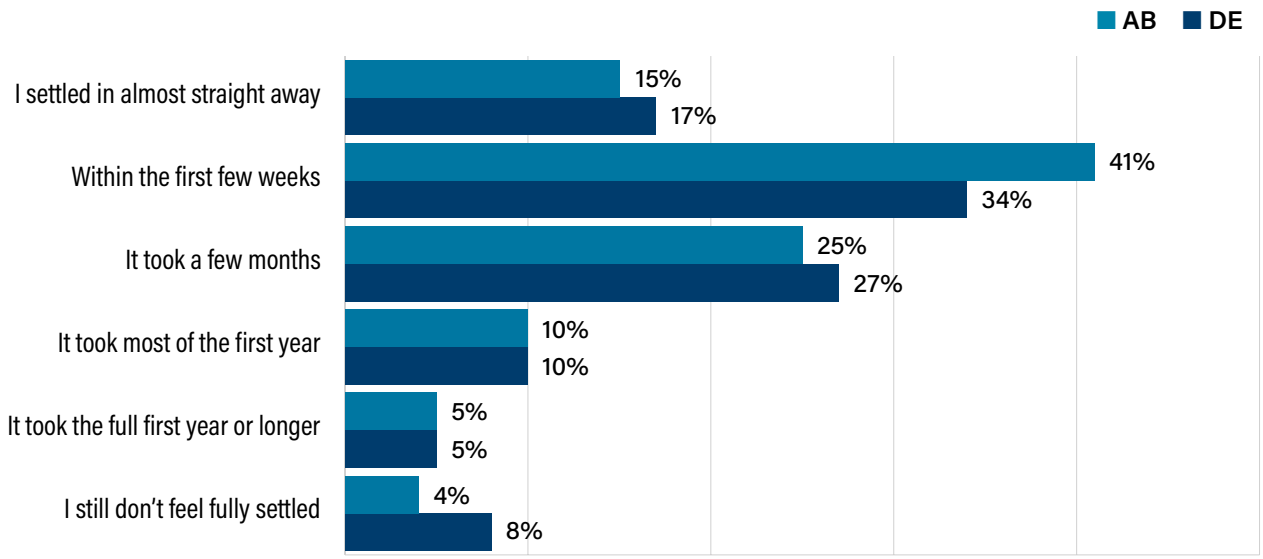
Pupils report a similar experience. 44% of pupils in Key Stage 3 say it took them a few months or more to feel settled at secondary school, including 5% who still do not feel fully settled. This was even greater for pupils in social grades D or E, 49% of whom say it took them a few months or more to feel settled at secondary school, including 8% who still do not feel fully settled.

The academic step up seems to be only one part of the challenge. Teachers are much more likely to point to the practical and social demands of secondary school when asked about the aspects of transition pupils find hardest, including organising themselves, coping with many different teachers and making new friends ranking highest.

In focus groups, pupils described being intimidated by the size of the school, the number of unfamiliar faces and, in some cases, arriving without many friends from primary school.

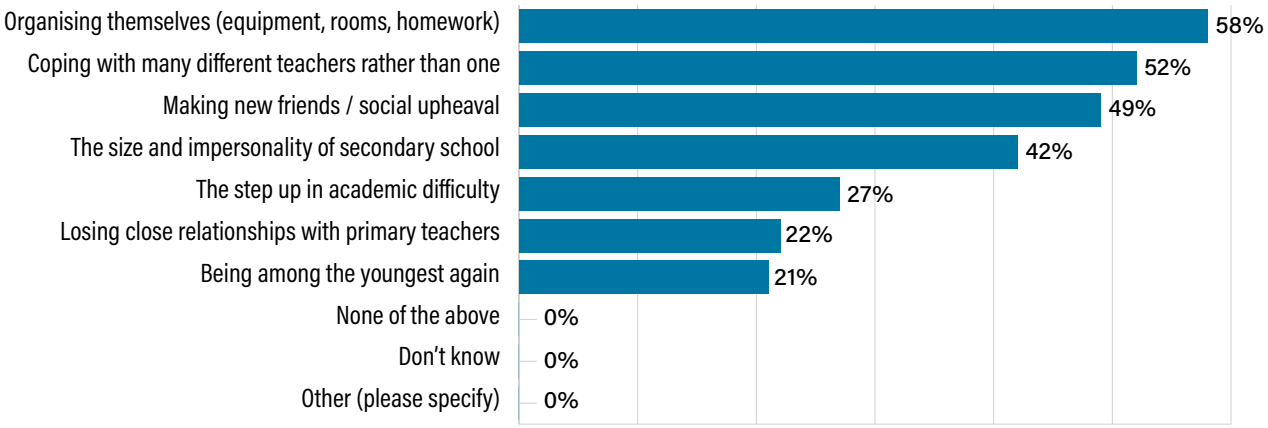
> *"Intimidating. No one else from my school came to this school, so I didn't really know anyone. I did kind of start from scratch when I got here."*
>
> Year 7 pupil, County Durham

How long did it take you to feel settled at secondary school?



Q. How long did it take you to feel settled at secondary school? Base: Pupils (2,090) - SEG AB (718). DE (435).

Which of the following aspects of the transition, if any, do pupils find hardest?



Q. Which of the following aspects of the transition, if any, do pupils find hardest? Select up to three. Base: All teachers (809).

Teachers told us that they put considerable effort into supporting pupils through the move. Heads of year spoke about primary school visits, buddy systems, additional sessions for pupils with SEND, parent events, mentors and staggered starts. However, 22% of parents say their child's transition was not managed well, while 44% believe schools should provide more support.

Relationships appear to be an important part of pupils settling in successfully. Among pupils who say that no teachers know them well, 67% took a few months or more to settle, compared with 45% of pupils who have teachers who know them well. The organisation of secondary school is therefore part of the challenge with transition. Pupils go from being known closely by one or two primary teachers to navigating relationships with many more adults, each of whom may only see part of their experience. Helping pupils settle therefore involves supporting them to move from one trusted relationship to a wider network in which they still feel known and understood.

What comes through clearly is that transition should be understood as a process that extends well into Year 7. Familiarisation with secondary school before September is important, but pupils also need sustained help to build relationships, manage greater independence and develop a sense of belonging once the initial transition programme has ended.

> *"We do buddies, and the buddies send a letter to their particular Year 6 to introduce themselves...on that transition date they meet their buddies and their buddies take them around the school...And the sixth form also get involved. But they still come in in September and it feels like they're completely under-prepared for what high school is really like."*
>
> Head of Year 7 and history teacher, state grammar school, Devon

> *"I just think they should have more than one transition day... There should be a couple of transition days or half days. It's too big of a gap and one day isn't enough to take everything in."*
>
> Mother of pupils in Years 6 and 9, Solihull

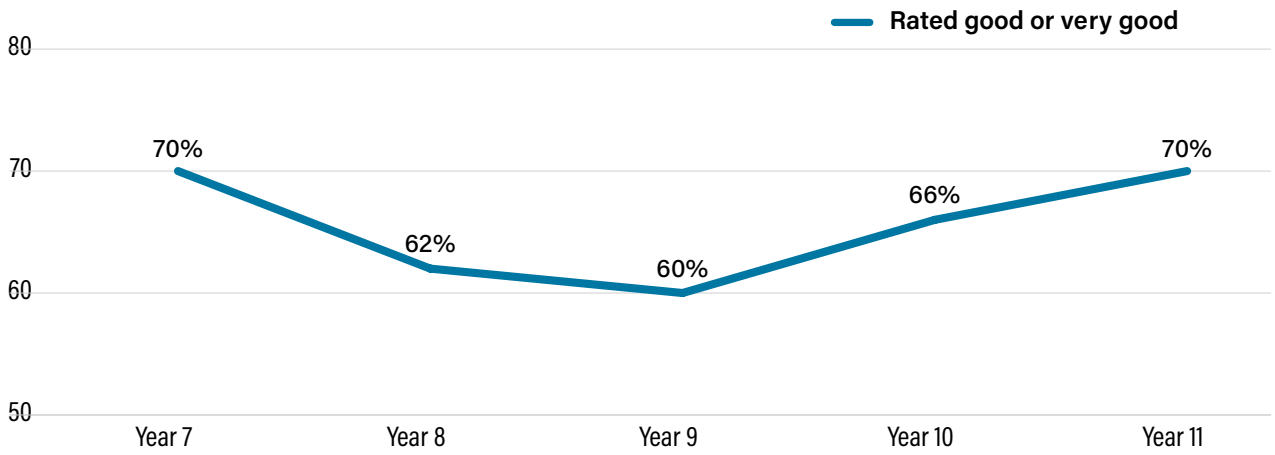
3.2 Pupils' experience of Key Stage 3 varies between subjects, teachers and schools

Our research shows that there is no single Key Stage 3 experience. What pupils receive varies across the secondary years, between schools and subjects, and even between classrooms within the same school.

When pupils rated the teaching they had received in each year, Years 8 and 9 received the lowest ratings. 70% of pupils polled rated their teaching in Year 7 as 'good' or 'very good', compared to 62% in Year 8 and 60% in Year 9. This compared with 66% in Year 10 and 70% in Year 11.

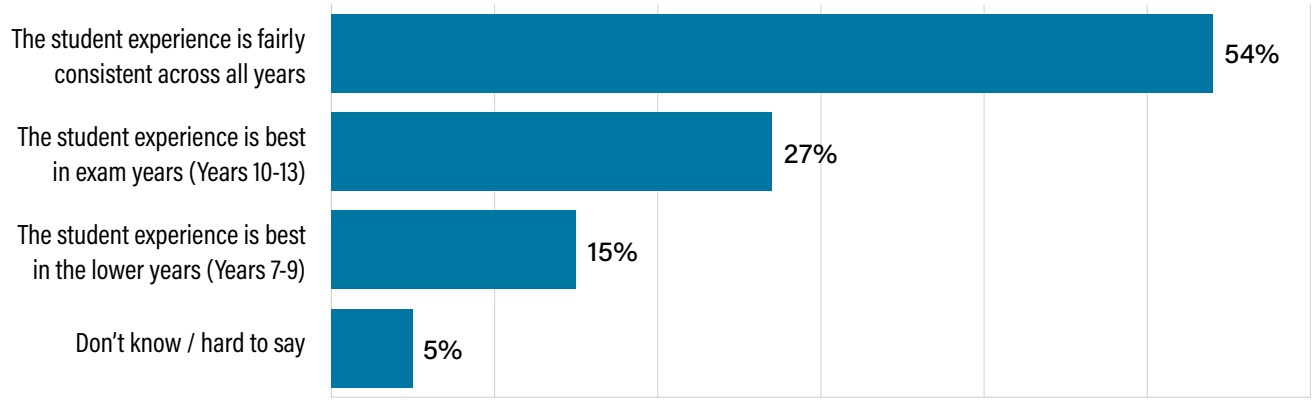
Teachers' assessment was more mixed. 54% said the pupils' experience was broadly consistent across year groups. However, 27% thought it was best during Years 10 to 13, compared with 15% who thought it was best during Years 7 to 9.

Q. Thinking back, how would you rate the quality of teaching you received during the following years? Give an overall rating for each year, across all your teachers, not just one subject. [Pupils]



Q. Thinking back, how would you rate the quality of teaching you received during the following years? Give an overall rating for each year, across all your teachers, not just one subject. [Year 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13]. Base: All pupils who experienced each year – 7 (2,090), 8 (1,698), 9 (1,468), 10 (1,189), 11 (868).

Thinking about your school, where do you think the student experience is best?

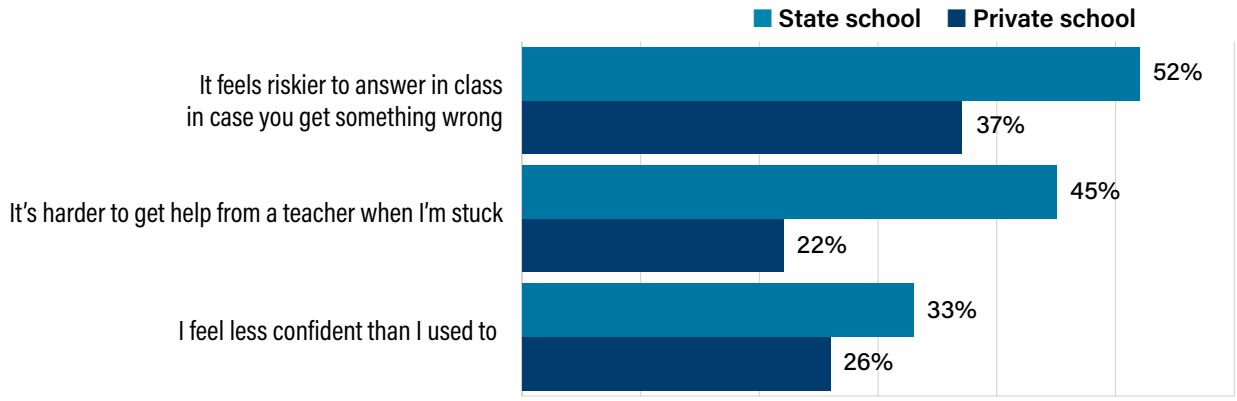


Q. Thinking about your school, where do you think the student experience is best? By student experience, we mean the quality of teaching, learning and support that pupils receive, and how well the school meets their academic, pastoral and developmental needs. Base: All teachers (810).

Experience also differed by school type. Compared with pupils in private schools, state school pupils were more likely to say that it felt risky to answer a question in class in case they got something wrong, that it was harder to get help from a teacher when they were stuck, and they felt less confident than they used to.

There was also variation between subjects. Maths teachers were the least likely to say Key Stage 3 prepared pupils poorly for GCSEs (11%), compared with 16% of English teachers and 17% of science teachers. In focus groups, pupils often organised their accounts of secondary school by subject, which is a significant shift from the more integrated experience of primary school, and means that a pupil's confidence and engagement can vary substantially within the same school, depending on the subject and teacher.

Which of the following have you found to be true since starting secondary school (Year 7)? Showing % saying "This is true'...



Q. Which of the following have you found to be true since starting secondary school (year 7)? Base: All pupils (2,090).

"I'm in top set, but mine's really loud most of the time...some teachers are really good at handling the class, and others, if we have a sub, stuff gets thrown across the classroom and people are just screaming. It really depends on who's teaching the lesson for you."

Year 9 pupil, County Durham

"In Year 7, when I was in middle set, there was shouting, yelling and stuff being thrown across the classroom. In top set, it was silent, especially in history."

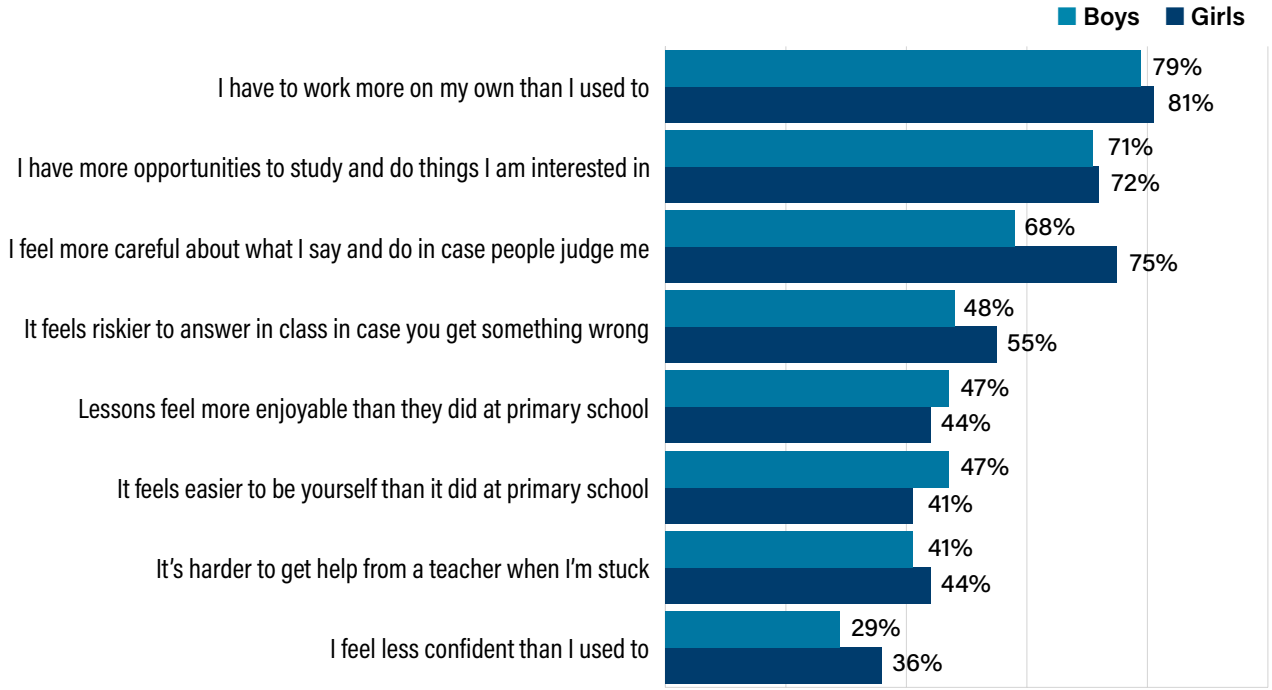
Year 9 pupil, County Durham

3.3 Girls, pupils with SEND and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds report a consistently poorer experience of Key Stage 3

The average figures through this report hide important differences between groups of pupils. Across the measures examined, girls, pupils with SEND and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds described a consistently more difficult experience of Key Stage 3. The recurring issues include lower confidence and enjoyment, greater pressure, weaker relationships and more difficulty getting help.

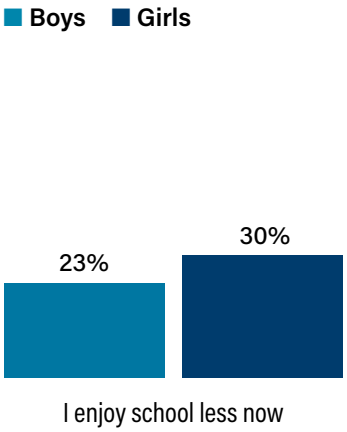
Girls reported a worse experience than boys on several questions. They were more likely to take months or longer to settle into secondary school, feel under pressure from tests, worry about being judged and find it risky to answer questions in class. 30% said they enjoyed school less than when they started in Year 7, compared with 23% of boys.

Which of the following have you found to be true since starting secondary school (Year 7)? Showing % saying 'This is true'...



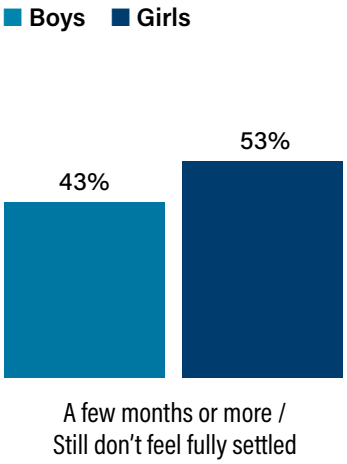
Q. Which of the following have you found to be true since starting secondary school (year 7)?
Base: All pupils (2,090) – Boys (1,050), Girls (1,035).

Since starting secondary school (year 7), how has your enjoyment of school changed?



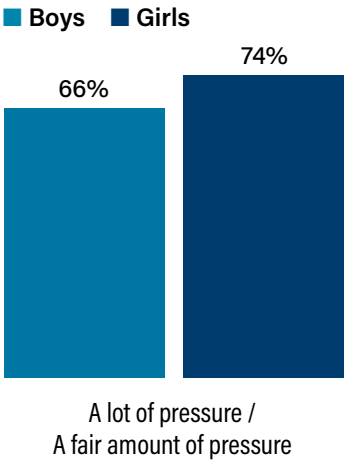
Q. Since starting secondary school (year 7), how has your enjoyment of school changed? Base: All pupils (2,090) – Boys (1,050), Girls (1,035).

How long did it take you to feel settled at secondary school?



Q. How long did it take you to feel settled at secondary school? Base: All pupils (2,090) – Boys (1,050), Girls (1,035).

How much pressure do you feel about tests and assessments at school?

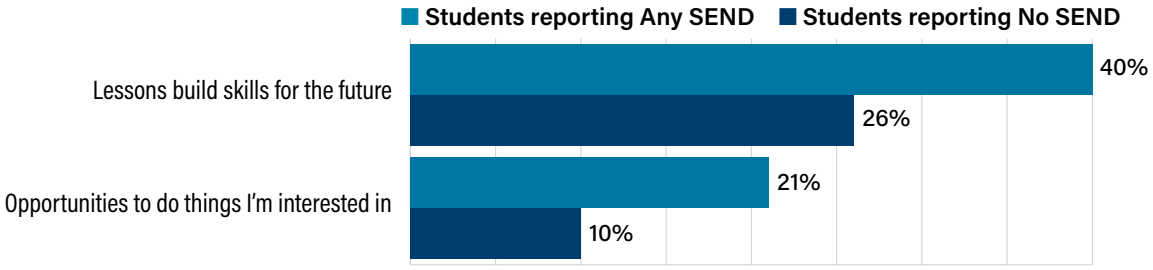


Q. How much pressure do you feel about tests and assessments at school? Base: All pupils (2,090) – Boys (1,050), Girls (1,035).

Pupils who reported having SEND also described a markedly harder experience. 46% said they felt less confident than they used to, more than twice the proportion among pupils without SEND, at 22%. They were also more likely to say that answering in class felt risky and that getting help from a teacher was harder than it had been at primary school.

Their experience of learning was also less positive. 21% said they rarely had opportunities to do things they were interested in, compared with 10% of pupils without SEND. 40% said lessons did not help them understand the knowledge and skills they would need in future, compared with 26% of their peers without SEND.

Which of the following comes closest to your view? / Thinking about your lessons, how well do they help you understand...? Showing % saying 'Not well' or 'Rarely'...

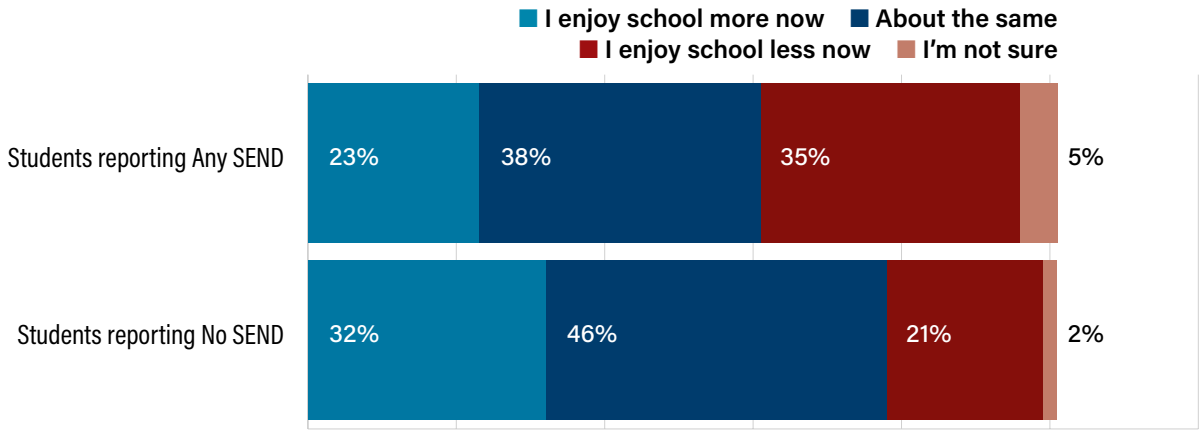


Q. Which of the following comes closest to your view? In my normal lessons... I have more opportunities to study and do things I am interested in. Base: KS3 Pupils (995) - Any SEND (236). No Send (730); Q. Thinking about your lessons, how well do they help you understand...The skills and knowledge you'll need in the future. Base: KS3 Pupils (995) – Any SEND (236). No Send (730).

Finally, socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils reported a weaker experience across measures of engagement and belonging. 35% of pupils from C2DE households said they were bored in most or all lessons, compared to 25% of ABC1 pupils. They were also more likely to enjoy school less than when they started secondary school, at 31% compared to 23%, and to say that they usually dreaded attending, at 22% compared to 15%.

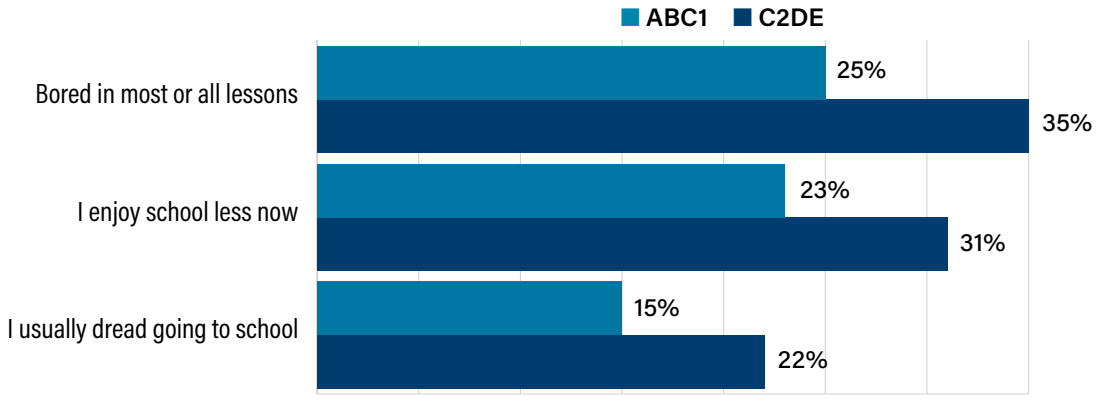
White British pupils from C2DE households reported a particularly weak experience on some measures. 33% said they enjoyed school less than when they started Year 7, compared with 24% of White British pupils from ABC1 households. Only 32% regularly saw the relevance of their learning beyond exams, compared with 40% across other pupils.

Since starting secondary school (Year 7), how has your enjoyment of school changed?



Q. Since starting secondary school (Year 7), how has your enjoyment of school changed?
Base: All respondents (2,090) – Any SEND (373), No SEND (1,227)

How often do you feel like this in lessons / Since starting secondary school (year 7), how has your enjoyment of school changed? / Which comes closest to how you usually feel about going to school?



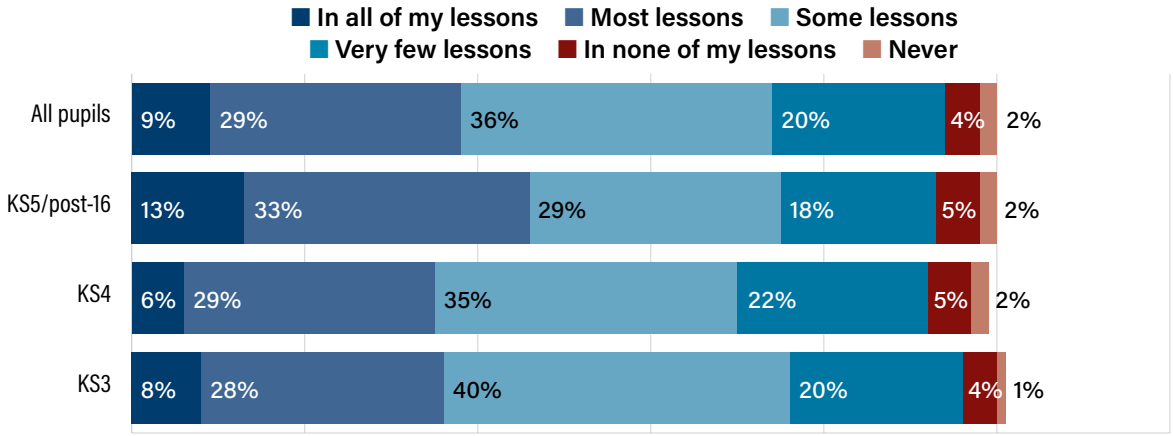
Q. Since starting secondary school (Year 7), how has your enjoyment of school changed?
Base: All respondents (2,090) – ABC1 (1,207) C2DE (876).

3.4 Many pupils struggle to see how what they are learning during Key Stage 3 will help them in life beyond exams

Only 36% of pupils currently in Key Stage 3 say they can see the relevance of what they are learning to life beyond exams or a future career in most or all lessons. A further 40% see it in some lessons, while 25% see it in very few lessons or none at all. This is roughly the same as the experience in Key Stage 4, and much lower than the experience in Key Stage 5.

Pupils spoke about this frequently in focus groups. They generally believed that education was important, particularly for getting qualifications, finding work, becoming independent, and understanding the world around them. What they struggled to explain was how the subjects and topics they were learning about linked to those broader purposes. In the absence of those connections being made explicit, some judged the value of a subject largely by whether it related directly to a career they already had in mind or a GCSE they expected to choose.

How often do you feel like this in lessons?: I can see the relevance of what I'm learning beyond my exams or future career



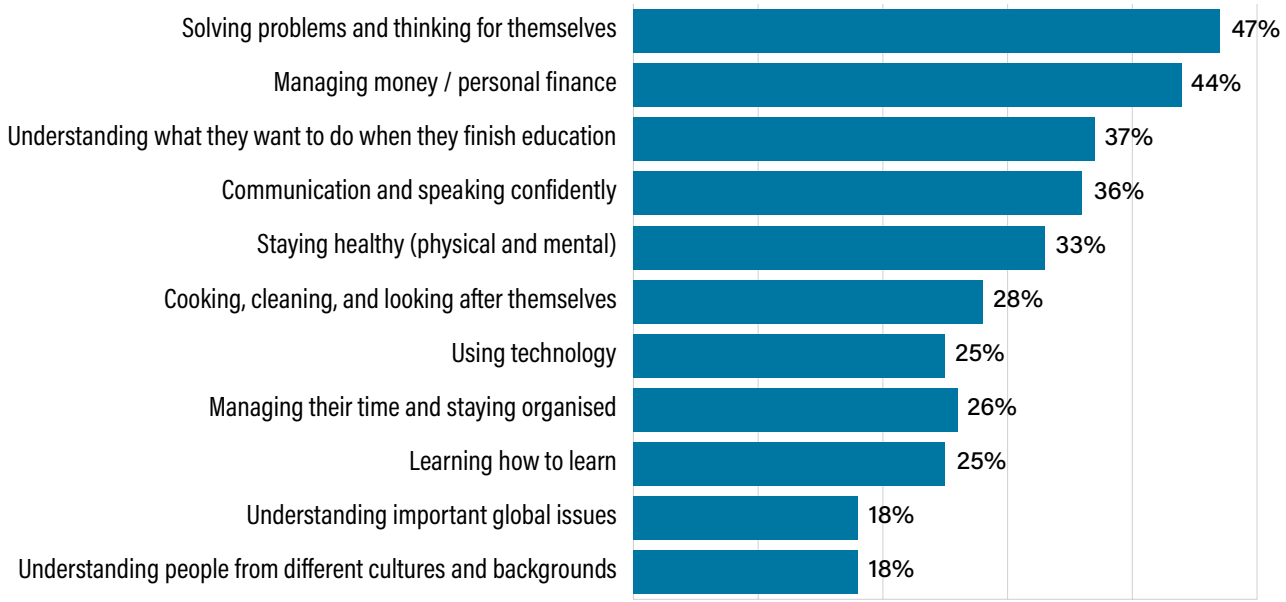
How often do you feel like this in lessons? Base: All pupils (2,090) – KS3 (995), KS4 (544), KS5 (546).

> *"Some things that you learn in science and maths and the core subjects, they're not going to particularly benefit you at all. Especially if you're aiming for a job that you really want...it's just not going to benefit you at all."*
>
> Year 9 pupil, County Durham

This shows how pupils have a relatively narrow understanding of relevance. They were often looking for direct usefulness because other forms of relevance – such as how a subject helps them to understand the world, different perspectives, or themselves – were less clear to them.

Parents also see a gap between academic learning and preparation for life. 63% say Key Stage 3 prepared their child well for the GCSE years, while only 40% say it prepared them well to thrive in the wider world. Asked what their child's school should have focused on more, parents most frequently selected 'solving problems and thinking for themselves' (47%), 'managing money / personal finance' (44%) and 'understanding what they want to do when they finish education' (37%).

Thinking about your child(ren)'s experiences during Key Stage 3, which of these areas, if any, should their school have focussed on more? Select all that apply



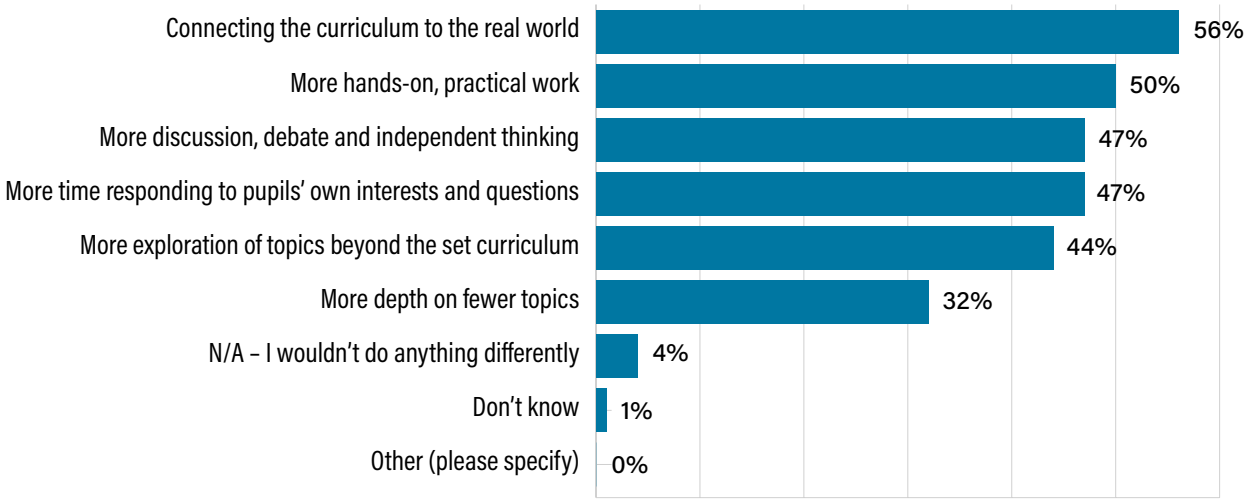
Thinking about your child(ren)'s experiences during Key Stage 3, which of these areas, if any, should their school have focussed on more? Base: Parents (772).

"I was asked when you look at your curriculum, who does it speak to and what does it say? And it made us think quite a lot, I'm in a faith school and a number of our student of course are not religious, but actually do they see themselves in that curriculum? Do they see that relevance? Do they hear views that support who they are as a person or not?"

Head of religious studies, state faith school, Greater Manchester

Teachers are divided over whether Key Stage 3 prepares pupils well for life after education. 53% believe it does, while 44% believe it does not. When asked what they would do more of if they had greater freedom, their most common response was 'connecting the curriculum to the real world' (56%). 50% selected 'more hands-on, practical work' and 47% selected 'more discussion, debate and independent thinking.'

If you had more freedom at KS3, what would you do more of?



Q. If you had more freedom at KS3, what would you do more of? Base: All teachers (810).

Zooming out: the system view

Variation in pupils' experiences is partly produced by the way secondary school is organised. Subject specialism gives pupils access to a richer curriculum, but it also divides their day between many different teachers, classrooms and sets of expectations. A stronger Key Stage 3 needs to preserve the value of subject-specific teaching while ensuring that pupils feel known and understood across the school and that they experience greater coherence between subjects and years. Schools and the wider system should therefore pay increased attention to ways of fostering engagement, belonging and relevance throughout Years 7 to 9, particularly for the groups most likely to report a poorer experience.

36%

More than a third of teachers say most pupils take a few months or longer to adjust to the move to Key Stage 3

22%

More than one in five parents say their child's transition to secondary school was not managed well

30%

Three in ten girls say they enjoy school less than they did when they started Year 7

46%

Almost half of pupils with SEND say they feel less confident than they did before moving to secondary school.



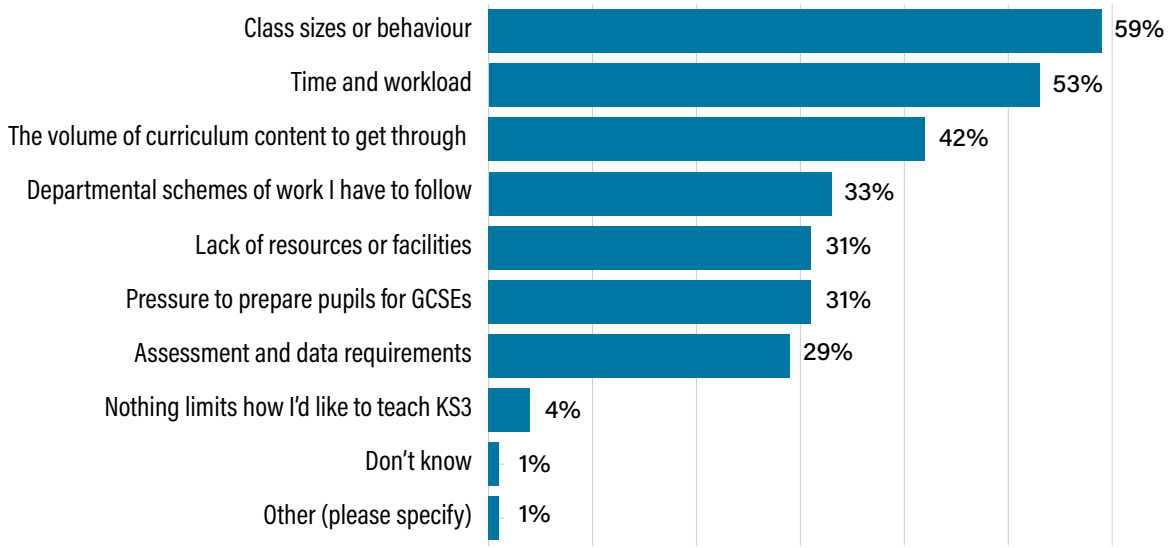
FINDING 4: Teachers recognise the problems with Key Stage 3, but the system limits their capacity to rethink it

4.1 Teachers identify constraints more readily than they identify opportunities to improve Key Stage 3

Teachers readily identify the pressures affecting Key Stage 3. 94% name at least one factor limiting how they would like to teach it. 'Class sizes or behaviour' is the most commonly cited constraint, selected by 59%, followed by 'time and workload', selected by 53%. Curriculum size, prescribed schemes of work, limited resources and GCSE pressure all follow.

However, asked about the drivers of pupil disengagement during Key Stage 3, many of the factors they name are outside the classroom or even the school gates.

Which of the following, if any, most limits how you'd like to teach at KS3?



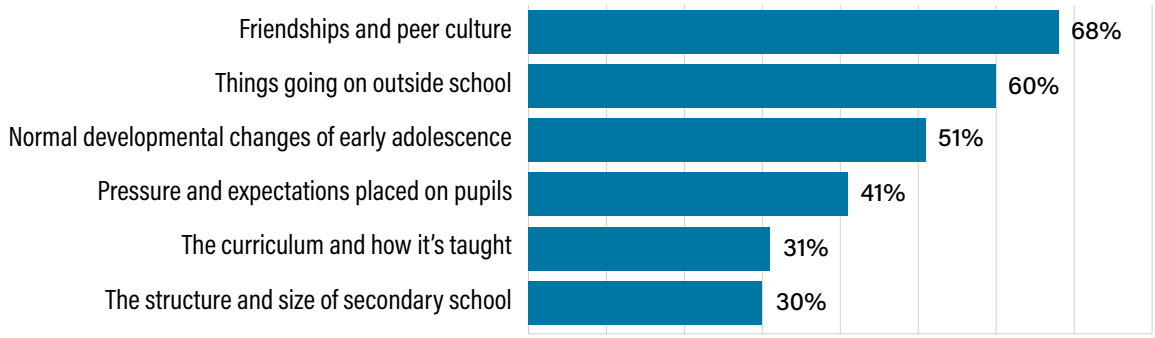
Which of the following, if any, most limits how you'd like to teach at KS3? Base: All teachers (810).

Despite this, their preferred solutions reflect the pressures faced inside schools. Smaller classes and earlier intervention are the two most commonly selected changes. They are both resource-intensive responses which leave the underlying purpose and design of Key Stage 3 largely unaffected.

This suggests that teachers tend to imagine improvement within the existing model of Key Stage 3. When its basic structures and expectations appear to be fixed, the most readily available solutions are those that make the current model more manageable. Changes to the purpose, curriculum or design of the phase are less readily identified. 30% select 'more practical learning', 28% 'a curriculum covering fewer topics in greater depth' and 25% 'greater freedom to depart from the set curriculum.' Only 23% place 'a clearer and more distinct identity' for Key Stage 3 among their three highest priorities, even though around three-quarters support such an identity when asked about it directly.

In focus groups, teachers spoke about how the next lesson, behaviour incident, assessment point or examination cohort creates an immediate demand on their time. Developing a different approach to Key Stage 3 requires space to challenge existing assumptions, weigh competing priorities and plan across subjects and year groups. Few teachers felt they had that capacity.

When students disengage during KS3, how much do you think it's driven by each of the following? Showing the % saying 'major driver'



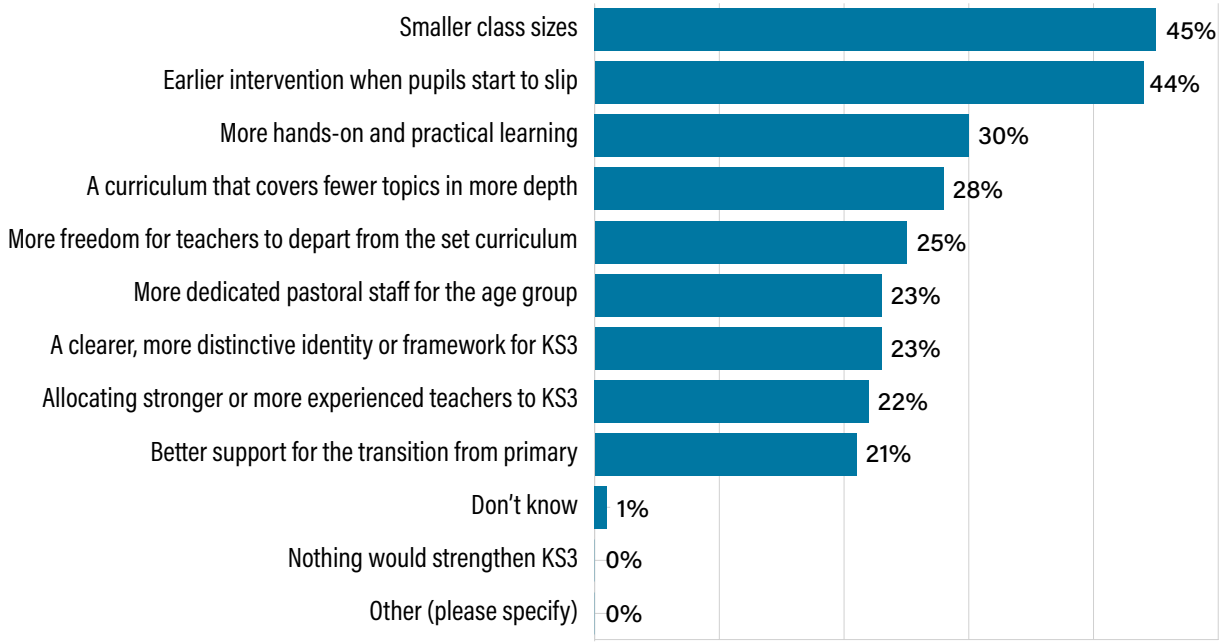
When students disengage during KS3, how much do you think it's driven by each of the following? Base: Teachers (810).

> *"My priority is just trying to make the majority or as many students as I can engage. It is majorly about relationship-building and how you deliver your curriculum with passion and the skills for GCSE. And then, if there's any capacity left over after you burnout to do all these extra things that contribute to inclusion, belonging and cultural capital and things like that, then great – but you've got to have the capacity for it."*
>
> Head of modern foreign languages, state secondary school, Torquay

When asked what they would do with greater freedom, teachers give clear answers: connect learning to the real world, provide more practical work and create more space for discussion and pupils' interests.

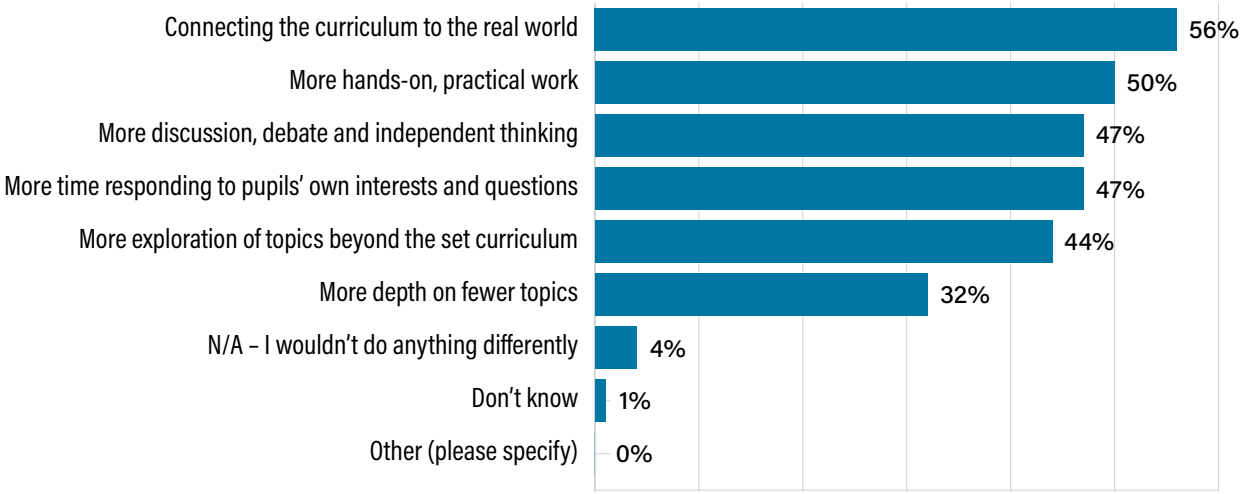
The difficulty is moving from recognising individual problems to developing a coherent alternative for the phase. Without protected time, useful evidence and sustained leadership attention, the most urgent problems continue to take precedence.

Which of the following would most strengthen KS3 at your school?



Which of the following would most strengthen KS3 at your school? Select up to three. Base: all teachers (810).

If you had more freedom at KS3, what would you do more of?



If you had more freedom at KS3, what would you do more of? Base: all teachers (810).

4.2 Teachers often perceive that they have less curriculum freedom in Key Stage 3 than they would like

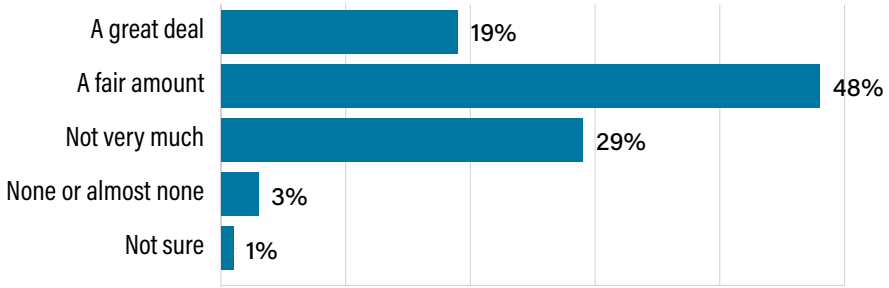
Schools have considerable freedom to determine what they teach and do in Key Stage 3. Maintained schools must teach the national curriculum, but can decide how to organise the school day, sequence much of the content, assess progress and teach the required material. Academies currently have wider curriculum freedoms, although they must provide a broad and balanced curriculum including English, Maths and Science.

Teachers' perceptions of their own freedom are mixed. 67% say they have at least 'a fair amount' of freedom to teach Key Stage 3 as they think best. However, only 19% say they have 'a great deal', while 32% report having 'not very much' or 'none or almost none'. Teachers in state schools are less likely to report substantial freedom than those in independent schools, at 65% compared to 85%.

Formal freedom is filtered through decisions made at trust, school and department level. A third of teachers say departmental schemes of work limit how they would like to teach at Key Stage 3. Teachers also described standardised lesson structure, assessment processes and expectations about the pace of curriculum coverage. These approaches may support consistency and help manage workload, but can also narrow the scope for teachers to respond to their pupils or experiment with different approaches.

> *"One of the things that I've seen is people saying we start every single lesson the same way. So say for example, a retrieval grid...we start every lesson like that because it means the students know what to expect and therefore they're able to retain things over time and it means that they're able to engage with things in an accessible way. But from my perspective, imagine going to five lessons a day and it starts the same way every time. How is that making students love learning?"*
>
> English teacher, state secondary school, Northumberland

How much freedom do you feel you have to teach KS3 the way you think is best?



How much freedom do you feel you have to teach KS3 the way you think is best? Base: Teachers who teach KS3 (584).

The focus group discussions also suggested that teachers often understand curriculum freedom primarily as freedom to change what content they teach or to add practical and enjoyable activities around it. There was less discussion of the concepts and contexts through which content can be made meaningful, or the pedagogy through which pupils are taught it. These can also be important sources of engagement, even where the prescribed subject content remains the same.

Perceived accountability limits teachers' freedom further. One mathematics teacher described how her previous school had introduced project-based learning. Pupils were more engaged and could see how maths applied to everyday life, but attainment was weak. The approach was abandoned and grades subsequently improved.

This example illustrates how formal curriculum freedom can be limited by the outcomes against which schools expect to be judged. It also exposes a wider tension between engagement and attainment where, when the two appear to pull in different directions, schools have strong incentives to prioritise the latter.

Other teachers described schools where leaders trusted departments to adapt Key Stage 3 around pupils' needs. A design and technology teacher linked this autonomy directly to strong later outcomes.

> *"The kids started to disengage with maths, but the grades went up. It felt like we were trying to please the trust and everyone else, but forgetting why we went to project-based learning in the first place – which was to encourage the kids to love maths and see how it is relevant in everyday life."*
>
> Maths teacher, Plymouth

> *"I like the autonomy that we've got in our school to do what we need at Key Stage 3, and we deliver good outcomes at Key Stages 4 and 5. So SLT aren't all over us. They leave us to get on with it."*
>
> Design and technology teacher, state grammar school, Dorset

4.3 Where good practice in Key Stage 3 exists, it is not spread effectively across the system

The research identified schools and teachers taking thoughtful approaches to Key Stage 3. These included deliberately sequenced subject curricula, timetabled co-curricular programmes, redesigned transition arrangements and practical projects connected to local employers. The examples differed substantially, reflecting different pupils, communities and educational philosophies. Teachers know that some things do work. While able to identify constraints and pressures, 89% of teachers also say Key Stage 3 works well in their own school – although only a quarter say it works very well.

This research has not found a single model of a successful Key Stage 3, and practices developed in one school cannot simply be transplanted into another. A timetabled co-curricular programme, for example, expands access but requires curriculum time to be taken from elsewhere. Greater consistency between classes may protect pupils' access to knowledge, while also reducing individual teachers' flexibility. Each approach involves choices and consequences that need to be understood.

The wider problem is that the system has limited ways to test these approaches, compare their impact or help other schools adopt them. Good practice is often shared through individual trusts, professional networks, conference presentations or isolated case studies. Its reach can depend on whether a school leader happens to encounter it and has the capacity to act.

Producing another collection of case studies will not, by itself, change practice across thousands of schools. Schools need to understand the principles behind an approach, the problem it is intended to solve, the resources it requires and the trade-offs it creates. They also need enough practical detail to picture how it might work in their own context.

This then all links back to the first finding: Key Stage 3 lacks clear purpose. Schools lack a common set of outcomes against which different approaches can be judged, particularly beyond attainment. There is limited comparative evidence about which models strengthen engagement, belonging, independence or the transition into later study. As a result, individual leaders must carry much of the risk of innovation themselves.

> *"Every so often I go online and see how many views we've had on our case study video – it's something like 1,000 views, months after it came out."*
>
> Member of the Early Secondary Advisory Group

> *"You need to have the abstract, top-level principles that hold together what we think good Key Stage 3 looks like. But then you've got to translate that down into: in this school, this looks like this."*
>
> Member of the Early Secondary Advisory Group

Zooming out: the system view

The constraint revealed in this section extends beyond teacher workload. Teachers and leaders are working within a system that has made subject coverage, consistency and preparation for later exams the default frame for Key Stage 3. Greater freedom alone may therefore have limited effect. Schools also need a shared framework, opportunities to develop their curriculum and pedagogical expertise, and practical ways to test and refine different approaches. Such a framework would help them navigate the recurring tensions between consistency and autonomy, knowledge and application, subject integrity and pupil engagement, and preparation for Key Stage 4 and the distinctive needs of 11- to 14-year-olds, without allowing any one of these to dominate.



94%

of teachers identify at least one factor limiting how they would like to teach Key Stage 3

19%

of teachers say they have a great deal of freedom to teach Key Stage 3 as they think best

32%

of teachers say they have little or no freedom in how they teach Key Stage 3

Implications

This research does not point to a single model for Key Stage 3. Instead, it identifies six implications that any serious attempt to improve the phase should consider, beginning with a clearer purpose, which should then extend through curriculum design and delivery, assessment, engagement, transition and the capacity of schools to rethink their approach to this phase.



IMPLICATION	DETAIL	ACTORS
1 Clearly define the distinctive purpose of Key Stage 3	Key Stage 3 needs a clearer purpose that is broader than preparation for GCSEs and extends beyond individual subjects. This should describe what every pupil should gain by the end of Year 9, and guide decisions around curriculum, staffing, assessment, transition and resourcing, while leaving schools scope to respond to their context.	For government, the Key Stage 3 Alliance, schools and trusts
2 Redesign Key Stage 3 around its distinctive purpose	Curriculum design should recognise both where pupils have come from and where they are going, while responding specifically to the developmental and educational needs of 11- to 14-year-olds. Schools should balance continuity from primary education with preparation for Key Stage 4, without allowing either adjoining phase to dictate the Key Stage 3 experience.	For government, curriculum bodies, schools and trusts
3 Align accountability and assessment with that purpose	Assessment, inspection and school improvement should reflect and align with the agreed purpose and design of Key Stage 3 suggested above. If not done, or misalignment remains, the effects of the above will be limited as Key Stage 4 content, assessment models and measures of success will continue to shape Years 7-9.	For government, Ofsted, the Key Stage 3 Alliance
4 Treat transition as a medium term process that is focused on student wellbeing and engagement	Schools should continuously monitor indicators of pupil engagement and belonging throughout the Key Stage 3 years and target activity towards pupil groups that are known to take longer to settle. Schools and trusts should consider how to reduce the gulf between the primary and secondary experience, by looking at how Year 7 is organised. This should include the number of teachers and classrooms pupils have, continuity of teaching approaches and curriculum design, connections between subjects, and whether every pupil has a strong point of contact.	For government, schools and trusts, and local organisations
5 Design engagement into the core curriculum	Curriculum bodies, schools and trusts should treat engagement as a core feature of strong curriculum design and teaching. What is taught in Key Stage 3 may be defined by the national curriculum, but how it is taught is up to schools and teachers and should be designed to maximise pupil engagement. Practical application, discussion, inquiry, real-world contexts and enriching experiences should be woven through subject learning and should not depend on activities outside lessons or individual teachers finding additional time and money.	For government, curriculum bodies, schools and trusts
6 Build schools' confidence and capacity to rethink Key Stage 3	Schools and trusts should consider who leads Key Stage 3, which staff teach it, and the autonomy they hold, and whether they have sufficient time and professional support to develop their practice. Schools and trusts should support teachers to apply agency over how they teach the defined curriculum. National, curriculum and teacher training organisations should help schools to understand the principles behind effective approaches, test and adapt them in different contexts, and build expertise in curriculum design and pedagogy.	For government, the Key Stage 3 Alliance, curriculum and teacher training organisations, schools and trusts



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