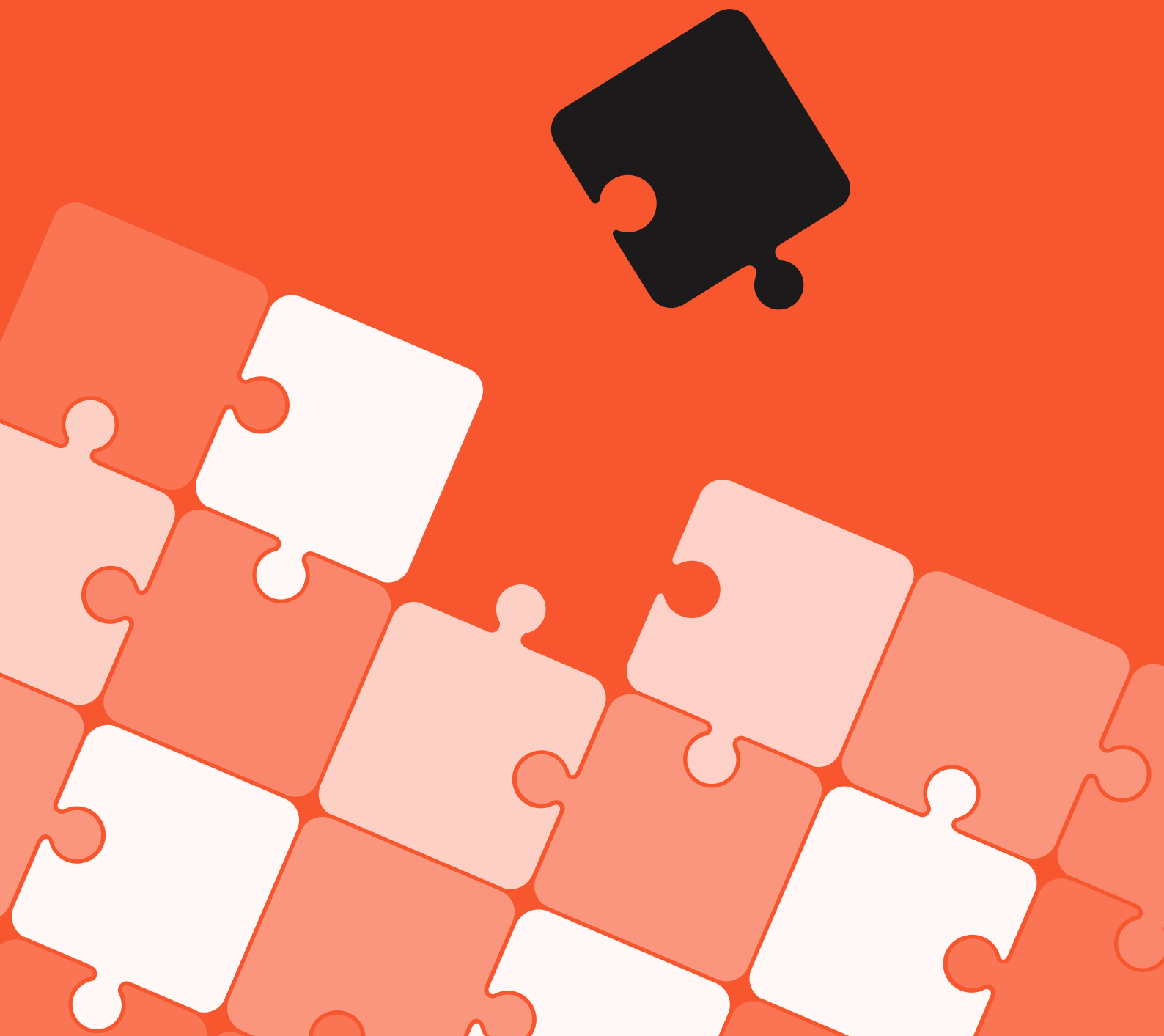
History on loop:

The sustained impact of school exclusions on Black communities

Simon Hood
Aqsa Suleman
Sarah Bristol-Abbott
Hassaan Anwari
Hannah Francis
Lesley Nelson-Addy



Published 2025.

The Runnymede Trust is the UK's leading independent racial justice think tank. Proudly independent, we speak truth to power on race and racism without fear or favour. From broadening the curriculum to exposing the Windrush scandal, our work is rooted in challenging structural racism and its impact on communities of colour. Our authoritative research-based interventions equip policy makers, practitioners and the general public with the tools to deliver genuine progress towards racial justice in Britain.

Contents

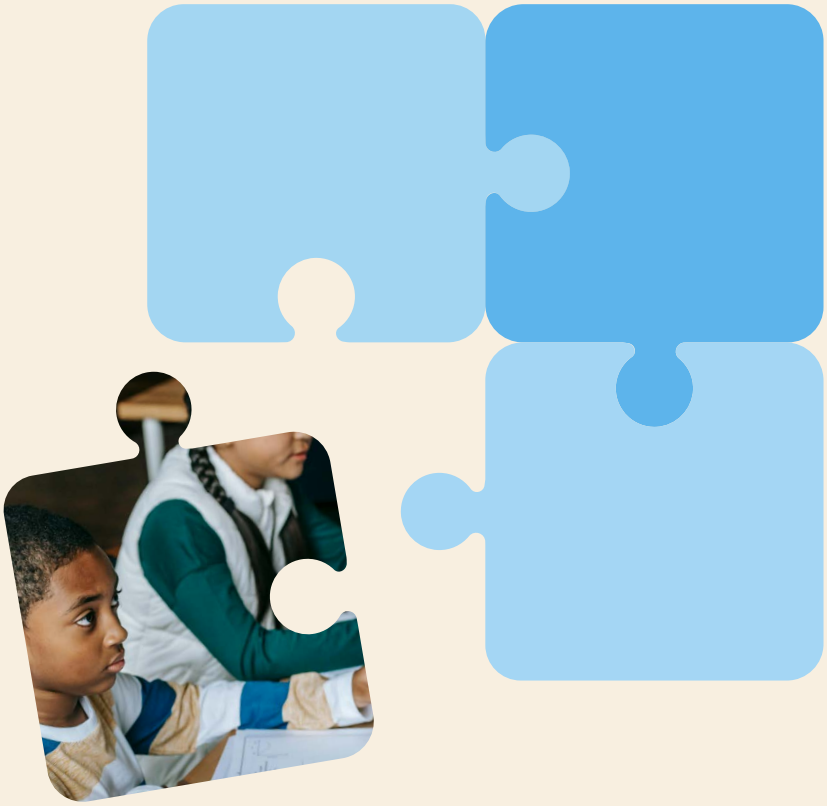
Terminology

Throughout this report, we have analysed the experience of Black Caribbean, Mixed White and Black Caribbean, and Black African students and adults.

We use the term 'Black' to describe these communities and to emphasise their shared experiences. When discussing the experiences of other communities we use the term 'minoritised ethnic communities' rather than 'communities of colour'. Among the communities most affected by school exclusion are Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Traveller communities, who have long histories of racialisation, discrimination and marginalisation. They may not identify with the latter term.

Content warning

This research report examines historical and current injustices in the education system, including instances of interpersonal and structural racism that have disproportionately affected Black communities. The report discusses the profound impacts of school exclusions, and the content may be distressing for some readers due to its detailed exploration of systemic inequities and intergenerational disadvantage. We recognise that any report addressing issues so deep-rooted may inadvertently miss certain aspects; however, we have made every effort to cover as much as possible, while ensuring sensitivity in our language and narrative framing.



Foreword

Jenn Lewis

CEO, Communities Empowerment Network (CEN)

Since 1999, the Communities Empowerment Network (CEN) has stood as a beacon of hope and an unwavering advocate for families navigating the challenging landscape of school exclusions. Our journey began with the foresight of Gerry German, Professor Gus John, John O'Malley and Obajimi Adefiranye, who recognised a pressing need to address the systemic inequalities that disproportionately impact Black and mixed-heritage students, particularly Black boys. CEN was among the first organisations in the UK specifically created to provide sustained and dedicated advocacy representation on behalf of children at risk of being excluded from school. Drawing from the campaigning and activism of the Black Parents Movement that emerged across the 1960s and 1970s, CEN was formed in 1999. Since then several organisations aligned with our values and work have emerged, many of whose staff were trained by or had some association with CEN. It could be argued that many of these organisations that have arrived on the scene since do not provide the same distinctive service offered by CEN, which has evolved to include training, early intervention and research as well as advocacy representation.

Each year, CEN is contacted by approximately 250 parents for advocacy support. Sadly, the demand for our services continues to soar, in direct correlation with the continuing increase in exclusions year on year.

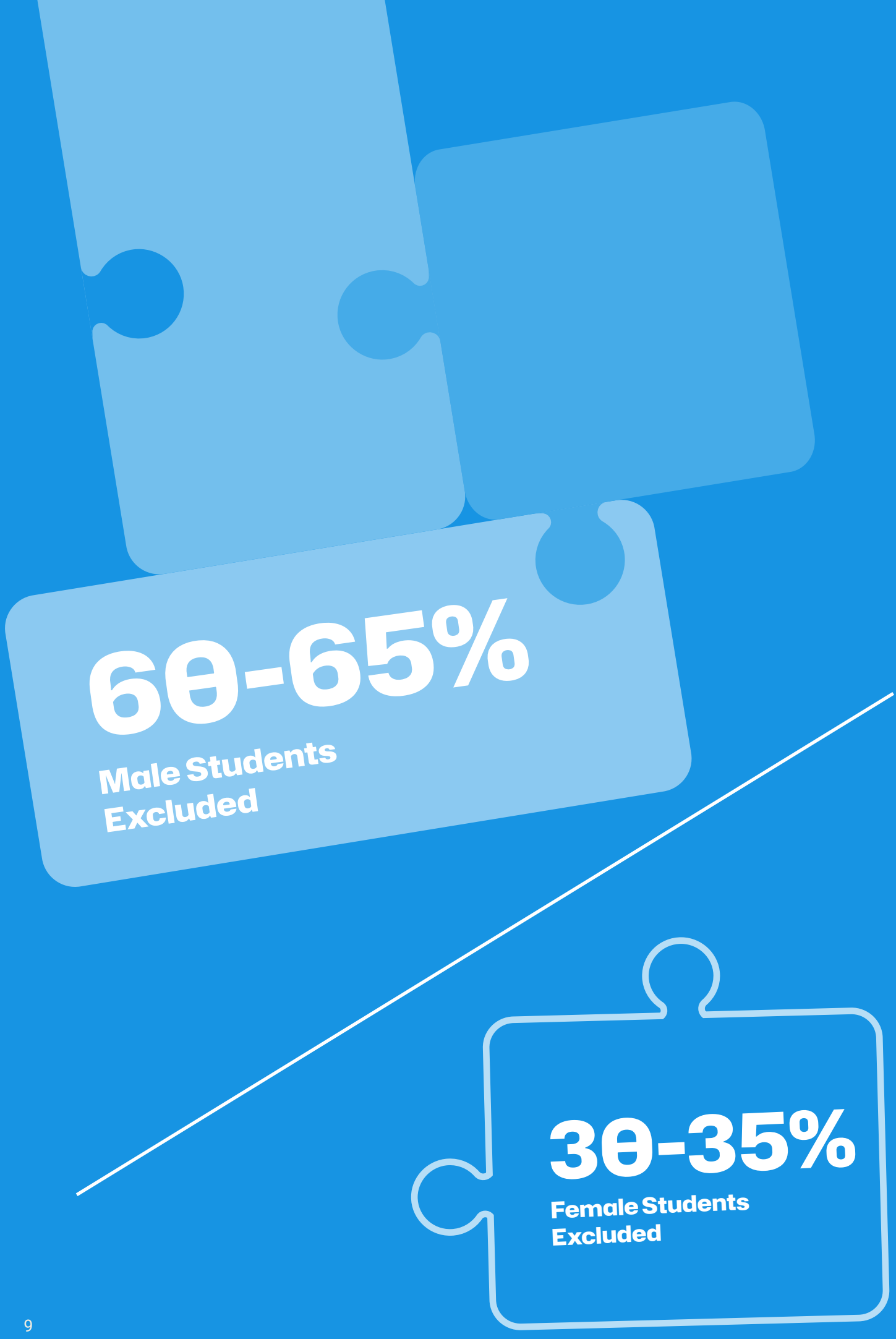
For over two decades, CEN has provided vital, free representation for parents and carers at crucial exclusion appeal meetings, including Governor Disciplinary Committees (GDCs) and Independent Review Panels (IRPs). We believe no family should face these complex and often daunting processes alone. Our core services – advocacy and representation, pre-meeting support, and reintegration guidance – are designed to empower families, ensure their voices are heard and protect their children's right to education.

More recently we have added early intervention via our Parent Empowerment Programme (PEP) to ensure that all parents have a better understanding of what they can do to support their children's educational journey.

The data we've gathered over the years paints a stark picture of who is most affected by exclusion policies. Black students consistently represent the largest proportion of our cases, ranging between 45 per cent and 50 per cent annually. Mixed-heritage students account for approximately 20–25 per cent, while Asian students make up a smaller segment, typically 5–10 per cent. The gender disparity is equally striking, with male students comprising approximately 60–65 per cent of excluded cases, compared with 30–35 per cent for female students. A particularly alarming trend is the high prevalence of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) among those excluded.

Between 30 per cent and 40 per cent of students we support have identified SEND, and a significant additional cohort exhibits signs of undiagnosed learning difficulties. This suggests a systemic failure in early intervention and adequate provision within mainstream education. As our service users attest, these students often struggle due to insufficient resources, a lack of specialist support and inadequate teacher training in managing neurodiverse learning needs.

Exclusion, therefore, is not merely an individual consequence but a profound familial upheaval. Many families turn to us for guidance on reintegration or alternative educational pathways for their children, highlighting the immense strain that these situations place on families.
Why is always the most important question when dealing with a child's behaviour and exploring options as to how best to respond – from 'Why is the child behaving this way?' in order to determine the circumstances that might be underpinning the behaviour, to 'Why is exclusion the best way to manage this child's behaviour?'


60-65%
Male Students
Excluded
30-35%
Female Students
Excluded

As well as working in the interests of those who are the primary casualties of exclusion, another important strand of CEN's advocacy programme is to use the advocacy conversation as an opportunity to encourage those who are responsible for making the ultimate decision to uphold an exclusion – or not – to adopt the WHY approach. This advocacy method, designed by CEN, is used by all CEN advocates when addressing panel members during GDC meetings and IRP hearings to prompt reflection on three specific points before a decision is made to exclude a child. It ensures that those making such decisions first consider the following:

WHAT other factors might be contributing to this child's behaviour that have not been identified/ presented as mitigation?

HOW might excluding this child impact on their/their family's life which may have long-term or unintended consequences?

YET to be explored options to support the child/family to improve their behaviour that might need to be considered instead of exclusion

This report delves into the lived experiences of these families, providing a qualitative lens through which to understand the realities that are hidden beneath statistics. It is a testament to the courage and resilience of parents, predominantly mothers, who have fought tirelessly for their children's right to education and fair treatment; to have their voices heard as equal partners in the education and care of their children; and to be engaged early enough in the process for other intervention options to be considered, which is why CEN's PEP programme is so vital.

The six in-depth case studies presented in Chapter 2 reveal the devastating impact of racial bias, the far-reaching effects of failing to provide adequate SEND support, the lack of parental engagement, and the emotional and financial toll that exclusions inflict on families. The eight which follow in Chapter 3 show the profound challenges that exclusion poses for young people as they enter into adulthood, and the deep scars which exclusion leaves.

We see, time and again, how the UK's education system disproportionately excludes Black and mixed-heritage students. Statistics are clear: Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean students are two to three times more likely to be enrolled in alternative provision than White British pupils. [1]

[1]Thomson, D. (2024) 'The characteristics of pupils who attend alternative provision schools', Education Data Lab, 1 February, https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2024/02/the-characteristics-of-pupils-who-attend-alternative-provision-schwools.

This is not simply a matter of individual behaviour; it is a structural injustice often rooted in biased perceptions, a lack of appropriate support for students with special educational needs, and socioeconomic disadvantages. CEN's work extends beyond individual cases; we actively challenge the systemic racism embedded in exclusion policies. Research repeatedly shows that Black students are frequently disciplined more harshly than their white counterparts for similar behaviours and often labelled as 'disruptive' rather than being provided with the support they need. The immense emotional, financial and logistical toll on families dealing with exclusion remains unrecognised, and little support exists. Our ongoing research reveals that parents often experience increased stress, career disruptions and significant mental health challenges. Many are forced to leave their jobs to manage their child's situation, leading to financial instability. By offering direct advocacy and legal support, CEN alleviates some of this burden, ensuring that families are not left to navigate this complex and often hostile process alone. The stories within this report are deeply moving, and at times infuriating.

They highlight the systemic failures that lead to children being pushed out of education, often when they are at their most vulnerable. From the 16-year-old with autism whose school consistently failed to provide necessary accommodations to the 15-year-old racially profiled for bringing a toy water gun to school, these narratives underscore the urgent need for change.

They reveal how a system designed to educate can instead criminalise and traumatise, leaving lasting scars on children and their families.
The case studies also shine a light on the incredible resilience of the parents. Their unwavering dedication in the face of institutional indifference, their tireless pursuit of justice and their determination to protect their children are truly inspiring. Yet this is a fight no parent should have to endure alone. CEN exists to stand with them, to amplify their voices and to hold the system accountable.

As you read this report, I urge you to reflect on the profound impact that school exclusions have on the lives of children and their families. Consider the ripple effects that extend far beyond the classroom, shaping futures and exacerbating inequalities. More importantly, consider what we, as a society, can do to ensure that every child, regardless of their background or needs, can thrive within an education system that is truly inclusive, equitable and just.

Sadly, due to a conflation of the current funding crisis, the government's 'levelling up' agenda and internal capacity issues, CEN has struggled to secure new financial support from trusts and foundations, many of whom have paused funding. As a result, at the time of writing, CEN is facing the very real possibility of closure despite the clear need for the vital services we provide.

This report, through its poignant case studies and meticulous analysis, underscores the enduring relevance of CEN's mission and the critical ongoing need for our work. But if CEN is to close, it will be in the knowledge that we have made a huge difference to the lives of the families with whom we have come into contact. We remain confident that whoever receives the baton from CEN will be as committed to advocating for a future where no child is left behind as we have been over the past 26 years.

We hope that you are moved enough by the stories shared as part of this report to join in ensuring a future that upholds a belief in equality and justice in education for all.

Introduction

The exclusion of Black children and young people has been a persistent and deep-rooted issue within the British education system

For decades, Black students, particularly those of Caribbean heritage, have disproportionately experienced a challenging and complicated relationship with UK educational institutions. These issues do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of a well-documented history of structural racism within education, which continues to shape the experiences and outcomes of Black children and young people today.

From the 1960s to 1980s, Black children, principally from the Caribbean, were disproportionately placed in schools designated for the 'educationally subnormal'.[2] Many of these young people were recent arrivals to Britain, joining their biological parents after an extended separation.

Frequently, their parents had emigrated some years earlier, leaving them in the care of grandparents or other relatives in the Caribbean.

Often, within days, weeks or months of arriving in Britain, Black children were placed into one of three categories of 'special' or 'educationally subnormal' schools for children with special education needs and learning disabilities.
It was rare for children placed in such schools to be reintegrated into mainstream education. More significantly, the stereotypes that emerged across the 'educationally subnormal' ESN period have persisted to this day. Black children are frequently associated with challenging and disruptive behaviour, labelled as being unmanageable, and at worst unteachable.

[2] B. Coard (2021) How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal, fifth edition, Kingston, Jamaica: McDermott Publishing.

The British education system continues to maintain a tiered school system. Black pupils are disproportionately excluded from mainstream education and placed into a lower-performing tier of schooling, in institutions such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and other types of Alternative Provision (APs). Throughout this process, they are denied the same rights to an education that their peers have. Importantly, research shows that decisions to exclude are based not only on differences in students' behaviour but also on the consistent underestimation of Black students by British teachers.[3]

Exclusion has a detrimental impact on the life chances of excluded pupils, meaning that racial inequality is becoming further entrenched. Only 1 per cent of students who complete their GCSEs in APs achieve five 'good' GCSE grades, compared with the national average of 64.5 per cent.[4]

This has a knock on effect on life outcomes too: in 2022/23, 28.5 per cent of students who finished education in APs were reported as having 'no sustained destination'[5] after leaving key stage 4. Just 8.3 per cent of students in mainstream schools have the same status.[6]

Excluded pupils are more likely to be criminalised and to interact with the criminal justice system: between 2008 and 2018, 10.2 per cent of young people who received custodial sentences had attended some form of AP. In contrast, just 0.7 per cent of those with no criminal convictions had attended an AP.[7]

The experience of education is fundamental to developing healthy and safe communities, as exclusion has a much wider impact beyond the initial event. Analysis of the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children indicates that one of the strongest early years risk factors associated with exclusion is a history of the mother being suspended from school.[8] This suggests that the challenges faced by one generation can predispose subsequent generations to similar adverse outcomes, and as this report discusses, a number of exclusions occur due to bias, discrimination and deeply engrained systematic inequalities. For example, a 1999 report for the Commission for Racial Equality discusses the reasons informing the high exclusion and suspension rates experienced by Black children:

> Deep seated stereotypes held by teachers and school governors may lead to Black children being seen as having behavioural difficulties. Bridges (1994) suggests that with additional pressures on Black families from high levels of unemployment, cuts to social spending, racial harassment and 'social dislocation imposed on their family and community life. It is hardly surprising that some Black children present themselves as aggressive'.[9]

[3] Burgess, S. and Greaves, E. (2013) 'Test scores, subjective assessment, and stereotyping of ethnic minorities', Journal of Labor Economics 31(3): 535–576.

[4] Gill, K., Quilter-Pinner, H. and Swift, D. (2017) Making the Difference: Breaking the Link between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion, London: IPPR, www.ippr.org/articles/making-the-difference.

5 This refers to any pupils not in sustained participation in education or employment.

[6] Department for Education (DfE) (2025) 'Key stage 4 leavers national level destinations', 22 August, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/ca1a9840-35a8-4736-4d3f-08ddb873f6c0.

[7] Office for National Statistics (2022) 'The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system: May 2022' www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/theeducationandsocialcarebackgroundofyoungpeoplewhointeractwiththecriminaljusticesystem/may2022.

[8] Page, A., Parker, C., Heron, J., Logan, S., Henley, W., Emond, A. and Ford, T. (2017) 'Which children and young people are excluded from school? Findings from a large British birth cohort study, the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC)', Child: Care, Health and Development 44(2): 285–296, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28913834.

[9] Osler, A. (1997) Exclusion from School and Racial Equality, London: Commission for Racial Equality, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED428162.pdf, citing Bridges, L. (1994)) 'Exclusions: How did we get here?' in Bourne, J., Bridges, L. and Searle, C. (eds) Outcast in England: How Schools Exclude Black Children, London: Institute for Race Relations.

It is clear that an education system which continues to suspend and exclude children only serves to entrench existing inequalities. Despite the immense harm they cause, parents have very little ability to challenge exclusions, and permanently excluded pupils are rarely allowed to return to school.

This report explores these issues and presents case studies of a number of Black students who have experienced exclusion in the wake of the ESN period of schooling during the 1960s to the 1980s. Chapter 1 presents the legacy of this period of schooling and an analysis of the current drivers of exclusion.

Centring on this historical period, this report focuses specifically on Black students. This focus does not diminish or overlook the challenges faced by other ethnic groups. Rather, it reflects a deliberate decision to examine the historic and deeply rooted pattern of disproportionate exclusions that have affected Black, and especially Black Caribbean, children over decades in the British education system.

By concentrating on this group, we aim to better understand and challenge the longstanding structural inequalities they face. We recognise that the experiences of different Black communities are not homogeneous, and future research must continue to explore the varied and evolving forms of racial disparity across all groups.

In Chapter 2, we give an account of the exclusion and appeals process and explore experiences of exclusion today.

This research is based on six in-depth qualitative case studies, drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted with parents of excluded students. The aim was to explore the lived experiences of families navigating school exclusions, with a particular focus on racial disparities, SEND needs and the wider impact that exclusion has on families.

Following this, in Chapter 3 we look at the experiences of eight Black adults who experienced temporary, fixed-term or permanent exclusions while at school. While many of this cohort demonstrate high levels of resilience, it is evident that exclusion produced deep scars that are carried into adulthood.

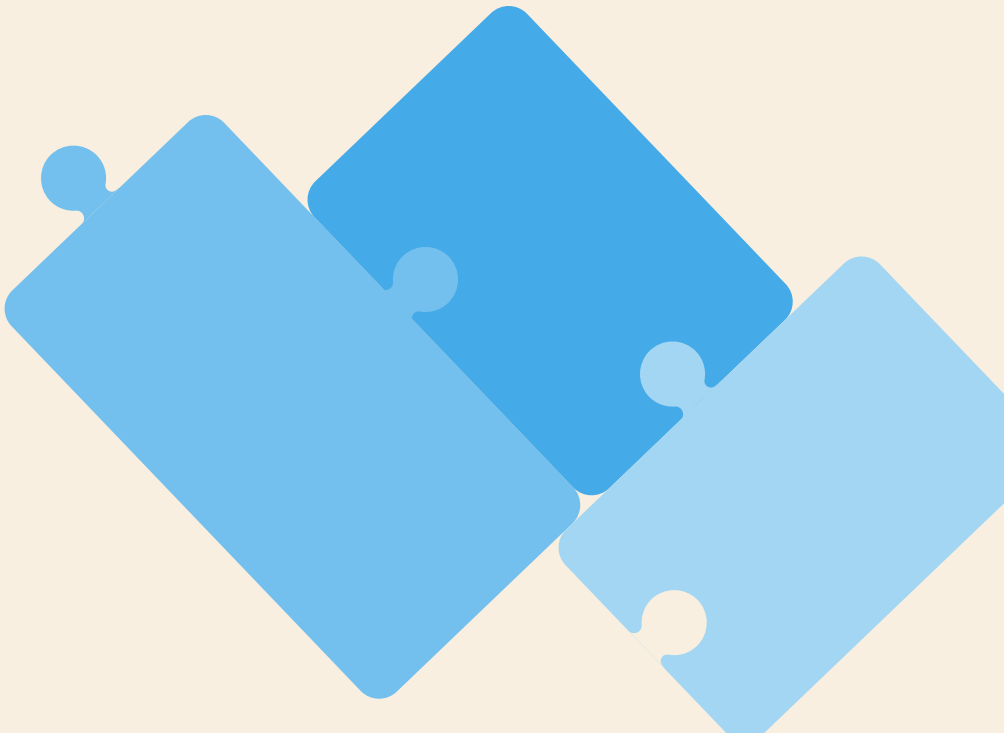
In comparing the two chapters, it is clear that an educational system that continues to expose Black pupils to exclusion further entrenches existing inequalities, with many formerly excluded students taking years to get their lives 'back on track'. By looking at the experiences of mothers, we can see how little recourse there is to appeal or reverse an exclusion decision. We take these experiences into account when closing the report, and offer a series of recommendations to push for equitable, fair and empowering educational experiences and outcomes for all.

Research into the disproportionate impact of school exclusions on minoritised ethnic communities is not new. At the Runnymede Trust and CEN, we have spent nearly three decades challenging the use of exclusions as a tool of racial injustice against children and families. In Runnymede's 1999 joint briefing with the Children's Society,[10] we laid bare how exclusion policies were failing pupils from minoritised ethnic groups, undermining the government's own commitments to social inclusion. That briefing emerged from our national 'Inclusive Schools?' conference, where we urged the government to set clear national and local targets to tackle racial disparities in exclusions.

Today, our commitment to advancing racial justice in education continues with renewed urgency. Through ongoing engagement with the Curriculum and Assessment Review,[11] the Runnymede Trust is working closely with key partners, including CEN, to fight for a truly inclusive curriculum – one that meaningfully represents the histories, identities and contributions of all minoritised ethnic groups. We believe that education must be a source of belonging, dignity and self-worth for all pupils, and that addressing racial inequality in schools must go beyond exclusions, to include what and how children are taught.

[10] Appiah, L. and Chunilal, N. (1999) 'Examining school exclusions and the race factor', Runnymede Trust Briefing Paper, December, London: Runnymede Trust, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/617bf7c6c25e78720e674d10_schoolExclusionsAndTheRaceFactor.pdf.

[11] Runnymede Trust (2024) Curriculum and Assessment Review: A Response from the Runnymede Trust, London, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-a-response-from-the-runnymede-trust.



Scope and methodology

Data collection

The case studies featured in Chapter 2 of this report were compiled from one-on-one interviews with parents who had sought advocacy support from CEN. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to share their experiences in depth while ensuring that key themes – such as school policies, the exclusion process and the emotional impact of exclusion – were consistently explored.

Further semi-structured interviews were conducted with adults who had experienced exclusion. In the Chapter 3 case studies drawn from these interviews, we explore the long-term effects of exclusion, and we ask participants to reimagine the education system.

Participant characteristics

All six participants in the first cohort were mothers advocating for their sons, reflecting a broader trend in which mothers disproportionately take on the burden of school exclusion advocacy. The second cohort were all Black adults, five identifying as male and three as female. The students discussed in the case studies were all Black boys, ranging in age from 12 to 16 years old. Three of the six students had SEND, including autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), though two were not formally diagnosed and were unsupported by schools for these needs.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Case study	Child's Age	Child's Gender	Child's Ethnicity	SEND	Parent Gender
1	16 years old	Male	Black Caribbean	Autism	Female (Mother)
2	16 years old	Male	Black African	Suspected SEND (unsupported)	Female (Mother)
3	15 years old	Male	Black Caribbean	N/A	Female (Mother)
4	12 years old	Male	Black Caribbean	N/A	Female (Mother)
5	12 years old	Male	Black African	ADHD	Female (Mother
6	14 years old	Male	Black Caribbean	Suspected SEND (unsupported)	Female (Mother)

1. The drivers of disproportionate school exclusions

Resistance to Racist Education and Exclusions Today

History demonstrates how racism in education has had life-altering consequences for Black children and young people. As discussed in the introduction to this report, during the 1960s and 1970s, Black Caribbean pupils were disproportionately labelled 'educationally subnormal' (ESN) and placed in special schools following racially biased assessments of their educational needs. Black parents were misled into believing that these placements would enhance their children's education, but these schools instead isolated and stigmatised their children. At the time, around 34 per cent of the school population in ESN schools were from Black Caribbean backgrounds.[12]

In 1971, however, Bernard Coard published his groundbreaking pamphlet *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain*, which shed light on these injustices and galvanised Black parents and education workers into action. His work prompted the growth of the Black Supplementary Schools movement – community-led initiatives that provided Black children with an affirming education and a means to resist racial discrimination.

These grassroots, volunteer-run schools, often held on Saturdays, not only reinforced core subjects such as maths and English but also taught pan-Africanism and Black history to counter the damaging narratives about Black culture embedded within the mainstream curriculum.

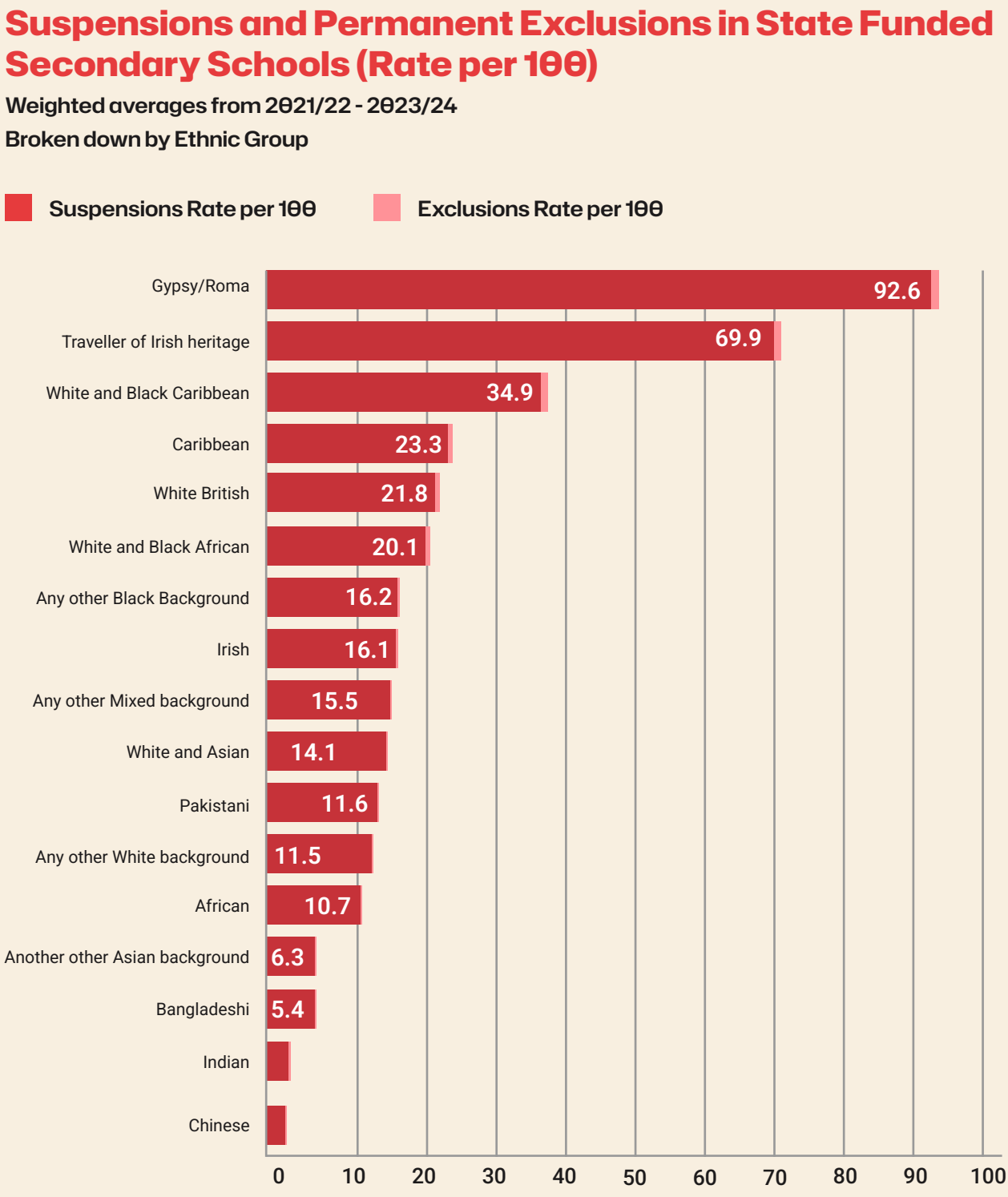
[12] Bei, Z. and Knowler, H (2023) 'Disrupting unlawful exclusion from school of minoritised children and young people racialized as Black: Using Critical Race Theory composite counter-storytelling', *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 27(3): 231–242.

Alongside this, the Black Education Movement (BEM), the Black Parents Movement and the anti-banding campaign took on the establishment, fighting against the racially biased introduction of IQ testing in primary schools. These campaigns were instrumental in exposing how exclusion policies were being used to justify the systematic marginalisation of Black children. The Sin Bins campaigns further challenged the disproportionate placement of Black pupils in ESN schools, highlighting how racial injustices in education have long fuelled activism.

Despite these efforts, over 50 years on the situation remains deeply problematic. Pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, as well as African and Black Caribbean children, are still suspended and permanently excluded at a much higher rate than White British pupils. Suspensions have risen to their highest levels since schools reopened after the COVID-19 lockdown. The majority of suspensions and exclusions occur during secondary school, but rapid increases have also been seen in primary school, where children have already had their earliest years of learning disrupted by the pandemic.[13] Figure 1 shows that in state-funded secondary schools between 2021/22 and 2023/24, White British pupils had an average suspension rate of 21.8 per 100 while Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils had rates of 23.3 and 34.9 respectively.

[13] Weale, S. and Adams, R. (2025) 'Rise in school exclusions in England including among pupils six or younger', Guardian, 10 July, www.theguardian.com/education/2025/jul/10/rise-in-school-exclusions-in-england-including-among-children-under-six.

Figure 1. Suspensions and permanent exclusions by ethnic group, rate per 100, 2021/22 to 2023/24



Note: The rates among Travellers of Irish Heritage and Gypsy Roma are an alarming 92.6 and 69.9 per 100, respectively. These experiences are beyond the scope of this research project as our findings are framed in relation to Black British history, and there is a specificity and range of factors informing exclusions and suspensions as experienced by Romani (Gypsy) Traveller and Roma communities to which we would not be able to do justice here. There will, however, be further research exploring these experiences.

Source: DfE (2025) 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England – by characteristic', 11 July, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/1320a1ec-d4ee-4a65-8b28-08ddbed6edd3.

Special educational needs and illegal exclusions

A 2018 Oxford University study found that Black Caribbean pupils continue to be disproportionately identified with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, even when controlling for socioeconomic background.[14] A study by the Education Policy Institute revealed that around one in ten students – totalling 69,000 pupils – made an 'unexplained exit' from mainstream education in 2017. Those most at risk of disappearing from the system included Black pupils, disabled students,[15] children in care, those receiving free school meals (FSM) and young people with mental health diagnoses.

The concerning trend of children disappearing from the education system seems to be growing too, with figures pointing to the ongoing issue of illegal and informal exclusions. In the 2022/23 autumn term, 24,700 children were reported as missing from education – meaning that they were not registered at a school at some point during the year. By the 2024/25 autumn term this figure had risen to 39,200, an increase of almost 60%.[16] Meanwhile the Education Policy Institute has estimated that up to 300,000 children may have been missing entirely from education in 2023.[17]

According to 2017 research by Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), the number of pupils being educated in schools for excluded pupils is five times the number of excluded pupils officially recorded each year.[18] Analysis of data since then shows that while this gap appears to be narrowing, there are still many more students enrolled in AP than there are permanently excluded pupils. In the most recent school year for which data is available (2023/24), there were still 5,000 more pupils enrolled in such schools (see Figure 2).

[14] Strand, S and Lindorff, A. (2018) Ethnic Disproportionality in the Identification of Special Education Needs (SEN) in England: Extent, Causes and Consequences, Oxford: University of Oxford, www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Combined-Report_2018-12-20.pdf.

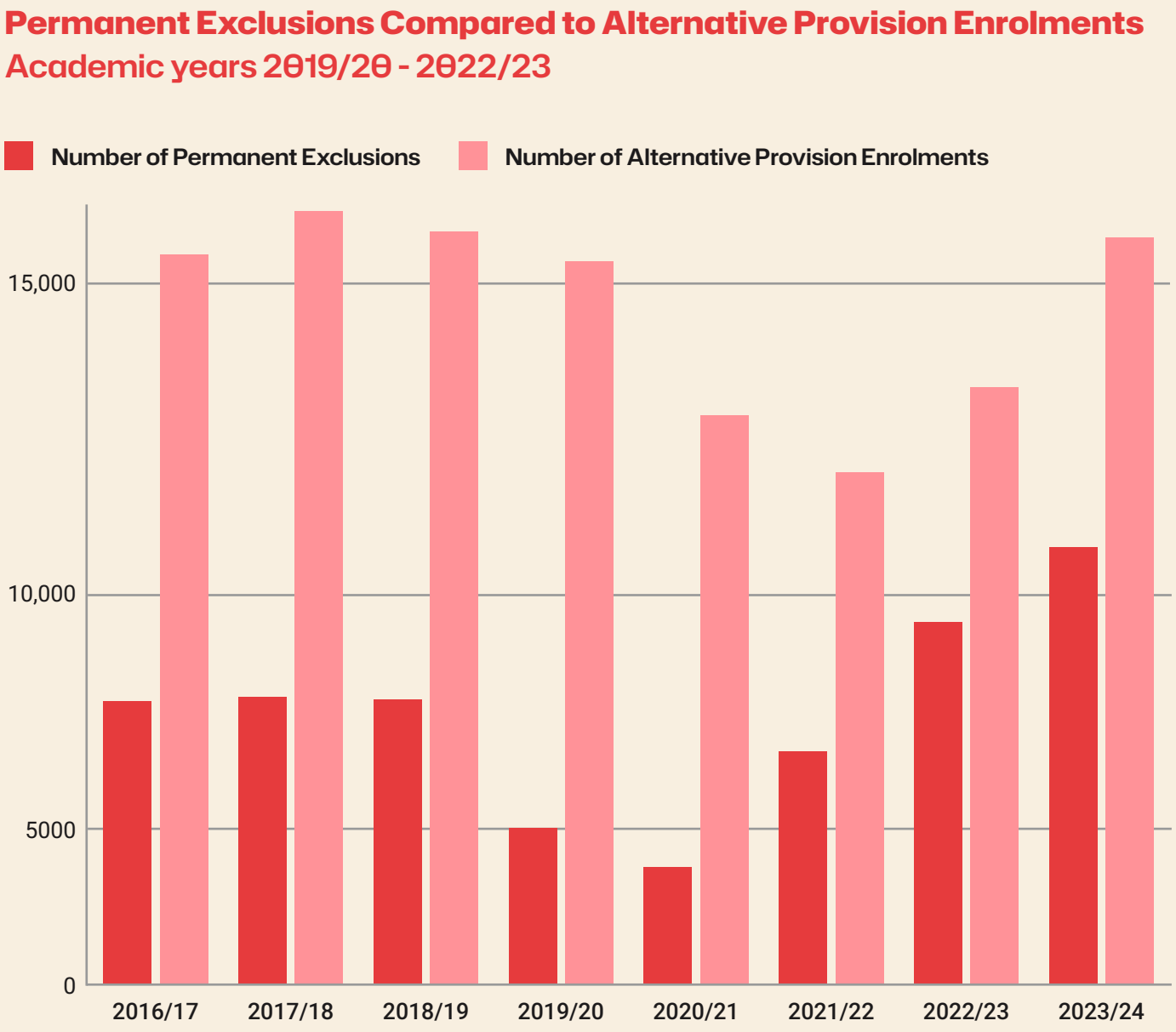
[15] For children with disabilities, there is a sense of over-controlling and surveillance on the part of teachers and teaching assistants being used to manage children's behaviour into a particular socially constructed idea. Those who either don't understand or don't want to understand can experience heavy sanctions. For a more detailed account of lived experiences of Black and global-majority disabled pupils in education, see Kikabhai, N., Neckles, T.Y., Hassan, T., Daley, M., Neilson, S., Olafimihan, I. and Walcott-Johnson, O. (2024), Lived Experience of Black/Global Majority Disabled Pupils and Their Families in Mainstream Education, London: Alliance for Inclusive Education, www.allfie.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/FULL-REPORT-Lived-Experience-of-BGM-Disabled-Pupils-and-their-Families-in-Mainstream-Education-Apr-24.pdf.

[16] DfE (2024) 'Autumn term 2023/24: Children missing education', 29 February, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-missing-education/2023-24-autumn-term.

[17] Crenna-Jennings, W., Joseph, A. and Hutchinson, J. (2024), Children Missing from Education, London: Education Policy Institute, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/children-missing-from-education.

[18] Gill et al., Making the Difference.

Figure 2. Permanent exclusions compared with AP enrolments, 2016/17 to 2023/24



Source: DfE (2025) 'School characteristics', 30 June, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/f27d4e2c-5e30-470c-a8f3-08ddb31391cd; DfE, 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England – by characteristic'.

Driving this discrepancy is the practice of off-rolling. This is where a school looks to unofficially exclude students who are deemed to be less desirable, and who typically have low levels of attainment and require a higher allocation of resources than other pupils.[19]

Unofficial exclusions such as these are a prominent way that many children from Black and minoritised ethnic communities, those with diagnosed and undiagnosed SEND, and pupils with behavioural challenges are impacted by socioeconomic disadvantages. In 2021, one in five parents responding to a survey by the National Autistic Society reported that their child had been informally excluded from school at least once in the previous two years.[20] In 2017, four in ten teachers reported that their school had either lawfully or unlawfully excluded an autistic child in the past year.

Accountability and progress measures are pressuring schools to prioritise pupils who can succeed on fewer resources. For high-performing schools, this practice improves the school's position in the league table, allowing them to become high-performance academies and therefore attract more pupils and larger annual budgets. For low-performing schools, however, such practices happen at a much higher rate and are often an attempt to halt being absorbed into a multi-academy trust, where the school would lose full autonomy over both its budget and its curriculum.[22]

As a result, too many decisions are being made to permanently exclude a child based on the impact they could have on a school's Ofsted or league table ratings or its budget, attainment and attendance data. As described in the Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 'If a child is displaying behaviour or performance that requires additional management and support, it is often easier and cheaper to permanently exclude them, than for the school to implement what they need'.[24]

The practice of off-rolling or informal exclusion has also been exacerbated by austerity. In a 2019 YouGov poll, a quarter of teachers said that they had seen off-rolling happen in their school and 66 per cent felt that the practice was on the rise. More than half of teachers surveyed felt that off-rolling occurred as a way to improve or maintain a school's position in league tables.[25]

Schools are accountable for the educational outcomes of pupils enrolled at their institution in January of Year 11, but not for those who leave school before this point, meaning that off-rolling pupils with low attainment prior to this date will improve a school's Progress 8 measure.[26]

Figure 3 shows cumulative exclusions as experienced by two cohorts of students. Here, we can see that exclusions steadily rise until the spring term of Year 11 and then plateau. This trend suggests that exclusion is a tool used to remove pupils prior to exams, and prior to the accountability cut-off point.

[19] Partridge, L., Lobley, E., Landreth Strong, F. and Mason, Danielle (2020) Pinball Kids: Preventing School Exclusions, London: RSA, www.thersa.org/reports/preventing-school-exclusions.

[20] National Autistic Society (2021) School Report 2021, London, www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/school-report-2021.

[21] All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (2017) Autism and Education in England 2017, London: National Autistic Society, www.specialneedsjungle.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NAS-APPGA-Education-Report-WEB61390.pdf.

[22] Partridge, L. (2019) 'School exclusions are a social justice issue, new data shows', RSA blog, 6 August, www.thersa.org/blog/2019/08/exclusions.

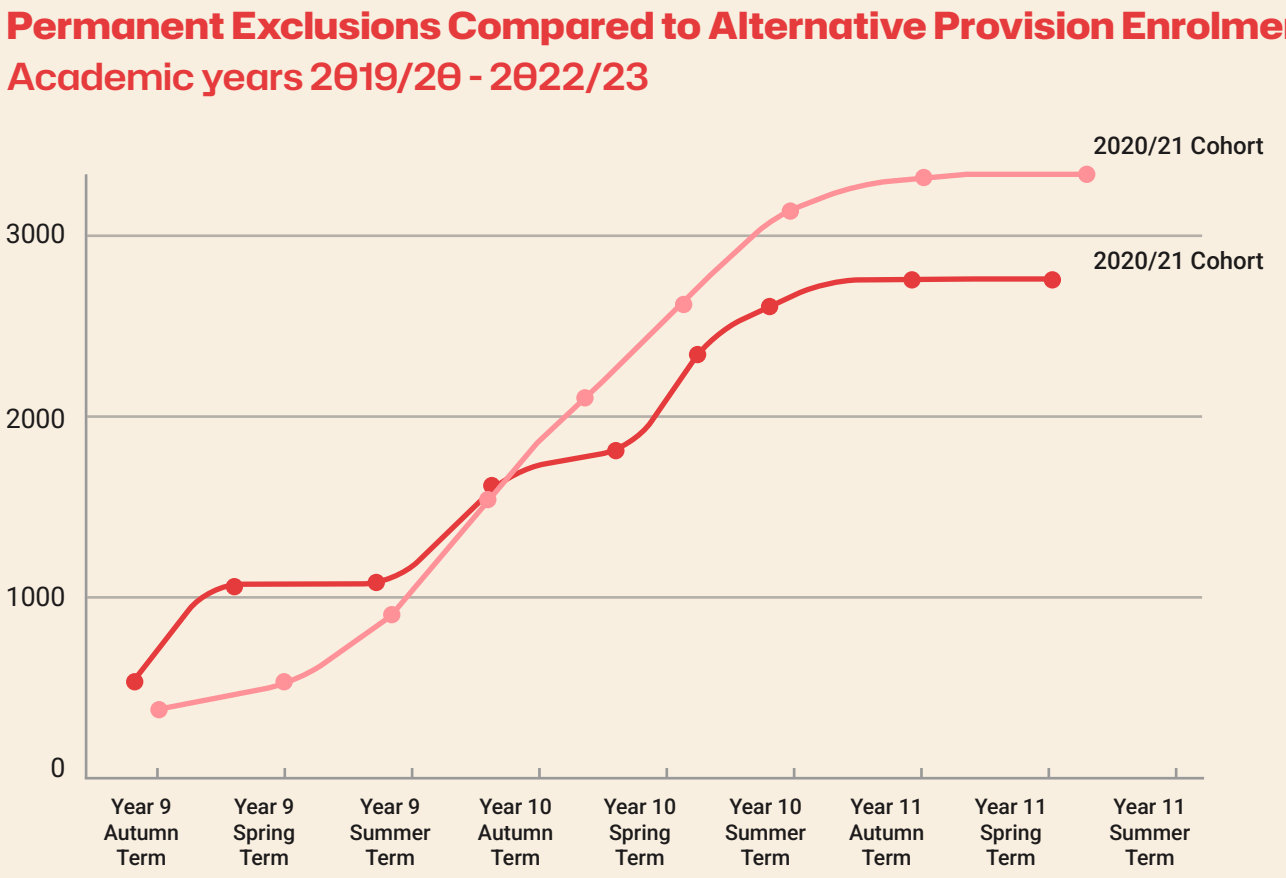
[23] Timson Review (2019) Timpson Review of School Exclusion, London, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf.

[24] Timson Review of School Exclusion.

[25] YouGov on behalf of Ofsted (2019) Exploring the Issue of Off-Rolling, London: Ofsted, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fb541488fa8f54aafb3c30d/Ofsted_offrolling_report_YouGov_090519.pdf.

[26] Timpson Review of School Exclusion.

Figure 3. Permanent exclusions during Key Stage 4 (cumulative)



Source: DfE, 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions – by characteristic'.

The marketisation of education

One of the most significant changes to the UK's education system came with the 1988 Education Reform Act. This transformed education by applying market principles to the education sector and introduced formula funding. After this, resources were allocated to schools based on levels of pupil enrolment. Alongside this, accountability measures were introduced which assessed school performance based on pupil attainment. The introduction of the national curriculum standardised educational offerings and facilitated a better comparison across schools. In the early 1990s, schools were required to publish exam results, leading to the creation of league tables. The introduction of Ofsted further influenced school rankings.

These market principles were designed to give parents more choices regarding their child's education, with competition in league tables spotlighting school performance. In the process, however, schools were able to opt out of local authority control and operate more like businesses. The separation of education from the state gave schools more freedom over the curriculum, admissions and staff management. This led directly to the academisation of schools in the 2000s – in which schools have transitioned from public governance to increased private sector involvement.

The introduction of academies

Academies were introduced by New Labour in 2000 to enhance educational standards and equality of opportunity. Initially called 'City Academies', they targeted struggling schools in deprived urban areas. Also known as sponsored academies, these schools often underperformed and received poor Ofsted grades. The purpose of these schools was highlighted at the time by David Blunkett, then the Secretary of State for Education and Employment:

> City Academies, to replace seriously failing schools, will be established by partnerships involving the government, and voluntary sector, church and business sponsors. They will offer a real change. The aim will be to raise standards by breaking the cycle of underperformance and low expectations.[27]

By 2006, 46 academies had been established as more schools transitioned from local authority control.[28] This trend continued beyond New Labour under the 2010 Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition, with further rapid growth in academies.

In 2010, the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, expanded academisation by broadening the criteria for targeted schools. While earlier policies had focused on struggling schools, the Coalition government included successful ones as well. The 2010 Academies Act allowed all schools to apply to become academies, including primary and special schools for the first time. Well-performing schools could convert to academies, and additional 'free schools' were set up without local authority consent. At the start of the Coalition in 2010, 203 academies existed in England. Within a year, this number had risen to 442. Many of these new academies were 'converter academies' – that is, schools under local authority control that had voluntarily chosen to 'convert' to become academies. For many of these converter academies, there were great advantages and a significant financial incentive. If a school converted into an academy, it would save 15 per cent on VAT in contrast with local authority schools. The government's opening up of the academies programme meant that all schools were now able to opt out of the financial restrictions that local authority control placed on them. The following decade saw substantial growth in the number of schools that voluntarily converted into academies.

Despite being offered as a way to improve opportunities for children and 'break the cycle of underperformance', academies exclude students disproportionately when compared with local authority-maintained schools.[29] Embodying market principles, academies put emphasis on using education to rigorously test pupils and produce students who are 'valuable' in the marketplace.[30] Those who fail to fit within these parameters – for example, those with low attainment or those who need extra provision to allow them to succeed in school – are ultimately marginalised and excluded.

This is evident in the fact that academies exclude students at twice the rate of local authority schools, and Black Caribbean students are excluded four times more than their white peers in academies[31] – ending up in AP such as PRUs or, in some cases, not in education, waiting for months to find a placement. The Institute of Race Relations views those educated in the AP sector as 'pawns in the new education market'. The marketisation of education creates a dichotomy between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving', the 'desirable' and 'undesirable', with the latter ultimately ostracised and placed into AP.[32]

[27] Department for Education and Employment (2011) City Academies: Schools to Make a Difference. A Prospectus for Sponsors and Other Partners, London, https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/3000.

[28] Politics.co.uk (no date), 'What are academy schools?', www.politics.co.uk/reference/academies.

[29] Hutchinson, J., Bonetti, S., Crenna-Jennings, W. and Akhal, A. (2019) Education in England: Annual Report 2019, London: Education Policy Institute, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2019.

[30] Maisuria, A. (2014) 'The neo-liberalisation policy agenda and its consequences for education in England: A focus on resistance now and possibilities for the future', Policy Futures in Education 12(2): 286–296.

[31] Gillborn, D. and Demack, S. (2018) Exclusions Review 2018: Evidence on the Exclusion of Black Caribbean and Mixed: White/Black Caribbean Students, Birmingham: Centre for Research in Race and Education.

[32] Perera, J. (2020) How Black Working-Class Youth Are Criminalised and Excluded in the English School System: A London Case Study, London: Institute of Race relations, https://irr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/How-Black-Working-Class-Youth-are-Criminalised-and-Excluded-in-the-English-School-System.pdf.

Zero tolerance policies and the securitisation of schools

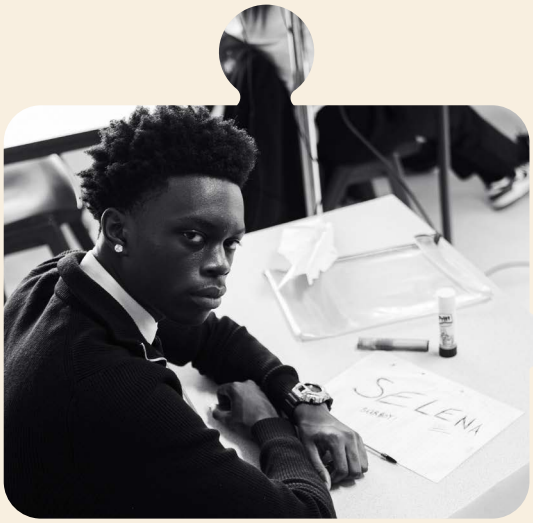
As schools have started to become academies, 'zero-tolerance' policies have been widely adopted. These policies mandate the application of predetermined consequences, often severe and punitive and applied regardless of the gravity of behaviour or students' mitigating circumstances. The adoption of zero tolerance has increased the likelihood of pupils in general, but Black pupils in particular, being placed in PRUs or other forms of AP. [33]

This has been followed by an increasing presence of police in schools. Since 2002, Safer Schools Partnerships (SSPs) agreements have meant Safer Schools Officers (SSOs)[34] increasingly being placed in schools. Their role is to identify potential risks and to refer pupils for further interventions to address their behaviour. Research by the Runnymede Trust has revealed that 979 police officers across 45 police departments are operating in UK schools.[35]

Research by the Institute for Race Relations explains the development from school liaison officers to SSPs over the past 40 years. Initially it was argued that these schemes would reduce disruptive behaviour in schools by identifying young people at risk of crime and disorder and staging early interventions in partnership with local authorities, health services and the voluntary sector. Soon, however, SSPs were placed in crime 'hot-spots' as identified by the government's Crime Action Group.[36]

Alongside this, police forces were asked to select schools in 'crime-ridden' areas, and were often deployed to assuage moral panics around youth crime in areas with high levels of truancy and exclusion. Accordingly, in the development from school liaison officers to SSPs, aims have evolved from 'the promotion of citizenship, public relations, prevention of crime and protection of pupils' to become more focused on overseeing pupils' behaviour, identifying youth 'at risk' and enforcing punishment.[37]

Worryingly, Freedom of Information requests show that police officers in London are more likely to be found in schools where there are higher levels of pupils eligible for FSM.[38]



[33] Partridge et al., Pinball Kids.

[34] and Wales https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/5927/1/Safer%20Schools%20Partnerships%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf.

[35] This figure excludes the Kent, Leicestershire, Cumbria, Derbyshire, Sussex, Northern Ireland and Lancashire Police Constabularies, which either declined to answer our Freedom of Information request, did not hold the information or had not responded by the time this briefing was published.

[36] Perera, How Black Working-Class Youth Are Criminalised and Excluded.

[37] Perera, How Black Working-Class Youth Are Criminalised and Excluded.

[38] Perera, How Black Working-Class Youth Are Criminalised and Excluded.

Henshall suggests that this demonstrates how the 'urban poor' are perceived to pose a threat, understood as interpersonal violence and vulnerability, which leads to schools adopting fixes such as increased surveillance, monitoring and control of students.[39] For example, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers surveyed 249 primary and secondary school teachers and found that 85 per cent reported having CCTV in their schools: 77 per cent of these reported that CCTV was in use in entrances, 49 per cent in corridors, 34 per cent in pupil leisure areas, 10 per cent in toilets and 7 per cent in classrooms.[40]

In April 2025, the Metropolitan Police announced the reallocation of 371 SSOs from London schools[41] – a move welcomed by the Runnymede Trust, which has long campaigned for the removal of police from educational spaces. There is no conclusive evidence that policing improves school safety, yet the harms – especially to pupils from minoritised ethnic groups – are well documented.

Cases like that of Child Q have revealed how police presence can inflict serious, lasting trauma on Black children in particular. Our research shows that SSOs are disproportionately deployed in schools serving working-class and racially minoritised communities,[42] contributing to the over-policing and criminalisation of minoritised ethnic communities.This over-surveillance is deeply connected to the disproportionate rates of school exclusion that pupils from these communities face.

Removing police from schools must be a national priority, and should be paired with government investment in pastoral care – such as youth workers, mental health support and school nurses – to create environments rooted in care, not control. Only then can we begin to tackle the racial disparities at the heart of our education system and address and meaningfully reduce school exclusion rates.

39 Perera, How Black Working-Class Youth Are Criminalised and Excluded.

40 Taylor, E. (2010) 'I spy with my little eye: The use of CCTV in schools and the impact on privacy', The Sociological Review 58(3).

41 France, A. (2025), 'Axing "safer school" Met police officers will leave more pupils vulnerable to knife crime, say teachers', The Standard, 9 April, www.standard.co.uk/news/london/police-removed-schools-knife-drugs-walthamstow-b1221479.html.

42 Runnymede Trust (2023) Over-Policed and Under-Protected: The Road to Safer Schools, London, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/over-policed-and-under-protected-the-road-to-safer-schools.

SEND and cuts to pastoral support

Since 2011, schools have received funding to support in-school measures to improve behaviour as part of their delegated budgets. However, these funds were introduced in the context of a wider programme of austerity implemented by the UK government in 2010. As a result, education budgets came under sustained pressure. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), between 2010/11 and 2019/20, school spending per pupil in England fell by around 9 per cent in real terms – the largest decline in school funding since the 1980s.[43] Between 2010 and 2021, the most deprived secondary schools saw a real-terms cut of 12 per cent compared with 5 per cent for the least deprived schools.[44]

These cuts have significantly weakened schools' ability to sustain inclusive provision, particularly for students with SEND. Support staff, who play a vital role in delivering targeted assistance, were among the hardest hit. A 2018 Unison report found that cuts forced many schools to make difficult 'trade-offs', often reducing the number of teaching assistants. As a result, 94 per cent of headteachers said they were struggling to provide adequate support for pupils with SEND compared with two years earlier.[45]

These cuts have occurred alongside a broader collapse in external support services. The IFS found that since 2010, local authority spending on services such as educational psychology and SEND assessment has fallen by 57 per cent per pupil.[46] At the same time, adult mental health services have come under severe strain. As poor parental mental health is linked to an increased risk of exclusion, this places added pressure on young people who support or live with parents with mental health difficulties. Supporting this further, a 2017 report by IPPR highlighted increasing numbers of children with complex needs – where mental ill health, unstable or unsafe family environments, and learning difficulties intersect.

Yet schools have struggled to respond due to insufficient workforce development. The report found that half of school leaders could not reliably recognise mental ill health, and three-quarters said that they could not make effective referrals to external services.[47] These limitations in school-based and external capacity have led to concerns that exclusion is at times being used as a mechanism to trigger access to additional resources or specialist provision for pupils struggling with behaviour or SEND.[48]

However, the quality of AP for excluded pupils is highly variable and often inadequate. The IPPR's data analysis found that once a child is excluded, they are twice as likely to be taught by an unqualified teacher and twice as likely to be taught by a supply teacher. A leadership recruitment crisis in AP settings saw leader vacancies double between 2011 and 2016, further undermining the quality of support available.[49] These staffing challenges disproportionately affect certain regions. For example, a child excluded in the North East of England is eight times more likely than the national average to be placed in an AP setting rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted.[50]

There are some signs of recovery. The IFS 2024/25 *Annual Report on Education* Spending shows that real-terms per-pupil funding is now increasing, reversing previous cuts to 2010 levels.

[43] IFS (2022) Annual Report on Education Spending in England: 2022, London, https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/Annual-report-on-education-spending%20-in-England-2022-Institute-for-Fiscal-Studies.pdf.

[44] Drayton, E., Farquharson, C., Ogden, K., Sibieta, L., Tahir, I. and Waltman, B. (2023) Annual Report on Education Spending in England: 2023, London: IFS, https://ifs.org.uk/publications/annual-report-education-spending-england-2023.

[45] National Association of Headteachers (2018) Empty Promises: The Crisis of Supporting Children with SEND, London.

[46] Drayton et al., Annual Report on Education Spending in England: 2023.

[47] Gill et al., Making the Difference.

[48] Timpson Review of School Exclusion.

[49] Gill et al., Making the Difference; Timpson Review of School Exclusion, p. 8.

[50] Gill et al., Making the Difference; Timpson Review of School Exclusion, p. 8

This is driven largely by an expansion of high-needs funding, reflecting a sharp rise in the number of students identified with SEND.[51] While the long-term impact of these funding increases remains to be seen, it is hoped that they will help rebuild pastoral support structures and close the gaps that have widened across the education system over the past decade. There is, however, much work to do. In the 2023/24 academic year, 46 per cent of all school suspensions were of pupils who either received SEND support or had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).[52]

The impact of poverty and misdiagnosis of SEND

In 2016, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) detailed the links between SEND and poverty, explaining that many children from working-class and lower-income households miss out on a diagnosis. This is due to factors such as the cost of assessment, or appointments being scheduled within parents' working hours.[53]

Minoritised ethnic groups are among the most economically disadvantaged communities in the UK, and therefore pupils from these groups are at risk of their educational needs remaining undiagnosed. For example, the ethnic groups with the highest rates of suspension and exclusion also have large percentages of pupils who are recipients of FSM. In the 2024/25 academic year, 67 per cent of Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils and almost 61 per cent of Gypsy/Roma pupils were receiving FSM, followed by 46 per cent of Black Caribbean and of Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils.[54]

For students from low-income households, over-identification of SEND is also common. In other words, they are more likely to be flagged by their school as having certain special needs – particularly moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH). This raises concerns about misidentification linked to social disadvantage rather than clinical need.[55]

In 2018, the University of Oxford, in partnership with the Economic and Social Research Council, published its report Ethnic Disproportionality in the Identification of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in England: Extent, Causes and Consequences. The study detailed their findings on school-aged children (5 to 16 years old) in England who have been identified with SEND. It analysed the 2016 National Pupil Database (NPD) to determine the extent of ethnic disproportionality in diagnoses and whether socioeconomic factors (poverty and deprivation) account for ethnic over- and under-representation, alongside two other longitudinal analyses involving 500,000 students, tracking age groups 5–11 and 11–16 to assess the emergence of SEND over these two periods.[56]

The findings identified that Black Caribbean (6.3 per cent, compared with 3 per cent of White British pupils) and Pakistani (5.6 per cent) students were over-represented in the SEMH and MLD categories, especially in secondary schools. While demographic and socioeconomic variables had very strong associations with identification of SEMH, 'controlling these factors did not account for the ethnic over-representation'.[57]

In 2025, the DfE reported that Black communities have the some of the highest percentages of pupils in receipt of an EHCP, with rates at 8.6 per cent for Black Caribbean pupils and 9.1 for 'any other Black background'. Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils have a rate of 7.7 per cent. Only pupils of an Irish Traveller background were recorded as having a higher rate (9.9%).[58]

[51] Drayton, E., Farquharson, C., Ogden, K., Sibieta, L., Snape, D. and Tahir, I. (2025) Annual Report on Education Spending in England: 2024–25, London: IFS, https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/IFS-REPORT-EDUCATION-SPENDING-2024-2025.1.pdf.

[52] DfE, 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions - by characteristic'.

[53] Shaw, B., Bernardes, E., Trethewey, A and Menzies, L. (2016) Special Educational Needs and Their Links to Poverty, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/special-educational-needs-and-their-links-to-poverty, 17.

[54] DfE (2025) 'FSM eligibility by ethnicity or national curriculum year group', 30 June,

https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/0b6bd4b2-c502-4143-240c-08ddb7c3ad2f

[55] DfE, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', 17–18.

[56] Strand and Lindorff, Ethnic Disproportionality, 7–8.

[57] Strand and Lindorff, Ethnic Disproportionality, 7–8.

It has been suggested that many Black parents may also be worried about agreeing to their child being assessed, because of the fear of formally 'labelling' them as 'challenging', impacting the perception of their child in the eyes of authority figures in school, including teachers and police community support officers (PCSOs).[59] Parents and professionals interviewed felt that schools take advantage of diagnosing their children with SEND, with one stating:

> *They just look at the behaviours and you get a focus on either adultification, [and] seeing them as deliberately naughty, rather than there is some kind of barrier which needs to be worked with to help them.*

Many parents recognise that SEND budgets per child are high and feel that their children are being taken advantage of. Despite diagnosing Black children, schools are not necessarily spending the resources to provide the right kind of support for them, in comparison with their white British classmates.[60]

Conclusion: performance related exclusions

All of these factors mean that schools are under pressure to prioritise pupils who can succeed with fewer resources, rather than spending limited budgets on pupils who are unlikely to 'perform well' or who are likely to cause 'classroom disruptions', with zero-tolerance policies meaning that behavioural issues are increasingly likely to be resolved through punitive measures. As a result, too many decisions are being made to permanently exclude pupils based on the impact a child could have reputationally on a schools' Ofsted or league table ratings or its budget, attainment and attendance data.

The perception of Black Caribbean students as more disruptive, aggressive and difficult to teach means that they are vulnerable to disciplinary practices such as suspension and exclusion. These deeply troubling stereotypes have been identified as a significant factor contributing to their over-representation in exclusion statistics.

Research going back to the 1980s indicates that Black Caribbean boys, in particular, were over-represented for SEND, with the pattern continuing today.[61] Then, as now, the identification of SEND is not grounded solely in objective measures of academic performance. Instead, it is often shaped by subjective assessments of 'emotional and behavioural difficulties' – a categorisation that remains widely used in the British education system.

Even in mainstream state comprehensive schools, Black Caribbean pupils continue to be disproportionately labelled in this way. This persistent racial bias in SEND identification not only pathologises Black children but also contributes to their marginalisation within the school system, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and diminished opportunity that urgently demands systemic change.[62]

It is to these experiences that we now turn, discussing the experiences of six mothers who at the time of writing were navigating the exclusion or suspension of their child. As the next chapter demonstrates, parents and families have very little recourse to effectively reverse or challenge the decisions of schools, impacting their physical and mental health as well as emotional wellbeing.

In presenting this analysis we demonstrate that the drivers described above do not just victimise pupils but also have a wider effect on families and communities. Before exploring our primary data, however, it is important to describe how the exclusion and appeals process works in order to contextualise the challenge that parents currently face.

[58] DfE (2025) 'Number of Education, Health (EHC) plans as at January each year', 30 June, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/e3242646-4f6a-422e-52d0-08ddb7c333e7.

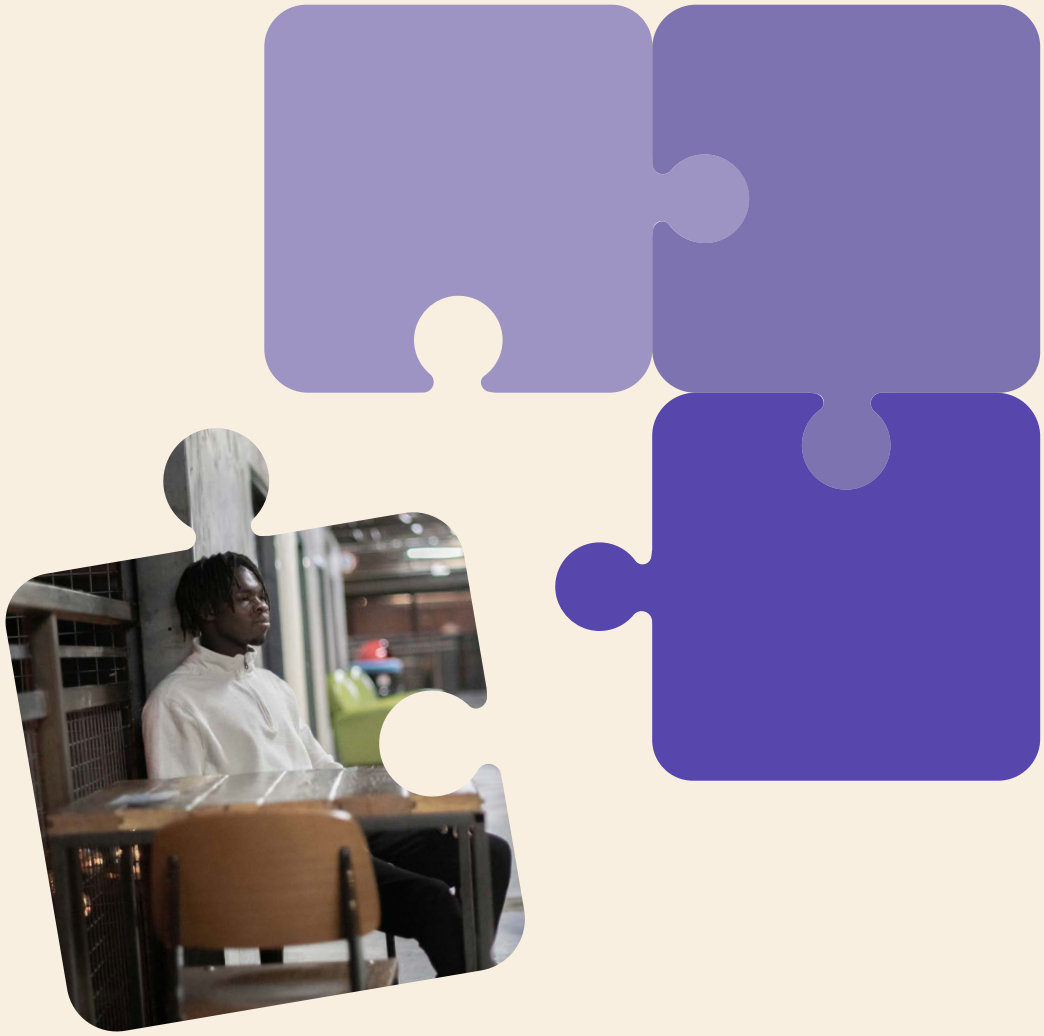
[59] Fleary, S. (2023) 'Black special needs kids failed by schools', The Voice, 3 March, www.voice-online.co.uk/news/features-news/2023/03/03/black-special-needs-kids-failed-by-schools.

[60] Fleary, 'Black special needs kids failed by schools'.

[61] Wheeler, R., Agyepong, A., Benhura, C., Martin, M. and Peter, M. (2024) Accessing Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Provision for Black and Mixed Black Heritage Children: Lived Experiences from Parents and Professionals living in South London, London: Global Black Maternal Health.

[62] Wallace, D. and Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2021) 'How, still, is the Black Caribbean child made educationally subnormal in the English school system?', Ethnic and Racial Studies 45(8): 1426–1452.

2. How does exclusion affect black families today?



The exclusion and appeals process: a technical guide for affected families

Despite the disproportionate impact on Black students of the structural drivers discussed above, there are now fewer mechanisms for parents to challenge and appeal exclusions. In 2012, government policy made it more difficult for students and parents to challenge schools' decisions to exclude, by abolishing Independent Appeals Panels (IAPs) and replacing them with Independent Review Panels (IRPs). Unlike IAPs, IRPs have no power to compel schools to reinstate excluded students, even when the school is found to have excluded illegally.[63]

[63] Virdi, S. (2012) 'Exclusion zone', Local Government Lawyer, 17 May, www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/child-protection/309-children-protection-features/10364-exclusion-zone; Wolstenholme, C., Coldwell, M. and Stiell, B. (2014), Independent Review Panel and First-Tier Tribunal Exclusion Appeals Systems: Research Report, London: DfE, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285458/DFE-RR313.pdf.

Exclusions

According to the DfE's guidance on suspensions and exclusions,[64] when a child is excluded or suspended, the school should contact the child's family, state the reasons verbally and in writing as soon as possible, and provide details about how to appeal against the decision. The school's governing body must review a headteacher's decision to exclude within 15 school days. Families are invited to this review and encouraged to make representations, where they can ask the school's governing board to overturn the exclusion. Special guidelines apply if a child has been temporarily excluded for more than 15 school days or if the child is at risk of missing a public exam.[65] According to Paragraphs 100–102 of the Guidance:

> A governing board must consider and decide on the reinstatement of a suspended or permanently excluded pupil within 15 school days of receiving notice of a suspension or permanent exclusion from the headteacher if:
>
> - it is a permanent exclusion
> - it is a suspension which would bring the pupil's total number of school days out of school to more than 15 in a term
> - it would result in the pupil missing a public examination or national curriculum test
>
> The requirements are different for suspensions where a pupil would be excluded for more than five but not more than 15 school days in a term.[66]

In this case, if the parents make representations, the governing board must decide within 50 school days of receiving the notice of suspension whether the suspended pupil should be reinstated. In the absence of any representations from the parents, the governing board is not required to meet, and it cannot direct the reinstatement of the pupil.

Where a suspension or permanent exclusion would result in a pupil missing a public examination or national curriculum test, the governing body must, 'so far as is reasonably practicable', decide on the suspension or permanent exclusion before the date of the exam or test.[67] If it is not practical for governors to do this before the examination or test, the chair of governors (in the case of a maintained school) may decide alone whether or not to reinstate the pupil.

The guidance states children should be excluded as a last resort.[68] However, Just for Kids Law, a London-based charity that advocates on behalf of young people threatened with or at risk of exclusion and their family, has found that factors contributing to an exclusion vary, and decisions to exclude can fail to account for the needs of the individual child, the circumstances of the child's home life, and the experience of teachers and their level of awareness of biases and zero-tolerance approaches.[69]

[63] Virdi, S. (2012) 'Exclusion zone', Local Government Lawyer, 17 May, www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/child-protection/309-children-protection-features/10364-exclusion-zone; Wolstenholme, C., Coldwell, M. and Stiell, B. (2014), Independent Review Panel and First-Tier Tribunal Exclusion Appeals Systems: Research Report, London: DfE, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285458/DFE-RR313.pdf.

[64] DfE (2024) Suspension and Permanent Exclusion from Maintained Schools, Academies and Pupil Referral Units in England, including Pupil Movement: Guidance for Maintained Schools, Academies, and Pupil Referral Units in England, London, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66be0d92c32366481ca4918a/Suspensions_and_permanent_exclusions_guidance.pdf.

[65] DfE (no date) 'Behaviour in schools: Sanctions and exclusions' www.gov.uk/school-behaviour-exclusions/challenging-exclusion#:~:text=for%20banned%20items-,Challenging%20exclusion,exam%20or%20national%20curriculum%20test.

[66] DfE, Suspension and Permanent Exclusion, paragraph 101.

[67] DfE, Suspension and Permanent Exclusion, paragraph 102.

[68] DfE, Suspension and Permanent Exclusion, paragraph 106.

[69] Just for Kids Law (2020) Race, Poverty and School Exclusions in London, London, www.justforkidslaw.org/sites/default/files/fields/download/Race%2C%20poverty%20and%20school%20exclusions%20in%20London%20-%20Executive%20Summary.pdf, 7–8.

When a child is permanently excluded or suspended, schools must continue to set school work and mark the child's homework for the first five school days of the exclusion.[70] In addition, according to Just for Kids Law, 'Children can only be excluded on a fixed-term basis ("suspended") for a maximum of 45 days in a year, or permanently excluded ("expelled")'[71]

If an exclusion is permanent, or a suspension extends beyond an initial five days, the school or local authority must arrange alternative full-time education from the sixth day. Schools must discuss these education alternatives, whether in-house or arranged by the local authority, with parents and families, in compliance with the DfE's *Arranging Alternative Provision guidance.*[72] If families are dissatisfied with the alternative full-time education their child is receiving, they can complain to the local authority or school. However, in the case of racially minoritised students with SEND these complaints are rarely taken seriously, so families are encouraged to bring their complaint forward to the DfE.[73]

Understanding your rights

As described above, for permanent exclusions, the family of the excluded young person should be invited to a meeting with school governors within 15 school days of the exclusion being issued. Except at an academy school, parents, the headteacher and a representative of the local authority must be invited to this meeting.

The child's virtual school head, social worker or youth justice worker must also be invited, if the child is a 'looked after' child and has been referred to social services or youth justice services. Parents are also entitled to an advocate. The governing body must ask for written evidence before the meeting and circulate any evidence it receives to everyone who will be at the meeting at least five days in advance. Parents who speak English as an additional language are entitled to request an interpreter.
After this meeting, the government body can choose to either uphold an exclusion or reinstate the pupil. Whichever type of school the child is attending, every family has the right to challenge permanent school exclusion decisions in the first instance. It is a legal requirement that schools also investigate the possibility that disruptive behaviour is the result of the unmet needs of the excluded child, and that they act to reduce the risk of permanent exclusion.[74]

When considering whether to uphold the exclusion or reinstate the pupil, the governing body must consider whether the headteacher's initial decision to exclude was justified in the first place. It must assess the evidence and make a decision based on the public law principles of proportionality, legality, rationality and procedural fairness. The governing body must notify parents, headteachers and the local authority of its decision in writing within five school days, and parents can request a copy of the meeting minutes of the hearing and the decision.

Families can ask for an IRP to be carried out by their local council (or academy trust depending on the institution the child has been excluded from) if they are dissatisfied with the governing body's decision, within 15 school days. During these IRPs, families can request the presence of an SEND expert if the excluded young person has been diagnosed or has suspected SEND or SEMH. If parents feel the exclusion had taken place as a direct form of discrimination they can make a claim under the Equality Act 2010 to the First Tier Tribunal (SEND), in the case of disability discrimination.

[70] DfE, Suspension and Permanent Exclusion, paragraphs 89–90.

[71] Just for Kids Law, Race, Poverty and School Exclusions, 5.

[72] DfE (2025) Arranging Alternative Provision: Guide for Local Authorities and Schools, London, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67a1ee367da1f1ac64e5fe2c/Arranging_Alternative_Provision_-_A_Guide_for_Local_Authorities_and_Schools.pdf.

[73] HCB Solicitors (no date) 'School exclusion appeals' www.hcbgroup.com/site/individuals_serv/education-law/school-exclusion-appeals.

[74] Just for Kids Law, Race, Poverty and School Exclusions, 4.

In reviewing the decision, the IRP must consider the interests and circumstances of the excluded pupil, the circumstances in which the pupil was excluded, and the interests of other pupils and people working at the school. The IRP must have due regard to the obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998 and the

The IRP can decide to:

- uphold the exclusion decision
- recommend that the governing body reconsiders its decision
- quash the decision and direct the governing body to reconsider the exclusion

According to Child Law Advice, it is imperative for the IRP to identify if a headteacher or school acted illegally (off-rolling; pressuring parents to undertake a 'managed move') and any irrationality of the claim or procedural impropriety. If the IRP identifies illegality, irrationality or procedural impropriety, it can quash the governing body's decision and direct the reconsideration of the child's exclusion.[75]

Generally, in all other cases, the IRP upholds the exclusion; after this, families have a three-month window in which they can appeal against the IRP decision via judicial review, but this depends on whether they can seek and access legal representation to do so.

Where the IRP directs that the exclusion should be reconsidered, the governing body must meet within ten school days of being given notice of the IRP's decision. If the governing body does not offer to reinstate the pupil within ten school days of being notified of the IRP's direction to reconsider the exclusion, a negative adjustment of £4,000 may be made to the school's budget. In the case of academies, the school would be required to make an equivalent payment directly to the local authority in which the school is located. This payment is in addition to any funding that would normally follow an excluded pupil.[76]

Just for Kids Law, reflecting on the exclusions review process, states that:

> *In spite of the huge impact that exclusions can have on children, the process for reviewing exclusions is deeply flawed.*
> *A school's governing body is the only compulsory mechanism of review and they lack independence. The appeal mechanism available to families is known as an IRP. These are ineffective as they do not have the power to reinstate children, even if the panel finds the exclusion to be unlawful, unreasonable or unfair. While governors uphold around 98 per cent of exclusions, IRPs find nearly half of those they consider to be flawed. However, of these, only around one third are ever offered reinstatement by the excluding school. There is also an imbalance of power due to the complexity of exclusions law. Parents can be left without the information or support to manage a complicated and important situation and there is no legal aid available to fund legal advice. This means that any legal support available is offered for free by charities. These are few and far between and the vast majority of families go through the process unsupported. Many find the process simply too intimidating to engage with effectively – schools are experienced having been through the process before – whereas families typically have a maximum of 15 school days to learn everything from scratch.*[77]

One parent stated in the same report:

> *They pushed the managed move on me in a meeting and said that this was the only route that was on the table for you and if you don't accept this route then your child would not be able to go to another school.*[78]

The complexity and overwhelming nature of exclusions processes puts families in a position where they either have not enough information (where schools do not properly communicate all of the available options) or too much information (where schools do not break down the

[75] Just for Kids Law, Race, Poverty and School Exclusions, 4.

[76] Just for Kids Law, Race, Poverty and School Exclusions, 4.

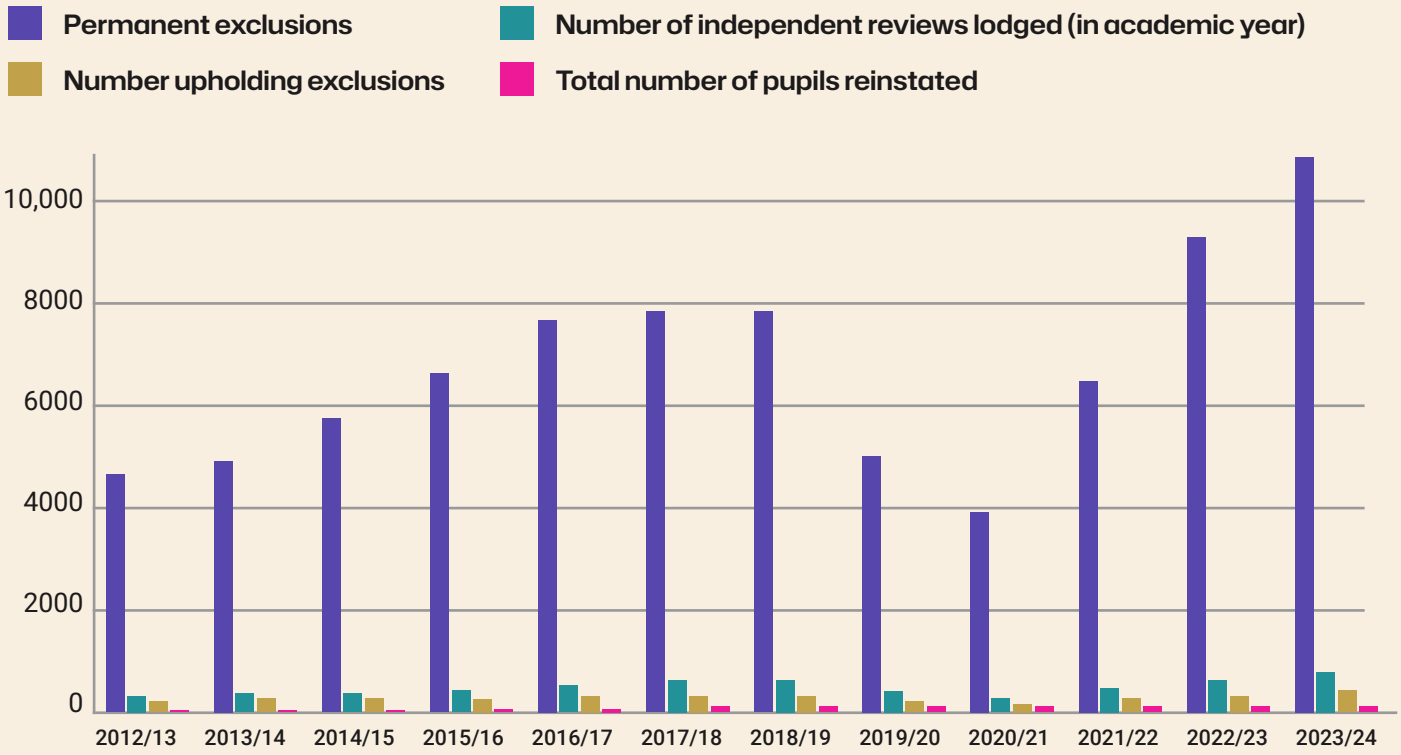
[77] Just for Kids Law, Race, Poverty and School Exclusions, 6–7.

[78] Just for Kids Law, Race, Poverty and School Exclusions, 7.

complexities of the processes), making these families more vulnerable to being pushed to make decisions about the future of their children without the proper channels of support.

Figure 4 shows the number of exclusions and appeals for each academic year from 2012/13 to 2021/22. During this period, exclusions rose year on year to a peak in 2018/19. The number of permanent exclusions dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic, before returning to comparable levels in the most recent year for which data is available.

Figure 4. Number of exclusions compared with independent review and their outcomes, by academic year



Throughout this period, the number of appeals lodged was significantly lower than the number of exclusions – with the number of pupils reinstated being lower still. The most common outcome of an IRP is for the exclusion to be upheld. In the most recent academic year, 2023/24, there were almost 11,000 permanent exclusions in schools in England; 810 independent reviews were lodged, with just 91 of these leading to the pupil being reinstated (after being recommended or directed by the review panel). This means that a pupil was reinstated in less than 1 per cent of exclusion cases, and only 11 per cent of reviews result in reinstatement.

Across the 12-year period measured in Figure 4, just 8 per cent of exclusions were appealed against: 10 per cent of these led to a pupil being reinstated (0.74 per cent of all exclusions); 58 per cent resulted in the exclusion being upheld; and 32 per cent were not accounted for in the data, meaning that other outcomes (such as managed moves) were achieved.

Unsurprisingly, research by the Children's Commissioner states that this system does not offer sufficient safeguards against schools that act unreasonably or unlawfully.[79]

[79] Children's Commissioner (2017) 'They Never Give Up on You': Office of the Children's Commissioner School Exclusions Inquiry, London, https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2017/07/They-never-give-up-on-you-final-report.pdf.

59.08% resulted in the exclusion being upheld.

9.7% of these led to a pupil being reinstated (0.74% of all exclusions).

Across the ten year period measured in the data just 7.65% of exclusions were appealed against

31.23% were not accounted for in the data

The impact of exclusion on mothers

The remainder of this chapter follows the experiences of six Black parents of excluded children – four of whom have either diagnosed or undiagnosed SEND. We anticipated that parents would share experiences of the exclusion process from start to finish, including appeals and managed moves. It is clear, however, that each family's experiences are unique, and not all cases follow an appeals path – possibly because this legal mechanism is made so opaque to parents. Many of our cases involve informal exclusions or unclear suspension terms, and there is evidence of schools not adequately supporting or communicating with parents during suspensions.

While it is often highlighted that Black boys are disproportionately subject to exclusion, an area which is often overlooked is the impact that exclusion has on mothers. A recurring theme across these interviews is the significant emotional toll placed on mothers. Many of those interviewed had to pause personal aspirations, such as career and educational goals, in order to manage their child's case. The stress which comes with managing a child's exclusion created a number of physical health issues for the mothers in this study, including early onset menopause. Many said they didn't have the time to address these health impacts at the same time as being responsible for managing their child's exclusion case on top of other gendered familial and household roles.

All of these mothers had contacted CEN while managing an exclusion or in looking for additional ways to support their child once they had been failed by their school. The data is presented as a series of case studies, to emphasise the diversity of experiences of parents and the levels of support CEN was able to offer. The stories of the families vary widely depending on the school's handling of the situation, the child's experiences and the level of parental support. However, each case study contains emotional accounts of parental sacrifice, missteps on the part of schools, and a range of culturally specific challenges facing Black children and their parents.

Adeola: Unfair exclusion and the battle for justice

Adeola approached CEN for support after her 16-year-old son Marcus was permanently excluded from school in Year 11. As highlighted in the previous chapter, this is a crucial period for pupils as they prepare for GCSE examinations. It is also a point in the year where exclusions spike nationwide. Adeola described the exclusion process as sudden and unjust leaving Marcus without any education for two months.

Adeola had prior experience as a teaching assistant, which gave her an understanding of school policies. However, despite her knowledge and efforts, she found herself powerless against a system that appeared intent on removing her son rather than supporting him.

The exclusion occurred after school hours when Marcus was near the school premises. A minor altercation took place, involving students from different schools. Although the incident did not occur on school grounds, the school decided to exclude him permanently.

Adeola was not informed immediately. Instead, she received a sudden phone call the next day from a private number, instructing her to come to the school. When she arrived, she was given an exclusion letter with no prior explanation or opportunity to discuss the decision. Adeola told us how the school would frequently call her instead of replying to her emails in writing, seemingly to minimise the paper trail between them. When she was officially informed of the exclusion, she was not told about her rights or any next steps she could take, leaving her feeling frustrated and bewildered by the school's level of accountability.

They handed me the letter like it was nothing. No warning, no discussion. I didn't even know what had happened. I was just told my son was permanently excluded.

"I saw the video, and it was clear—it wasn't him. But by then, they had already decided he was guilty."

"I cried so much. I did everything right, I fought for him, I followed the rules. But it didn't matter – they had already decided his fate."

The school cited 'aggressive behaviour' as the reason for the exclusion, yet Adeola was denied access to the CCTV footage of the incident. When she later saw the footage, it became clear that her son had not instigated the situation and was wrongly blamed.

> ***I saw the video, and it was clear – it wasn't him. But by then, they had already decided he was guilty.***

> ***Adeola suspected that the school had been looking for a reason to exclude Marcus for a long time. Prior to this, the school had repeatedly given him detentions for minor infractions, and the management had framed him as a 'trouble-maker'.***

During meetings, the school would only list negative incidents, disregarding his academic progress and positive teacher feedback. She recalled a particularly painful moment:

> ***One teacher told me my son was 'intimidating' and that staff 'didn't feel safe around him'. But when I spoke to his actual subject teachers, they said he was amazing, clever, and hardworking.***

After his exclusion, Adeola attempted to enrol Marcus in another school, but she discovered that his negative record had been shared with potential schools, effectively blacklisting him.

> ***They put everything negative in his report, so no other school would take him. It felt like a set-up.***

Following the exclusion, the school and local authority failed to provide any immediate education. Marcus spent two months at home with no work, no classes and no academic support. His mother fought tirelessly to get him placed in another school or AP, but the school was uncooperative.

> ***For two months, he just sat at home. No lessons, no support. They didn't care. I sent emails, called the local authority, even contacted my MP – nothing changed.***

Eventually, he was placed in a PRU, but the quality of education was poor. He attended for only one to two hours a day, working on a computer with minimal instruction.

> ***He's in Year 11! How can an hour a day be enough to prepare him for his GCSEs? If he passes, it will be a miracle.***

Emotional and psychological toll:

The exclusion had a severe impact on both Marcus and Adeola. Marcus, who at one point had been engaged in school, became disengaged, withdrawn, and resentful:

> ***He told me, 'Mum, when I grow up, I'm leaving this country. They don't want me here.'***

Adeola struggled with overwhelming stress, feeling unsupported by both the school and local authorities:

> ***I cried so much. I did everything right, I fought for him, I followed the rules. But it didn't matter – they had already decided his fate.***

She also feared for her son's safety. Without structured education, he had more free time and was at risk of becoming vulnerable to negative influences in the community:

> ***If these schools don't want our kids, where do they think they'll end up?***

Kiyana: racial profiling and the criminalisation of play

Kiyana sought support from CEN after her 15-year-old son Andre was suspended for three days for bringing a small toy water gun to school. She was shocked by the severity of the punishment, as the toy was a standard party favour, the type commonly included in children's birthday bags.

Andre and a group of friends had used the water gun along with drinking bottles to have a harmless water fight before registration. The school, however, classified the item as a prohibited weapon, and the official suspension letter framed the incident as a serious safety concern.

> ***If you saw the water pistol, you'd laugh. It's tiny. But the way they wrote that letter, it sounded like my son brought a real weapon into school.***

The letter cited the school's zero-tolerance policy on prohibited items, claiming that the toy water gun 'resembled a firearm' and could be considered a public safety risk. The school further stated that Andre's behaviour could have been perceived as threatening and that his actions demonstrated a disregard for safety and school discipline.

> ***They made it sound like he was dangerous. That's what upset me the most. They could have just said 'he broke a rule, here's the consequence'. Instead, they wrote about it like he was a criminal.***

Adding to the frustration, the letter referenced previous behavioural incidents that were unrelated to the water gun incident. It stated that he had accumulated 87 behaviour points, which, according to Kiyana, could be given for minor infractions such as forgetting to complete homework, being late to class or running in the corridor.

The school used this record to justify its extreme disciplinary approach, despite none of the incidents being serious. Although it is not known whether this school operates a formal zero-tolerance policy, the decision to exclude rather than explore the drivers behind the pupil's behaviour indicates an overly punitive response to behavioural infractions.

"They made it sound like he was dangerous. That's what upset me the most. They could have just said 'he broke a rule, here's the consequence.' Instead, they wrote about it like he was a criminal."

They brought up all these little things – things they wouldn't have even mentioned if this hadn't happened. It felt like they were building a case against him.

The school failed to communicate with Kiyana before issuing the suspension. She was not informed until the end of the school day, when she received a call from the head of year.

No warning, no discussion – just a phone call telling me he was suspended. No one asked what I thought. No one cared how this would affect him.

When she requested learning materials to support her son during his suspension, the school initially ignored her emails. It was only after multiple follow-ups that they provided work, two days into the suspension.
The way the school framed the incident deeply affected both Andre and Kiyana. For the child, he became withdrawn and unmotivated, questioning whether he would ever be treated fairly in school. For the mother, the experience was stressful and exhausting, leading to frustration with a system that she felt had already decided her son was a problem.

I read that letter at work, and I cried. I just needed someone to tell me I wasn't crazy, that what I was reading was completely over the top.

She reached out to the school's board of governors in an attempt to address the situation, but she received no response. She also submitted a Subject Access Request (SAR) to obtain records of her son's disciplinary history. The school delayed responding beyond the required time frame, forcing her to chase them for weeks.

Revealing patterns of racial discrimination:

During a parents' evening, a teacher subtly confirmed what Kiyana had already suspected: her son was being used as an example to enforce discipline.

The teacher told him, 'I need you to behave because if you don't, I won't be able to help you. This will go above my head.' That's when I knew – it wasn't just about him. They were making an example out of him.

This was not an isolated incident. Kiyana had observed that Black boys were consistently disciplined more harshly than their white peers. Despite knowing that Andre was a good student, she had to constantly coach him on how to avoid trouble in school.

Every morning before school, we tell him: 'Try not to get any negative points today'. That shouldn't be normal. School should be about learning, not about walking on eggshells.

She also noticed a sudden shift after she submitted a complaint letter – Andre began receiving positive behaviour points in rapid succession, making her question whether the school was manipulating records to cover their tracks.

"No warning, no discussion – just a phone call telling me he was suspended. No one asked what I thought. No one cared how this would affect him."

Edna: failed safeguarding

Edna sought CEN's support after her 12-year-old son Reece received a one-day suspension for retaliating against a peer who had been bullying him for months. Despite repeated complaints to the school, no effective interventions were put in place to deal with the bullying, leading to a confrontation that resulted in his exclusion.

Edna was deeply frustrated, believing that the school's failure to act had set her son up for punishment, rather than protecting him from harm.

> ***I kept telling them it was going to happen. I warned them for months. And when it finally did, they blamed him.***

An incident occurred during an unstructured period when Reece's long-time aggressor grabbed him around the neck. In response, her son pushed the other student away and punched him. The other student ran off, and Reece followed him briefly before staff intervened.

Later that day, Edna received a brief phone call from the school informing her that her son would be excluded for one day for 'violence against another student'. The staff member who called had not been directly involved in the incident and could not answer the mother's questions about what had happened.

> ***They couldn't even tell me the details properly. They just said, 'He's not in school on Monday'. That was it.***

When the exclusion letter arrived, it simply stated 'physical assault on another pupil', failing to mention the months of bullying that had preceded the incident or the fact that Andre had been grabbed first.

> ***All that context – gone. On paper, it just makes him look violent.***

Despite the school being aware of the longstanding conflict, it had taken no serious measures to separate the two students. Edna repeatedly reported the bullying over the school year, and yet when the exclusion occurred in July, she was told by senior staff that they weren't aware of the situation.

> ***They sat there and told me they had no idea this was happening. Meanwhile, I had emails proving I had been telling them for months.***

"I kept telling them it was going to happen. I warned them for months. And when it finally did, they blamed him."

Adding to her frustration, she learned that the other student was receiving one-to-one support, but at the time of the incident, that support had been withdrawn as part of a 'trial' to increase his independence.

So they let him loose on my child, basically. They wanted to see how he would do without support, and my son paid the price for that.

Impact on the child and family:

The exclusion confirmed Reece's growing belief that the school was unfair. He no longer trusted school staff, and frequently described them as racist, believing that he was being singled out. He dreaded going to school and often complained of headaches and feeling sick before school, likely as a result of stress. This created anxiety and fear surrounding his experience of school, as rather than being able to focus on education he instead feared further punishments. Even minor incidents now made him worry about being blamed again.

> ***He already hated school because they didn't listen. Now he just wants to leave. He keeps asking if we've heard back from other schools.***

Edna, meanwhile, was deeply concerned about the long-term impact of the exclusion on her son's future. He was a talented footballer training with Leicester City, and if he pursued professional football, schools and clubs would review his disciplinary record:

> ***If they see 'physical assault' on his record with no context, it could ruin everything for him.***

She wanted to transfer him to another school, but she feared that his exclusion record and previous detentions might affect his chances:

> ***I don't want to wait until they give him another exclusion. Because if they've done it once, they'll do it again.***

"If they see 'physical assault' on his record with no context, it could ruin everything for him."

Sophia: a system that fails Black SEND students

Sophia reached out to CEN for support after her 12-year-old son Ethan, who had ADHD, was repeatedly removed from class, isolated and eventually racially abused by a teacher. Despite the family's persistent efforts to get the school to acknowledge his special educational needs, Ethan was instead targeted with punishments, labelled a trouble-maker and denied the support he required.

Sophia, a single parent of three children, had to leave her job to focus on supporting Ethan, as the stress of dealing with the school became overwhelming.

> ***I had to stop working in October because I couldn't cope with everything happening to him at school. It was just too much.***

Ethan had displayed clear signs of ADHD from primary school onwards, yet teachers failed to recognise or address his needs. The transition to secondary school was particularly difficult, as staff immediately labelled him as disruptive instead of investigating underlying causes. Within the first three weeks of Year 7, the head of year had already branded him as one of the naughtiest students.

> ***I told them – you don't know my son. It's been three weeks! How can you say that already?***

His mother repeatedly asked for an assessment, but the school dismissed her concerns. Instead of offering accommodations, they subjected him to constant removals, detentions and isolation.

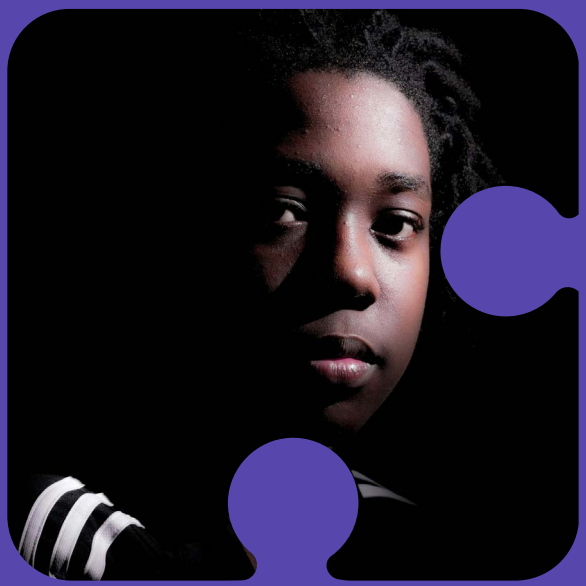
> ***Every single day, they were removing him from class. I begged them – let's work together to support him. But they ignored me.***

The school denied Ethan basic SEND support, including a fidget aid (a simple tool to help manage ADHD symptoms). Sophia fought to secure him one-on-one assistance and modifications, but the school failed to follow through. It consistently framed him as the problem rather than acknowledging its failure to support him. Teachers and senior staff repeatedly called him a trouble-maker, a liar and the source of all classroom disruptions. Even when other students took responsibility for incidents, teachers continued to blame him.

> ***Even his classmates would say, 'It wasn't him!' But they wouldn't listen.***

Sophia's emails requesting meetings and solutions were ignored for months. The headteacher refused to meet her until an extreme incident occurred in April.

"Every single day, they were removing him from class. I begged them– let's work together to support him. But they ignored me."



“The GP asked if he ever had thoughts of hurting himself. He said yes. That’s how bad it got.”

The worst moment came when a teacher directed a deeply offensive racial slur at Ethan in front of the entire class. The incident occurred after Ethan questioned whether he was being unfairly targeted due to his ethnicity. The classroom fell silent, and another student later confirmed what had happened. However, when Ethan reported the incident, the school’s immediate response was to remove him from class rather than investigate the teacher’s behaviour.

> ***Instead of protecting him, they told him to go home and think about what happened. Why should he have to think about it? It happened!***

The next day, Sophia went to the school with a relative, demanding answers. The head of year responded by calling her son a liar.

> ***My cousin, who has 20 years of fostering experience, turned to him and said, ‘Did you just call him a liar? In front of his mother?’***

It was from this point that the relationship between the school and the mother completely broke down. The school took weeks to investigate but ultimately refused to acknowledge the full impact of the racial abuse.

The emotional and psychological toll:

The constant removals, isolation and public humiliation led to severe mental health impacts for Ethan. This included increased levels of anxiety and stress, frequent nightmares and difficulty sleeping. On top of this, he lost trust in teachers and authority figures and no longer believed that teachers were there to help him. This resulted in continuing damage to his self-esteem, as he reported not wanting to go to school and not feeling safe.

Sophia had to take him to the GP, who formally noted the psychological impact and referred him to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) for therapy.

> ***The GP asked if he ever had thoughts of hurting himself. He said yes. That’s how bad it got.***

Jacinta: the toll of a rolling suspension and lack of SEND support

Jacinta sought support from CEN after her 14-year-old son Tyrone was suspended from school following an argument with a teacher while in isolation. Initially, the school issued a one-week suspension, but the situation quickly escalated as the school began to raise concerns about 'compounding incidents' and disruptive behaviour.

Jacinta, who has two younger children in primary school, suddenly found herself navigating an extended period of uncertainty, as Tyrone had remained out of education for four months at the time of writing. The school's handling of the situation, lack of transparency and refusal to provide clear guidance left her battling immense stress. This began to affect her physical health, triggering severe menstrual disruptions that led to GP investigations into whether she was experiencing early menopause, despite being under 40.

When Jacinta was first informed of her son's one-week suspension, she assumed it would be a brief disciplinary measure before his reintegration. However, as the week passed, she was told that his return was being delayed due to the school needing more time to review the 'pattern of incidents' leading up to the exclusion.

> ***They kept saying they were looking into it, but I wasn't getting any straight answers … They told me he had 'built up a pattern of misconduct'. But the worst thing they had on record was 'talking back' to a teacher. That's not grounds for exclusion.***

As Jacinta pressed the school for details, she found that they struggled to provide clear evidence of serious wrongdoing, instead vaguely citing 'a history of disruptive behaviour, lack of concentration and attitude towards staff'.

> ***I had never seen half of these reports before. If there was a problem, why wasn't I told? Instead, they just collected reasons to kick him out … It felt like they had already made up their minds, but when I asked for reports or concrete reasons, they had nothing solid to show me.***

"They told me he had 'built up a pattern of misconduct.' But the worst thing they had on record was 'talking back' to a teacher. That's not grounds for exclusion."

“They just left him to rot at home. No homework, no online lessons, nothing. How is that fair?”

Unclear AP options and a lack of commitment:

At one point, the school suggested a managed move, transferring him to an AP. However, the school was vague about what support they could actually provide, hinting that it would be quicker for Jacinta to seek a SEND diagnosis externally rather than through them.

> ***They kept saying ‘he needs extra support’, but when I asked what they could offer him, they didn’t have an answer. They just kept implying it was a funding issue.***

Jacinta pushed back against the lack of clarity, questioning whether her son truly needed an AP setting or if this was just a way to remove him from the school rather than support him properly. She was left confused and frustrated, unsure of whether she should be preparing him for a return to mainstream school or trying to secure an alternative placement herself.

> ***I was stuck in limbo. If they weren’t going to take him back, why weren’t they being honest about it?***

With Tyrone at home indefinitely, the burden of childcare fell entirely on Jacinta. Juggling his care while still working full time and looking after her two younger children in primary school placed her under intense pressure. Adding to her frustration, the school did not provide any work for him to complete at home, leaving him with no academic engagement for several weeks.

> ***They just left him to rot at home. No homework, no online lessons, nothing. How is that fair?***

Tyrone became increasingly disengaged, questioning whether he even wanted to return to school. Jacinta feared that without proper intervention, his long-term future was at risk.

Meanwhile, the relentless stress of fighting for answers took a serious toll on her physical and mental health. Her menstrual cycle became severely disrupted. Her GP initially investigated whether she was experiencing early menopause. After further assessment, stress was identified as the primary cause of her symptoms. I was having GP appointments every few weeks because my body was shutting down from the stress. I felt like I was losing control of everything.

CEN helped her to challenge the school’s failure to provide home-learning materials, ensuring that if the situation continued, Tyrone would at least receive educational support. This case was still ongoing at the point of interview.

Chandice: the fight for SEND support and the impact of long-term neglect

Chandice sought support from CEN after years of struggling to secure adequate educational support for her 16-year-old son Jaden, who had been diagnosed as autistic in Year 5. Despite her tireless efforts, the school consistently failed to provide the necessary accommodations for Jaden's needs. His experience was shaped by persistent bullying, lack of understanding from school staff and an ongoing battle to access SEND services. While this case study did not result in an exclusion, it demonstrated how difficulties in obtaining an EHCP or accessing SEND support makes pupils particularly vulnerable to exclusion. It also illustrates the great lengths parents can have to go through in order to access adequate support for their child.

Jaden's struggles began early in his schooling. He experienced bullying from as early as Year 1, and by Year 2 Chandice began to notice a significant change in his personality. He became withdrawn and anxious, exhibiting signs of emotional distress. She recalled:

> ***To see your son do a complete 180 before your eyes – it's heartbreaking. The child I had before the bullying isn't the same child I have now.***

By Year 5, Jaden was officially diagnosed as autistic, but the school's response was inadequate. Instead of proactively implementing support strategies, it largely ignored his additional needs, treating his challenges as behavioural issues rather than signs of distress.

As the bullying escalated, Jaden began to develop unhealthy coping mechanisms. His mother noticed that he was secretly eating large amounts of food, stashing snacks under his bed, in his pockets and even in the bathroom. He later admitted that his goal was to gain weight to make himself physically larger, in the belief that if he were bigger, his bullies would stop targeting him.

However, this strategy backfired. His weight gain led to additional bullying, further damaging his self-esteem.

> ***He thought being bigger would make them stop, but it only made it worse. It just drew more attention to him.***

His struggles continued at home, where he internalised his frustration and anger.

> ***He would bottle things up all day at school, then explode when he got home. I was the one who got the brunt of it.***

"He would bottle things up all day at school, then explode when he got home. I was the one who got the brunt of it."

School's failure to provide SEND support:

The school continuously denied multiple appeals for an EHCP to provide structured support, or delayed the process. Chandice fought tirelessly to get the school to acknowledge her son's difficulties, but staff dismissed her concerns.

> ***They acted like he wasn't struggling. But how do you explain a boy going from high academic achievement to failing? If that's not a red flag, I don't know what is.***

Jaden's teachers acknowledged that he was articulate and bright but repeatedly reported that he struggled to put anything down on paper. Yet instead of seeing this as a sign of his SEND needs, Chandice believes the school simply let him 'fall through the cracks'.

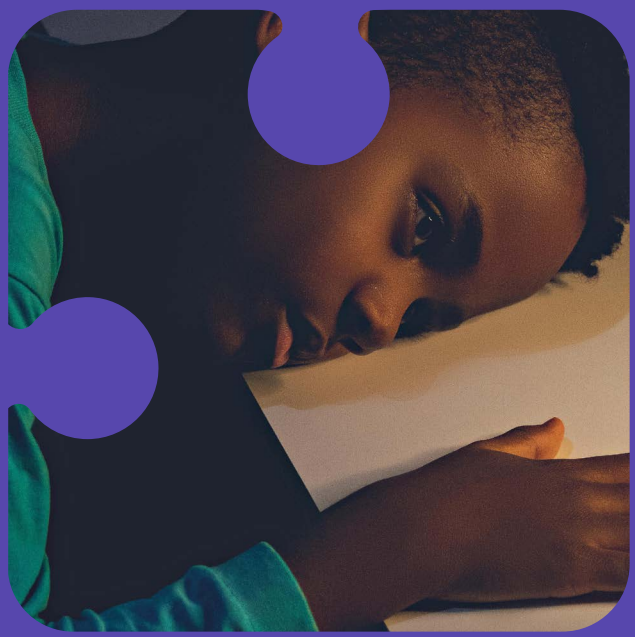
The fight for support took a devastating toll on both Jaden and his mother.

> ***This has been the loneliest fight I've ever had for my child. I felt like I was screaming into the void.***

As Jaden's struggles worsened, he withdrew from social interactions, stopped engaging in extracurricular activities and frequently expressed frustration about his future. He even began questioning the value of trying at school.

> ***He told me, 'What's the point, Mum? They don't care about me anyway.' That broke my heart.***

"He told me, 'What's the point, Mum? They don't care about me anyway.' That... broke my heart."



Conclusion

The six case studies above reveal deep-rooted systemic failures in school exclusion practices, with disproportionate impacts on Black students and those with SEND. Rather than addressing underlying causes – such as unmet SEND needs, racial bias or safeguarding shortcomings – schools often resorted to punitive measures.

Black students were consistently punished more harshly for minor infractions and were frequently labelled as aggressive or disruptive. In contrast, similar behaviours by white peers were overlooked. Exclusion records often exaggerated incidents, reinforcing damaging stereotypes and contributing to the over-policing of Black students. Compounding these issues was a lack of adequate safeguarding, leaving Black pupils vulnerable to peer aggression. In two cases, students were excluded after defending themselves against bullying – despite prior parental complaints that schools had failed to act upon. Conflicts were allowed to escalate, and disciplinary records often omitted crucial context, misrepresenting students as aggressors.

Zero-tolerance policies were applied harshly and inconsistently. For example, one student was excluded for bringing a toy water gun to school, treated as if it were a real weapon. Investigations were delayed, behaviour records were manipulated following complaints and disciplinary decisions were sometimes made without a full understanding of the facts.

These case studies also highlight a widespread failure to support students with SEND. Some schools admitted that they could not meet children's needs due to financial pressures. One suspension was even justified on the grounds that the student required 'extra support' the school couldn't provide. Three of the featured students had diagnosed or suspected SEND, yet their difficulties were framed as behavioural problems. Schools neglected to implement EHCPs or make necessary adjustments, leading to crises that ended in exclusion.

The consequences were profound – not only for the students but also for their families. In every case, mothers became the primary advocates, often forced to become experts in school policy, SEND rights and legal procedures to defend their children. One mother left her job to support her son's education; others suffered extreme stress, financial hardship and health issues, including stress-induced menstrual irregularities and suspected early menopause. Students who were once engaged became withdrawn and distrustful of teachers. Parents experienced anxiety, exhaustion and career setbacks, all while trying to navigate exclusion systems that offered little support.

Throughout these cases, CEN played a critical role in guiding families through the often confusing and emotionally charged process of school exclusion. Its support extended far beyond formal advocacy, offering a tailored mix of legal advice, practical assistance and emotional reassurance.

In several instances, CEN also connected families with specialist legal advice regarding discrimination or failures under the Equality Act. In others, it supported parents to ensure exclusion records were contextualised or amended before being passed on to new institutions. These case studies underscore the vital role of organisations like CEN in a landscape where families often face complex systems without clear routes to redress or support. Without independent, informed advocacy, many of the young people featured in this report would have been left without education, justice or a pathway forward.

Even with CEN's intervention, the impact of exclusion remained significant. Some students lost months of education – one received no formal learning for two months after being excluded. Exclusion records followed them to new schools, making reintegration challenging and in some cases jeopardising their futures. One student, a promising footballer, saw his career ambitions put at risk.

While we cannot yet fully measure the long-term consequences for these students, the warning signs are unmistakable. As we now turn to the stories of Black adults who were excluded as children, these case studies stand as a stark reminder of the enduring harm that exclusion can cause – and as a call to action for an education system that continues to fail Black children.

3. How has exclusion affected young people as they enter into adulthood?

This chapter centres the experiences of eight adults – seven Black Caribbean and one Black African – who were excluded from school.

Each had different experiences within the education system, with a range of exclusionary practices including internal, fixed-term and permanent exclusion. Regardless of the method employed, the effects of exclusion were deeply felt as our participants transitioned into early adulthood and beyond.

The individuals we spoke to have shown remarkable resilience. Despite significant challenges – such as resitting exams, pursuing qualifications later in life, experiencing poor mental health and involvement with the criminal justice system – many have gone on to build meaningful and successful careers. Notably, the majority have chosen to enter the education sector themselves or become actively involved in community work, often motivated by a desire to be the positive role models they felt were absent during their own school years.

While these stories are inspiring, they also raise an important question: what might these individuals have achieved had the education system better recognised their potential and supported their needs from the start?

To structure this chapter, we have organised these testimonies under the three main drivers of exclusion outlined in the first chapter of the report: the marketisation of education, the securitisation of schools, and the impact funding cuts have had on students with SEND. These themes consistently appear across the narratives, illustrating how structural factors often overlap and reinforce one another. By presenting the data in this way, we aim to underscore the systemic nature of exclusion and its disproportionate impact on Black Caribbean and Black African pupils.

We share these deeply personal and often painful journeys in order to engage policymakers and urge them to consider: what more can be done to ensure that every child, regardless of race, has access to a high-quality, inclusive education?

Zero-tolerance policies and the securitisation of schools

We begin this chapter by first looking at how zero-tolerance policies and securitisation tactics have affected Black pupils. First is the case of Aaliyah, who experienced an internal exclusion due to her school's zero-tolerance policy on education. This is followed by the case of Nyomi, whose school had a zero-tolerance policy on drug use and who experienced an unsupervised strip-search while in school. Finally we present the case of Trevor, whose boisterous behaviour was misinterpreted on an audio-less CCTV recording and who, after receiving a permanent exclusion, became involved in serious youth violence.

Aaliyah: adultification and assimilation

Aaliyah was excluded at the age of 13–14. She experienced an internal exclusion and was not allowed to attend science classes as she had a facial piercing. This exclusion took place even though Aaliyah reported good academic performance and a 'love of learning'.

> ***There was a real kind of confusion because I felt like I was doing all of the right things.***

As an adult, Aaliyah was diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia – conditions that can lead to impulsive behaviour. Her piercing, for her, was not an act of defiance but an expression of creativity. Rather than recognising this, the school responded with punishment.

> ***So a friend of mine might have felt like I don't want to get a piercing because I'm scared the school is going to exclude me. But because of all of these things I'm going to find a way to do something, a bit resistant, a bit creative maybe, I'm going to get the piercing. I'm going to deal with it afterwards … That's how my mind works.***

Eventually, continual experiences with one teacher resulted in Aaliyah becoming angry and alienated from education. She explained how even though her academic attainment was good, the small fact of a facial piercing and the reaction of her teachers made her feel like she was a problem, leaving her wondering 'what's the point in school if you can't be yourself?'

> ***It got to a point where I wasn't even going to class. I just used to go straight to exclusion. It was almost like I'm not going to have this back and forth with you about why I should and shouldn't be in the classroom.***

This experience was part of a broader pattern in which Aaliyah's efforts to explore her identity as a young Black woman – through beauty routines and personal style – were routinely policed. Teachers often lacked the cultural understanding to see these expressions as normal, instead adultifying or sexualising her behaviour.

One vivid example occurred after a PE class, when Aaliyah was moisturising her legs and a male teacher confiscated her body oil.

> ***To me, it's a very normal thing – I was just moisturising my skin, but how he***

"It got to a point where I wasn't even going to class. I just used to go straight to exclusion. It was almost like I'm not going to have this back and forth with you about why I should and shouldn't be in the classroom."

perceives my body, I think it can be quite sexual. He's deemed it to be everything that it's not. He's now confiscated the oil from me, and I'm thinking 'I use this in my hair, I use this on my face. And now you've taken a central product of mine' … [He thought] that I was doing something inappropriate, but it was so mundane.

Aaliyah's sense was that her school expected her to conform to white, middle-class norms in both appearance and behaviour. Her identity – her hair, her nails, her jewellery – was marked as 'non-compliant' or 'inappropriate'.

My friends would do my hair, but I think everything about me was very opposite to how the school mandated you to be. [As well as having moisturiser confiscated, there were] comments from other teachers about my hair being unkempt, or my nails and gold jewellery being kind of chavvy … I felt like there was a system, there was a culture which suggested that I was not assimilating and therefore I need to be punished and penalised.

One rare source of support came from Ms Davies,[80] the school's only Black teacher. She understood the challenges that Aaliyah and her peers faced and created a safe space for them within the school – going as far as to set up a school-based hair salon as a social enterprise, despite resistance from other staff.

This salon became a creative and affirming environment, a safe space where Black girls in the school could connect, express themselves and avoid punishment simply for doing their hair in public spaces. Through these interactions Ms Davies would become an important figure for the girls:

She was trying to allow us to understand that she's facing a real political agenda of people trying to dismiss the abilities of girls in the school who look like her, or other people in her family … she created space to speak to us, and what she shared was the narrative from the rest of the teachers that we would be excluded and not get our GCSEs … but more than that, [she was telling us] that the teachers' opinion of us matters, because they mark our work and they already have a perception of us being unsuccessful.

Effects into adulthood

Aaliyah was now in the final year of a PhD, having worked in sexual reproductive health for a number of years. Despite having a successful academic and professional career, her experiences of exclusion were formative in how she understands her own identity and positionality in society. This, in turn, exposed her to the way in which society continues to oppress Black people who are unwilling to assimilate into white norms.

I now find myself being in predominantly white spaces. So I think there is an expectation of how I'm meant to look. But where I'm from, a lot of people look like me. They have piercings, they have nails, they have natural hair. It's not a thing.

In terms of the exclusion, it feels like the school has an idea of who I am and who I was meant to be … Which is why they were trying to tell me to assimilate. If you assimilate, maybe you'll have a better chance of doing whatever the thing is you're trying to do. And I don't believe in that. I don't think that's the right narrative. I think it's false. No matter how I shape-shift my body, people are still going to see a Black woman.

[80] As with interviewees, Ms Davies is a pseudonym and bears no similarity to the real name of the person being discussed.

What does change look like?

Like other adults interviewed in this research, Aaliyah felt that schools were not equipped to provide holistic support and a nurturing environment for Black young people. Instead, school was seen as an overly prescriptive and regimented experience, more focused on the strict parameters of academic attainment than on giving young people the tools they need to understand their emotional wellbeing, health and family life.

Accordingly, Aaliyah felt that an education which cannot be tailored to fit the needs of all young people was doing them a disservice. This was a sign to start looking towards African-centred teaching traditions. These give more space to young people and nourish their ways of learning, encouraging them to be central in their own education and disrupting the linear teacher–pupil power dynamic. One example cited by Aaliyah was how a local faith group encouraged pupils as young as five or six to deliver self-directed presentations on a topic of their choice, rather than, for example, a more prescribed way of learning from a textbook or whiteboard.

Ultimately for Aaliyah, a successful education system should be about creating cultures of understanding, and in prioritising developing people rather than chasing exam results. In place of exclusion and disciplinary practices, what should be developed is a culture of care, understanding and respect, all of which many Black children cannot access through the current educational system.

"I now find myself being in predominantly white spaces. So I think there is an expectation of how I'm meant to look.

But where I'm from, a lot of people look like me."

Nyomi: low teacher expectations and the presence of police in school

Like many other participants in this research, Nyomi had a positive experience in primary school but began encountering challenges after moving to secondary education. This shift meant moving from a highly diverse school to one that was predominantly white, in terms of both the student body and the teaching staff. At secondary school, Nyomi felt that teachers had low expectations for Black Caribbean students, assuming they would underperform or fail. This sense of bias extended beyond the classroom and into social dynamics, where she often felt excluded and struggled to build meaningful friendships.

> ***We were quite poor so we didn't have a lot of money, and obviously I'm Black. Most of the students came from quite affluent backgrounds. So, even though I did have a few friendships here and there, I always felt like a little bit of an outsider.***

The combination of being hyper-visible as one of the few Black children in school and the low expectations that teachers had of Black Caribbean pupils led to Nyomi feeling that she would be more severely punished for poor behaviour than her white peers. This led to her feeling as if she had been labelled as a 'bad kid' from the outset.

> ***They weren't expecting me to do good then, or in the future. That was the vibe I got.***

This perception was tragically reinforced when Nyomi, along with two white students, left school grounds and smoked marijuana. After being caught by a teacher, she was permanently excluded from the school while her peers were not. While the school was investigating the incident, Nyomi was separated from the two white students and was strip-searched by the police without a parent or guardian present. Only her headteacher was in the room.

> ***I ended up getting strip-searched – they didn't find anything. I got strip-searched without a parent with me, so it was just the police and the headteacher, which was absolutely awful.***

> ***They had coerced the two white students to say that I had talked them***

"They weren't expecting me to do good then, or in the future. That was the vibe I got"

into smoking weed. Even though I bought it, I didn't actually know how to smoke it. They smoked more than me. I didn't even know how to roll.

Despite nothing being found, Nyomi was excluded while the others faced no consequences. She recalled a previous incident involving white students found with a Class A substance, who received only a warning and were allowed to return to school. Nyomi felt criminalised, alienated, and unsupported during a time when she was already struggling with personal challenges.

According to her own testimony, there were a lot of 'personal factors' in Nyomi's life at the time. She felt like an outsider in school and on the fringes of friendship groups. Rather supporting her or seeing this incident as a way of bonding with her classmates, the school criminalised Nyomi's behaviour and opted to exclude her completely and permanently. This experience led to her feeling let down, and that she was being treated in a discriminatory way:

I don't feel [my personal issues] were picked up on by teachers. They just saw that my behaviour was off and didn't look to see if there was more going on. I don't feel like they offered me the same kind of support and protection that they had offered white students.

I don't think they were trying to be supportive or anything. I think it was just 'get her out'.

After she was excluded, her teachers attempted to place Nyomi in AP. However, her mother fought against this and managed to secure a place for Nyomi in a different local school But by this point, she had 'given up on education' and left school with two GCSEs.

Effects into adulthood

The fallout from Nyomi's exclusion lingered well into her adult life. Though she enrolled at a new school, she struggled to fit in socially. Already feeling like an outsider, her confidence continued to suffer. The emotional toll from her schooling experience negatively impacted both her mental wellbeing and her academic outcomes.

After leaving school, Nyomi entered into a 'terrible relationship' with a much older man and quickly started a family. Her early exclusion from school and the way it shaped her sense of self-worth left her with a deep sense of hopelessness.

I feel like if [the exclusion] didn't happen, I think I probably would have felt like I had a future. I maybe wouldn't have got married and started a family so soon, because I would have just felt like I could have done more at that age. So, yeah … I feel like it really hindered my ability to progress at that younger age.

Nyomi eventually decided to go into nursing. When she was resitting her English GCSE, a teacher noticed that she had scored very highly and recommended applying for a scholarship at a redbrick university.

I was like 'Wow! You really think that I'm good enough for that?' and it made me think that I can actually do this. I would say it gave me a confidence boost. And then throughout the years, I've pushed myself and come out of the other end, it reinforces that confidence.

Reflecting back on her journey into nursing and her feelings of self-confidence, Nyomi referenced the low expectations that teachers had of her as a young person

I'm finding out in my nursing degree that actually, I'm not stupid. I've managed to get a first, so you know, I do have some brains in there. But it just didn't feel like I was supported to grow in that way in school … If you had told me back then that I was going to be a degree holder, I would have thought you were crazy. [I felt like] that's not something that I can do, and that's not accessible.

What does change look like?

Throughout her time at secondary school, Nyomi felt outcast as one of the few Black Caribbean students. She felt on the fringes of friendship groups and largely unsupported by her white teachers. Alongside this, the curriculum was often delivered through a 'white lens'

Looking back, Nyomi believed that the education system must change to better serve students like her. She pointed to a lack of diversity among teachers and an overly white-centric curriculum as major barriers. She argued that a more inclusive teaching workforce – alongside a curriculum that reflects the stories and experiences of all cultures – could help students feel more seen, understood and supported

Nyomi also saw value in more interactive, student-centred teaching approaches that encourage self-expression and allow for different learning styles. Teachers embedding their own experiences and stories into lessons could foster connection and build trust

In her view, improving teacher diversity would also help to reduce racial bias. When students share cultural or racial identities with staff, they may feel safer and better understood. Nyomi's problems with education happened as she moved to a much less diverse school that she had been at previously. As highlighted in other case studies such as the case of Aaliyah above, the presence of even a single trusted adult can make a world of difference in a young person's school experience. For racialised young people, relationships of trust and understanding can be easier to form with an adult who shares their characteristics, as there may be a perceived or real understanding of the challenges the young person is facing.

Finally, Nyomi was critical of how exclusion is often used by schools – not for the benefit of the student but to protect institutional outcomes such as exam performance.

I feel like schools use it as a way to increase their overall GCSE scores. I don't think [exclusion] is necessary. Even though they say it's for behaviour or management, I feel like it's more to benefit the school … I think the school should try and work with families more and try to understand if there are any challenges or obstacles that could be impacting their schooling or behaviour.

"I was like 'Wow! You really think that I'm good enough for that?' and it made me think that I can actually do this.

Trevor: social isolation and serious youth violence

Trevor was a gifted student at school and sat his GCSE exams for maths and English while in Year 9. Although the importance of these two subjects were stressed to him by his parents and grandmother, most of the remaining school curriculum left Trevor both unengaged and uninspired. This coincided with being educated in a majority-white secondary school which treated the teaching of Black history as important only to students from minoritised ethnic groups and failed to incorporate Black narratives throughout the curriculum.

As a result, Trevor – along with other Black African and Caribbean students – was separated from the main lessons and made to attend what they informally called 'Black class' in place of the usual curriculum:

> ***Instead of doing maths, they would put the African or Caribbean kids in what we used to call Black class. We would be in one classroom and would have them telling us about our history. We just felt like our parents instilled that in us from childhood, and that it was the rest of the school who needed that education, not us. As I got older, I realised it was like segregation.***

This performative approach to inclusion extended beyond that one class. Black pupils often felt singled out by their teachers – for instance, being asked in front of their peers to share how they felt watching programmes like Roots in class. Disciplinary practices also seemed biased, with Black students feeling as if they were monitored and punished to a greater extent than their white classmates.

> ***I feel like a lot of it was down to how teachers would perceive us in a heavily white school. It was easy for them to look at us as dangerous. They would see us in a classroom where people were being disruptive, and we would always be the first ones out – whether we were being the loudest or not. Sometimes we weren't even doing anything, and we would be called out. I think we just looked like a threat.***

In Year 11, six months before the start of GCSE exams, Trevor was permanently excluded from school. The incident which led to his exclusion involved a play fight with a younger pupil, which was wrongly interpreted as violent when watched back on an audio-less CCTV recording. After viewing the incident, the school opted to permanently exclude Trevor by 3pm on the same day. A group of pupils, including white pupils, staged a small protest within the school asking for Trevor to be reinstated, citing the differential treatment between Black and white pupils at the school:

> ***We would have kids at school that would bring snooker balls in socks, throw chairs and stuff and they would get to go go-karting instead of going to lessons. There were clear extremes between boisterous behaviour and really destructive behaviour that would come from the white kids, and they wouldn't get the same treatment.***

Accordingly, Trevor was severely punished for the altercation. To make matters worse, one teacher threatened Trevor with being placed on the sex offenders' register because the altercation happened in the boys' toilets.

Following protests from Trevor's mother, the school conceded and allowed Trevor to return and sit some of his GCSE examinations. This followed a four- or five-month period where he was not allowed to attend school and was unable to enrol at another. A miscommunication also meant that Trevor missed four of his GCSE examinations entirely and had to spend three years rather than the standard two at sixth form. The extra year of study was taken up sitting BTEC exams in sport and business which were 'way below me, as I had already done maths and English GCSEs in Year 9. It was just a waste of time for me.'

Effects into adulthood

Trevor's exclusion left a lasting mark. Being labelled a 'trouble-maker' due to his race made him feel like an outsider. This led Trevor to feel as if he had no place in society and that he would not be able to lead a 'normal' and functioning life as an adult.

> ***It's just so easy to say that you were mistreated because of your skin colour, but it definitely played a factor. When I left school, it put something in my head that I couldn't work in an environment that would be like school and have to go through that again.***

This would lead to Trevor going down 'different paths'. His peer group, which included other Black and mixed-ethnicity young people who had been excluded from school, felt like they could not live in broader society and instead created their own bubble in which they would live. This meant quickly falling into a cycle of knife crime and serious youth violence. One particularly violent incident occurred during Halloween one year that left Trevor with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and feeling that he was unable to leave the house for months on end. Emotionally, Trevor told us that one of his peer group committed suicide after the incident.

> ***People that I knew died. A lot of us shared this feeling that we couldn't live in broader society, so we lived in a bubble. Knife crime, those kinds of things. One of my friends … He couldn't take it any more.***

> ***I remember feeling so out of place and disconnected. I realised [knife crime had] become so normal. Over the next three months I just started pranging out. I couldn't go outside. PTSD kicked in. I couldn't go outside.***

Trevor felt that his experience at school meant that he had built up an 'armour'. He felt betrayed by a school system which had treated him harshly and discriminatorily, when instead these institutions should have looked after him and provided more pastoral care. As a result, Trevor felt as if he had to 'look after myself when nobody else would' and fight the outside world. This would 'spiral out of control'.

> ***I think [youth violence] was all we thought we were good for. Going to prison was normal. I didn't go to prison, but it didn't bother me. Being arrested didn't bother me, we would just carry on doing what we were doing. But you can only live like that for so long.***

In his thirties, Trevor started to rebuild his life. He got a new job supporting young people with complex behaviours. However, having only started in this role a year ago, Trevor talked about us how he had spent most of his life after school feeling lost and that the only choices he was able to make involved criminality and violence. In addition, previous experiences of racism in workplaces had led to Trevor feeling as if he was unable to function within regular employment.

> ***I don't want to put myself in that compromising position where someone might make a monkey noise … even in the last place I've worked, I've had a guy dropping the N-bomb. I've lost my temper, but kept it cool. An hour later he's come out with a torch in his hand. He's chucked me the torch and said, 'When you come home tonight, make sure you switch this on so we can see you in the dark'. I took him to court, I just won the case last week.***

"I think [youth violence] was all we thought we were good for. Going to prison was normal. I didn't go to prison, but it didn't bother me. Being arrested didn't bother me, we would just carry on doing what we were doing. But you can only live like that for so long."

What does change look like?

Reflecting on his journey, Trevor was clear: if he had not been excluded from school, he might have avoided the destructive path he ended up on. While he acknowledged that some choices were his own, he believed they were also shaped by ignorance and lack of support.

> ***I feel like, [if it wasn't for] the school exclusions and how the whole system was, I wouldn't have gone down this path. I went down that path out of choice, but also out of ignorance. It's about the character we have to build up to fight the outside world but then it just spirals out of control.***

Trevor wanted to see an education system that does not rely on exclusion except in extreme cases involving actual harm or danger. Instead, he advocated for strong wraparound pastoral support, smaller class sizes and early intervention when students exhibit signs of distress, rather than just punishing them.

He also stressed the importance of teacher recruitment that prioritised cultural competency and anti-racist training, as well as a curriculum that thoughtfully included Black history and experiences.

Attainment and performance-related exclusions

This section explores how performance-related exclusions disproportionately affect Black pupils. As we mentioned earlier, a significant number of school exclusions take place in the build-up to GCSE examinations during Year 11. Schools often face pressure to maintain high academic performance for national league tables and funding purposes. In this context, pupils who are underperforming – particularly those with SEND or from disadvantaged backgrounds – are sometimes removed from the school roll to preserve academic outcomes.

The experiences of two students, Raquel and Jayden, illustrate this issue from opposing angles. Raquel, who struggled with undiagnosed SEND, was excluded shortly before her exams. This exclusion had a long-lasting impact on her adult life. Jayden, on the other hand, was a high achiever. His academic success shielded him from exclusion, but this sense of invincibility led to risky behaviour that continued into adulthood, resulting in multiple encounters with the criminal justice system.

Raquel: experiences with SEND and unlawful exclusion

As an adult Raquel was diagnosed with dyslexia, but during secondary school her neurodivergence was undetected. She struggled with work in class and did not receive the help she needed, despite asking for support on a number of occasions. Struggling to do the work, Raquel became disruptive in class and built up a reputation. This resulted in her being targeted by school staff and disciplined for the behaviour of other classmates (such as outbursts in class) even when she was not involved.

> ***There wasn't any support in school whatsoever. They just took it that I was a naughty child, rather than thinking I was struggling. I used to say that I couldn't do the work, but even if they explained it, I just didn't understand. I don't think they had the resources back then to help me.***

The lack of support in school, along with a cycle of attributing blame and discipline, spiralled out of control. Raquel was often excluded from her lessons. In Year 11 she faced a month-long exclusion, and shortly after a new headteacher arrived, she was permanently excluded just before her GCSEs.

> ***It was a shock. I knew my behaviour wasn't the best. It did get worse coming into Year 11, especially coming into GCSEs. Maybe it was stress because I thought I wasn't going to do well. It was a shock but there wasn't any interventions put in place, no extra-curricular support, no one to help. Nothing like that.***

The timing of her exclusion raises serious concerns. As noted earlier in this report, there is growing evidence that schools exclude low-performing students before exams to boost their overall academic performance. Pupils with SEND or low attainment and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected by this practice.[81]

Raquel's mother was not involved in the process of her exclusion, and had had no prior warning of poor behaviour or attainment. The school harboured negative stereotypes about the Black family structure which Raquel lived in – assuming that a single parent who was raising four mixed-heritage children would be disengaged from their education. Instead, Raquel described her mother as 'strict', and if she had known about the issues Raquel was facing in school she would have been likely to intervene and ensure that her child received a suitable education.

> ***She didn't know about it really. She went in maybe a few times and she just didn't know until a later stage. It was a shock to them to find out what happened in school.***

These experiences of education ultimately led to Raquel feeling 'let down' by the system. Despite being a good student during primary school, she struggled to transition into secondary school – a common experience among Black students, who are more likely to experience racism and face difficulties assimilating to a new school environment.

Raquel's educational journey, marked by missed opportunities and unmet needs, left her feeling abandoned by a system that failed to recognise her potential despite knowing that she was intelligent. This severely affected Raquel's confidence and the way that she saw herself:

> ***It's not like I wasn't clever. It's just the school let me down – and it affected my confidence. I'm quite shy anyway, but I feel like … I always feel like I'm not really good enough. I can't articulate myself or even how I feel.***

Effects into adulthood

Raquel's exclusion and lack of support followed her into adulthood. For years, she struggled with low confidence and self-worth. It wasn't until nearly 20 years later that she began to rebuild her life. After working in hospitality for a decade, she retook her GCSEs and, motivated by her partner and young child, went on to earn a degree and become a teacher.
Despite her success, she continued to acknowledge the impact that her school exclusion had. She described how long and difficult her experience had been since leaving school:

> ***It's still a journey. I always think back to school, because coming out with one GCSE is not nice at all. I don't know, it was a big letdown. It's something that I always regret … I feel a bit more confident because I've got my degree and I'm a teacher, it's nice to say that, but I've always felt not good enough, or that I can't do it … I qualified last year, so I'm quite late. It's been a journey. Not going to lie, it's taken me ages to get to where I wanted to be.***

Raquel went on to explain:

> ***I feel like there's a lot of gaps in my knowledge … especially when it comes to my niece and nephews. When I look at their [home]work, I just don't know this stuff. You feel stupid. You feel like you don't know like lessons in science, history … it's just a lot of gaps.***
>
> ***You just can't speak to people on a level, or feel like you have something in common with someone. It's embarrassing to know that you don't know the basics …] I just think about the experience of school, it was horrible. It was actually horrible … I didn't receive any praise at school. I don't remember feeling positive.***

What does change look like?

Raquel's story highlights the urgent need for systemic change in education – particularly in how schools support students with SEND and engage Black pupils. Now a teacher herself, Raquel saw the same issues still affecting children and families today. She explained how she had seen it take up to two years for a child to be diagnosed with SEND, and that due to class sizes, it was hard to give one-on-one time and provide interventions for children who need additional support.

'There wasn't any support in school whatsoever. They just took it that I was a naughty child, rather than thinking I was struggling' I used to say that I couldn't do the work, but even if they explained it, I just didn't understand.

As a result, many children fall through the cracks, unable to get appropriate support. Their frustration builds, leading to behavioural issues and further discipline, perpetuating a damaging cycle. While teachers try their best to manage, history remains on loop, with the pressures of low funding and poor pastoral support creating conditions for children to fail rather than flourish.

Alongside structural reforms to the education system, the presence of Black teachers in school can help to counteract some of the worst consequences. A number of interviewees described how the presence of a Black professional in school can help turn things around for young people, providing them with a recognisable and familiar figure who they can talk to and who can hold them accountable without the dynamic being shaped by racial bias.

For Raquel, this dynamic now shaped her work with pupils who reminded her of her own experiences of education:

> ***It's important to have [Black teachers] in school. Most of the time, kids are just misunderstood. Talk to them – most of the time it's stuff that's not school related. I tell them that they don't need to be like that to be heard. I see a lot of kids that see that because I'm Black, I know what it's like. They respect you.***

She also reflects on the one Black teacher who made a difference in her life: even though it was too late to change her school trajectory, that teacher planted a seed:

> ***I had one Black teacher, she's the only one that got through to me and made me think. I know that she came too late, but if I had that at the start, it would have helped me for sure. I feel [thinking of her] has spurred me on too, because I want to make a difference.***

"I had one Black teacher, she's the only one that got through to me and made me think. I know that she came too late, but if I had that at the start, it would have helped me for sure. I feel [thinking of her] has spurred me on too, because I want to make a difference."

Jayden: the other side of performance-related exclusions

Jayden's behaviour began to shift at the end of Year 7, shortly after his parents separated. Although he had been well behaved in primary school, the emotional toll of family breakdown became a turning point in his life.

> ***So it's not like my mum and dad broke up and then I acted out, there's a lot of more complex things going on. But yeah, that was definitely a turning point.***

From that point on, Jayden faced repeated internal exclusions, culminating in a fixed-term exclusion in Year 10. The incident which led to the exclusion happened during break time and involved some younger students in the school. While Jayden was chasing another student around a classroom, the student fell and seriously injured themselves on a table. Jayden was suspended for five days. Looking back, he reflects that if the same incident occurred today, the outcome would likely have been far more severe.

> ***There are definitely things that I did at school that I got a fixed-term exclusion for that would if I was in school now, would more than likely have warranted a permanent exclusion.***

Jayden believes his academic ability shielded him from the harshest disciplinary measures. While he did misbehave, particularly outside of lesson times, he maintained strong engagement in class. In one instance, another student was permanently excluded following a serious incident, while Jayden, who was also involved, was not.

> ***When I did get in trouble, I could always get out of more serious trouble. Obviously, from an educational perspective, they thought 'He's smart and he's going to do well in his GCSEs. We really don't want to get rid of him.'***

At times, surface-level behavioural interventions, like being placed on a report card, led to improvements. But Jayden now recognises that what he was really seeking was praise and recognition.

> ***I always remember asking to be put on a report card, and when I got put on a report card, I got straight ones for all of my subjects. I look back now though and think, 'Oh, I wanted praise'.***

This dynamic created a dangerous feedback loop: poor behaviour was tolerated because of academic potential, and that tolerance fuelled a growing sense of invincibility. Over time this created a kind of arrogance and hardened into a belief that he could avoid meaningful consequences. They're not going to get rid of me. Like, I can kind of do whatever I want, because most of the time I'm actually well behaved.

Effects into adulthood

This perceived immunity to consequences, shaped in part by how the school overlooked Jayden's behaviour and failed to provide meaningful pastoral support, carried into his teenage years. Emboldened by past experiences where he had faced little accountability, he began taking greater risks, believing he could talk his way out of trouble just as he had in school.

> ***I don't fear anything, and I push those boundaries. I'm out and about with my friends, and we're doing things that we shouldn't be doing. Then I get arrested and I get away with it or I go to court and I get found not guilty. It's this common theme of 'I could do what I want, and I'm probably never going to get caught for it', until you get caught for it.***

In 2013 Jayden received a six-year prison sentence and spent 11 months on an electronic tag. After being released from prison, he took a more active and pastoral role in supporting his two younger brothers – both of whom were excluded from school. His middle brother experienced a failed managed move and then enrolled in AP. His youngest brother went to the same school and was branded a 'trouble-maker' due to Jayden's past. After two failed managed moves, Jayden's mother opted to take his youngest brother out of school and home-school him instead.

Reflecting on both the experiences of his younger brothers and the absence of his father following his parents' separation, Jayden felt that he had not been the male role model his brothers needed as they were growing up, and that poor decisions he made in his own life had an influence on their own behaviour.

> ***I had disappeared for a while and obviously my mum and dad had broken up years prior. So I was their male role model. I wasn't the greatest. Even though I never told them to do anything bad, I look back now and realise that they wanted to be like me.***

After being released from prison, Jayden decided to 'make good decisions' and started to work as a mentor for young people, eventually running outreach programmes for schools. Now, he is completing further qualifications that will allow him to become a teacher, despite facing significant challenges in enrolling in education due to his past criminal conviction. Although he was in the process of rebuilding his life after being convicted, experiences within education were still a prominent source of tension for Jayden:

> It definitely played a part in my risk-taking … I think that's had a long-lasting effect.

What does change look like?

Jayden's story illustrates that the school's disciplinary strategies were not only ineffective – they were enabling. Rather than recognising the emotional impact of his family circumstances, the school treated his attainment as a reason to overlook his behaviour. This resulted in a missed opportunity to provide meaningful pastoral support, setting Jayden on a path of escalating risk-taking that ultimately led to incarceration.

At the heart of this is an attainment-driven education system that fails students at both ends of the spectrum. Those like Raquel – students with undiagnosed special educational needs – are pushed out due to perceived underperformance. Those like Jayden are retained and excused from disciplinary action because they are seen as academically valuable. In

"I always remember asking to be put on a report card, and when I got put on a report card, I got straight ones for all of my subjects. I look back now though and think,

'Oh, I wanted praise'."

both cases, schools neglect the emotional, moral and psychological development of the child. This becomes evident when Jayden describes how:

> ***Unfortunately, the majority of teachers don't actually care about young people … They only care about them doing well in an exam, as opposed to doing well in life, or trying to help them with things that are not education related.***

One glaring issue that ran through both Raquel and Jayden's experiences is the lack of role models – particularly Black teachers – in the school environment. Jayden's challenges were compounded by parental separation during a critical stage in his life. His story, like many others, underscores how schools often fail to recognise the pastoral needs of Black boys, especially when they present as 'high achievers'.

In a structurally racist system, Black pupils are frequently stereotyped, with little room for the full complexity of their identities to be acknowledged or nurtured. The absence of Black educators and mentors exacerbates this, leaving students without trusted figures who understand their lived experiences.

If Jayden had encountered a teacher who recognised his emotional needs and the significance of his home life, his trajectory might have looked very different. Just as Raquel found inspiration in the one Black teacher who believed in her, Jayden could have benefited from a figure who offered accountability grounded in empathy, not just performance.

Both cases speak to a wider truth: representation is not just symbolic – it is structural. The presence of Black teachers, mentors, and role models in schools offers more than visibility. It provides students with proof that they are seen, understood and capable of transformation. Until schools prioritise this, students like Jayden and Raquel will continue to fall through the cracks of a system that values outcomes over lives.

Cuts to pastoral support

This section explores how reductions in pastoral provision have disproportionately impacted Black students. Both Christopher and Jeremiah spoke candidly about how the disappearance of youth centres, mentoring programmes and safe community spaces left a void. These were spaces where they had once found belonging, mentorship and the kind of guidance not always available at home or in school. The absence of these resources intersected with challenging family dynamics, resulting in behaviour that was frequently misunderstood or punished rather than dealt with supportively.

In both examples, it is clear how external factors such, including difficult familial life, affect students who have disruptive and challenging behaviour in school. For Christopher, both a lack of male role models and having to take on care responsibilities made school a challenge, and it was only youth centres that provided him with adults he could relate to and aspire to emulate. Jeremiah, on the other hand, went through school with undiagnosed mental health needs that would only be picked up later while he was in higher education. These challenges were compounded by a school that was unable to cater to his family's needs, especially having English as a second language, and left Jeremiah to navigate multiple exclusions largely on his own.

Christopher: a lack of role models

Christopher's story is marked by repeated exclusions, starting in Year 8 and continuing until the end of his school life. His disengagement from lessons stemmed from a curriculum and assessment model that failed to meet his needs. The structure of the curriculum and examinations left Christopher disenfranchised and unwilling to complete coursework while at school. This led to him becoming disruptive in class. By the time he left school, he had no GCSEs to his name.

Christopher was raised in a single-parent household. His father was largely absent, something that created confusion and resentment during his formative years. When he transitioned to secondary school he moved in with his grandmother, who then suffered a stroke. Overnight, Christopher became a young carer.

> ***I was trying to care for her in the mornings, or in the evenings. So coming in and getting ready for school, getting ready to learn … it's not the one [thing you have to do], because you've got all of these other things that you're responsible for.***

Despite these overwhelming pressures, Christopher wasn't met with understanding or support. Instead, he was quickly labelled as 'disruptive' and routinely removed from lessons. Teachers did not appear to look deeper – to ask why a child might be struggling to sit still, focus or engage.
I think at school, they didn't really cater to my needs, or if I was loud or anything like that. They see me as a disruptive and always send me out.

Racialised assumptions about Black boys added a further layer of bias. Christopher, of mixed Black heritage, was not only labelled disruptive but also perceived as aggressive, a dangerous stereotype that resulted in his referral to anger management rather than to emotional support services. Being of a mixed Black background and going to a predominantly white school can have an influence on how a child understands and perceives their ethnic identity, and navigating this can be a source of confusion.

> ***My grandparents are from Jamaica and Cuba – you're expected to act in a certain way, listen to a certain type of music and behave in a certain manner … partner that with masculinity and what that really looks like, I guess the only thing, the only emotion that seemed acceptable when I was younger was anger. Showing my strength.***

Christopher went on to explain how his anger was a mask for the frustration and confusion he was feeling in his life at this time, caused by a challenging family life where he was required to provide care, and by a school which was increasingly excluding him from class and his social group.

> ***I know deep down that I did not want to be angry. I wanted to talk about what was going on and talk about my emotions, but was not allowed the space to do that.***

This lack of emotional recognition, especially through a culturally aware lens, created lasting harm. Instead of receiving support, Christopher was excluded, pushed to the margins of school life and made to feel invisible:

> ***I almost felt like I was just being punished, pushed to one side and forgotten about. Out of sight, out mind. [It was as if my teachers were saying] 'We're not bothered about what's going on, we just need to get him out', and of course that has a knock on effect on your view of adults and how adults view you. Like you haven't got a voice. You're not being listened to and you're just acting up because you want to act up.***

Effects into adulthood

The weight of Christopher's early experiences followed him well into adulthood. School left him with a deep mistrust of authority and struggling to manage emotions in a healthy way.

> ***I harboured a lot of frustration, and that led to not being able to process emotions as I got into adulthood and navigating life as a young man. [If I was in] any sort of confrontation, I would lose my head straight away … It's only been within the last six or seven years that I've been able to deal with that.***

Thankfully for Christopher, this gap was filled by local youth clubs, and by having Black and mixed-ethnicity youth mentors who 'understood the dynamics I was going through'. Having relatable adult figures who understood the situation he was in and the dynamics of his family life helped him to grow in confidence and learn healthy ways to process his emotions, rather than being disruptive and having outbursts in school. This approach, where people Christopher felt he could relate sought to understand his life and provide him with encouragement, was starkly different from the disciplinary approach he experienced at school.

Those early interventions proved pivotal. Christopher now works with a local youth club which uses non-contact boxing to engage young people dealing with mental health issues or involved in serious youth violence. The organisation helps young people to chart a positive route into adulthood.

Still, the scars of school remained. Christopher's experiences of school gave him a distrust of authority figures, and at times this affected his relationships with colleagues and managers.

> ***If I get a certain type of manager that's been very confrontational in how they deal with me, then I'm always going to push back. I guess from those early experiences, schoolwork and I guess you're put into that flight or fight mode when you're being shouted at by a teacher. [Confrontation] evokes memories of that, so you're constantly trying to push back against it.***

However, these challenges have spurred Christopher on, motivating him to become the role model who he lacked while he was growing up. Citing his experiences of youth clubs, Christopher explained how this was something he drew on when working with young people:

> ***They gave me a sense of belonging because they gave me someone who I could talk to without being judged, without sort of, throwing my feelings away and putting them down to just teenage angst.***

"I know deep down that I did not want to be angry. I wanted to talk about what was going on and talk about my emotions, but was not allowed the space to do that."

What does change look like?

Christopher's experience highlights how opaque and intimidating the school exclusion process is for many parents – particularly those from Black or working-class backgrounds. A lack of transparency, poor communication and inaccessible language make it harder for families to challenge exclusions or advocate for their children.

Ethnicity and deprivation also play a factor, with parents unable to find the time to learn about the exclusion process themselves – often during periods of intense pressure and stress. In turn, Black and mixed families can be looked down on and that there is a rift between them and the 'white middle-class' people who are teaching their children. A lack of cultural competency among teachers and overarching racial stereotypes associated with Black males mean that behaviours which would otherwise seem normal, such as laughing loudly or expressive body language, are misinterpreted as aggression.

This creates a vicious cycle in which behaviour is misinterpreted and punished, which can then result in a child being labelled as disruptive or a 'trouble-maker'. Once they are labelled in this way, it is common for teachers to have lower expectations of them, and this creates feelings of fatalism within young people – causing them to disengage from education.

> ***You're almost going in with that knowledge, thinking 'They're going to exclude me, they're going to chuck me out'. You're being judged right from the get-go. When I've seen myself being punished more severely than my white peers … I can't help but think that it's a racial thing. They don't know how to deal with people of my colour and heritage.***

What Christopher's story makes clear is that structural racism in schools isn't always about overt prejudice. Often, it's about what is missing – cultural understanding, emotional support, mentors who reflect the identities of their students and a system that sees young people as whole human beings rather than just academic performers.

In an era of rising exclusions and shrinking pastoral budgets, we must ask: what future are we building when we remove precisely the support systems that young people like Christopher need most?

'They gave me a sense of belonging because they gave me someone who I could talk to without being judged, without sort of, throwing my feelings away and putting them down to just teenage angst.'

Jemiah: mental health and missed potential

Like many adults in this study, Jeremiah had a positive and enjoyable experience at primary school, but the transition to secondary marked a sharp decline. From Year 7 onwards, he received multiple fixed-term exclusions. In Year 10, a managed move failed after just 12 weeks and he returned to his original school, where he eventually sat his GCSE exams in internal isolation.

Though Jeremiah enjoyed learning, he found secondary school challenging, often battling racial stereotypes around Black pupils' behaviour and academic ability. He also struggled to concentrate in class:

> ***It was only later that I learned that I struggled with attention span, and I would say that was probably a learning difficulty for me, and I had anxiety about being sent out of class all of the time. I always wanted to be in class, but I felt I was never given the opportunity.***

While struggling in class, Jeremiah received no additional support from his school.

> ***There was just no support at all – but they did exclude me. Looking back, following that exclusion, if there had been pastoral support it would have been very helpful. I just needed to sit down with someone and understand where I was going wrong, and have them look at how I can stay in class. You know, essentially some support to help me learn.***

These struggles resulted in Jeremiah misbehaving in class, and he was frequently excluded for 'persistent disruptive behaviour', including misdemeanours such as talking in class. His school built up a log of incidents and routinely excluded him for a number of days. During these periods of hardship, Jeremiah would stay at home and found strength in his Christian faith.

> ***Fixed term exclusions, staying at home and watching Murder, She Wrote. You know, staying at home, walking around and not doing much.***

Adding to these difficulties was the fact that Jeremiah had to navigate the exclusion and appeals process largely on his own, as his mother spoke English as a second language and could not understand the letters the school sent about her son.

> ***It's just me. My mum's there, but she's not fluent in English, so it's just me speaking to them. And I'm saying 'Give me another chance, give me another chance'. On top of that there's isolation and internal exclusions … sometimes I'm in isolation for a whole week, I spent a lot of time outside of the classroom.***

Despite struggling throughout secondary school and sitting his final exams in isolation, Jeremiah obtained eight A–C grades. After this he attended sixth form, but he was 'kicked out every three weeks' and completed his AS levels from home. After sitting the A2 in sixth form, Jeremiah would go on to higher education, taking five years rather than three to complete his undergraduate degree.

> ***It took me five years because I was processing all of those challenges I've been through in education.***

> ***There's always a constant struggle. You talk about the long-term impacts of these things. It does have an impact. There are times where I still have self-doubt, low confidence, all of these things.***

Effects into adulthood

Persistent exclusions had a lasting effect on Jeremiah into adulthood. At first, he felt angry and that the system was designed to work against him. This sometimes led to him 'giving up', as he was frustrated with 'constantly getting pushed back'. The exclusions also put a strain on family life, with Jeremiah regularly accompanying his mum to work.

> ***It created a behaviour of self-destruction. When I got excluded from school, I would just go around and go to the premises. I was frustrated, and the police would come and take me away. It's just self-destruction. When one thing goes wrong, everything goes wrong. Looking back now, things just used to deteriorate so quickly.***

While being excluded from sixth form, Jeremiah realised that he was struggling with depression. It was only at university, however, that he managed to get a diagnosis for anxiety and depression and started to receive reasonable adjustments, including extra time during exams and a mental health mentor. As Jeremiah was from a low-income family and higher education funding extended only to four years, he was also given a disability student allowance which allowed him to finish his studies.

> ***I was depressed, and it was only because two professors had a meeting together that they were able to recognise a pattern of behaviour. They looked at what I was saying at the time, and that led to them encouraging me to do counselling and get help from my GP. I had a mental health mentor but I still struggled with delay, procrastination, not believing that you're good enough.***

This support helped Jeremiah to finish his undergraduate course, and at the time of interview he was studying towards a master's while working as a case worker for a member of parliament. Reflecting back on his experience of education, however, he realised that not all of his peers had been able to follow the same path. A number of teachers saw most of the Black students in his peers group as 'prisoners or criminals', and this became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

> ***My friends who got excluded just got involved in crime, My friend got excluded from college and he started to sell drugs. It's made to think about it, because I went to visit him in prison a month ago.***

> ***It's the inability for these teachers to see the potential of a lot of us … I think when you're excluded, what options are you giving to young people? If you take them away from education, what options are you giving them? What options do they have?***

"It was only later that I learned that I struggled with attention span, and I would say that was probably a learning difficulty for me, and I had anxiety about being sent out of class all of the time. I always wanted to be in class, but I felt I was never given the opportunity."

What does change look like?

For Jeremiah, the single biggest factor that could have changed his school experience was better pastoral support. While in-class support would have helped, he emphasised the value of culturally specific extracurricular activities. He recalled a project during primary school that brought together young Black boys, giving them exposure to positive role models, mentoring and a supportive community:

> ***We went away on two residentials and did a lot of team-building exercises. There were good leaders there, and it was so important, because it was the first time I saw older Black males in [that] capacity.***

This experience was later echoed when Jeremiah joined a national campaign on school exclusions, led by a charity. There, he met other young adults with similar lived experience and received mentorship. The campaign included public speaking and group activities, both of which helped him to develop personally and professionally. The contrast with secondary school, where extracurricular opportunities were largely absent, was stark.

> ***During secondary school I was not allowed to go on any school trips. I had no insight on the outside world, no insight on politics or any of those things. I was just isolated from any form of aspiration. The thing is, I still had this potential back then, but it was not brought out because they couldn't see it. They just saw, 'This guy's misbehaving'. They couldn't see the potential.***

Having schools facilitate extracurricular activities for Black students has become increasingly important, as many of these services were cut during the period of austerity. This often means that young Black people who struggle within education are not getting important exposure to adult role models, nor are they able to build supportive communities among their peers.

We used to have all of these things where people used to come together and just have a great time. You know, socialise, play table tennis, speak to someone that's older than you. And then, all of these things were shut down, and you can see a lot of causal effects.

Jeremiah felt that in place of exclusions, schools should actively do more to support young people who are presenting challenging or disruptive behaviour. In his view, if exclusions are in place to improve behaviour, then they simply do not work. A more effective approach would be to provide engaging activities outside of the classroom, allowing students to build both their confidence and their aspiration. Alongside this, schools should take a more active role in helping pupils understand their behaviour in a progressive way, allowing them to take accountability for their actions and build an understanding of where their disruptive behaviour may be coming from. Ultimately, however, Jeremiah felt that these progressive changes to education were difficult to implement because of the fact that the current system places so much emphasis on attainment rather than developing young people.

> ***When I was in school, the focus was on having a higher percentage of people achieving five A–C grades, so they would kick out all of the people who were disturbing the class. When you focus too much on results, you miss the people, and I feel like a lot of people were missed when I was in school because there interventions weren't put in place.***

History on loop: comparisons with the subnormal period

In concluding this chapter, we reflect on the story of Nigel, the oldest participant in this study, whose experiences during the ESN period offer a sobering mirror to present-day challenges.[82] Nigel was wrongly assessed as having SEND and placed into an ESN school at just six years old. His parents, having recently migrated from the Caribbean, were misled about the nature of the school and felt powerless to challenge the decision. The consequences of this early misplacement continued to echo into his adulthood, shaping both his life trajectory and his relationships with his family.

Experiences of education today have thankfully progressed from the ESN period. However, as our case studies demonstrate, much progress remains to be made. It is clear that the attitudes and stereotypes that teachers held towards Nigel still feature in education today: from having low expectations of Black pupils to associating them with 'deviant' behaviour or criminality. We see contemporary parallels with Nigel's time in cases such as Jeremiah's, where young Black pupils are misunderstood, unfairly labelled and pushed out of mainstream education. Both Jeremiah's exclusion and Raquel's misdiagnosis highlight how these patterns continue in more modern, but no less damaging, forms.

Comparing Nigel's experience with Jeremiah's, it is also clear that the school system remains ill equipped to communicate with recently arrived migrant families about the decisions affecting their children's education. In both cases, the families lacked the knowledge, power and resources to intervene. This often results in young people feeling trapped within a system that fails to support them, discriminates against them and denies them the high standard of education they deserve.

[82] Content warning: the final case study provides an account from the ESN ('educationally subnormal') period. Our research participant experienced racial abuse while enrolled in such a school and spoke about this openly with our research team. We felt it was important to include quotes referencing the abuse he endured to authentically represent his experience and highlight the serious impact of racial abuse in education. However, we have chosen to censor explicit details to protect readers.

Nigel: the 'educational subnormal' period

When Nigel was six years old and attending primary school, his family, who had recently arrived from the Caribbean, received a visit from the Education Department. Officials informed them that due to Nigel's sickle cell anaemia, he would need to attend a boarding school with a matron. The school was 15 miles from home; Nigel would be picked up by taxi on Monday and brought home on Friday. During this conversation, officials referred to Nigel as 'a dunce' and reassured his mother that the boarding school would help him with his education. Nigel's first day at the school revealed the reality of his placement. Arriving late due to the long commute, he was racially abused by a classmate. This was his first experience of realising that he was different from those around him.

> ***I had a bag with my clothes in it and went into my classroom. When I walked in this boy stood up out of his chair, and he goes 'Oi, N*****!' So at that point, I think, I must be a little bit different. [Before that] I didn't realise that I'm different to everybody else.***

Looking back, Nigel realises that there was no curriculum, and that he had in fact been placed in a school for 'subnormal children'. He did not attend any maths classes, and the writing he did went unsupported by his teachers. His classes instead revolved around playing and a small amount of reading. Nigel was racially abused several times by his classmates and regularly phoned home to report the incidents to his parents, who were unaware of the type of school he was attending.

> ***He hits me repeatedly, calls me a Black b*****. I kick off, on my way out of the school I pull over a bookcase and sprint up the hill to a phone box. One of the teachers is behind me, he's one of the good ones, and he asked me if I want to ring my mum. I tell him it's alright so they bring me back to school and start having a go at me. By this point I was crying my eyes out.***

It was only after several years that Nigel's parents began to understand he was not in a school for children with special educational needs, but by then they felt helpless:

> ***'They do whatever they are told by white men and women. They had only been in the country since the 1960s, and white people were seen like gods. You couldn't challenge them … They found out later [about the school] but there was not much they could do. They wanted to get me out but they couldn't.***

At the age of 12, Nigel realised that he did not have special educational needs and that if he could attend a state secondary school he might be able to learn – something which he was entirely unable to do in an ESN school which would not even teach him how to spell. He began to attend a secondary school on a part-time basis but ultimately failed to make the transition: by this point, he had missed so much of his education that he was unable to catch up to his peer group. On top of this, he was the only Black student in a school of 1,000 pupils. The teachers at this new school also had little idea about the lack of curriculum in ESN schools and gave Nigel reading material which was beyond his reading age – something which could have been avoided if he had been allowed to attend a mainstream school from a young age.

Like Raquel and other participants in this research, who describe being labelled as 'naughty' rather than being offered support, Nigel received no help to catch up. Teachers misunderstood the reasons for his educational gaps. The opportunity to access a 'normal' education had long since passed.

> ***Though ultimately unsuccessful, this attempt at integration confirmed for Nigel that he was capable of learning – fuelling a deep anger and frustration about the injustice he had suffered.***

Effects into adulthood

One of the most significant ways in which ESN schooling affected Nigel was in his relationship with his family. While his father always provided for him, Nigel described how the label of being 'a dunce' shaped how his family viewed him:

> ***My dad always looked out for me, he always provided. But he did have this opinion that I was stupid. I remember my cousin coming to the house one day and my mum telling her that I was a bit slow. So they all have this impression that I'm slow, without realising that I wasn't being schooled. It did have a huge impact on me. I don't really get on with my family these days.***

As a result, Nigel suffered repeated episodes of poor mental health. At the age of 15, Nigel's father took him to Jamaica and would introduce his son to the rest of the family as a 'dunce'.

> ***Why has he got to say that? What's that got to do with anything? He's had this opinion of me, thinking that I'm something less. 'Dunce' in Jamaica means that you're a simpleton.***

His father would only realise the truth decades later, acknowledging in his seventies that his son had been failed and discriminated against by a racist education system.

The lack of a formal education also affected Nigel's aspirations and made him realise that Black African people were seen as lower class and lower status compared with the white population and other post-war migrant communities. Accordingly, his experience of school made him feel that the Caribbean community were pushed into often low-paid and menial employment, such as manual jobs, labouring or security work. In his opinion, other communities were allowed to aspire towards more middle-class and secure jobs, such as doctors or lawyers – aspirations which the Caribbean community was denied.

This was a route which Nigel took for part of his adulthood, spending time working as a labourer. With a lack of formal education and qualifications, many other routes into employment were simply unavailable at that time. However, having sickle cell anaemia meant that hard manual work resulted in Nigel spending time in and out of hospital, struggling to manage his illness. Instead, he opted to re-educate himself by attending evening classes, sitting his first qualification in maths in 1988.

> ***I've got all my certificates on the wall. I've got them framed because they're achievements. They tell me that I can actually do this. The transition came easily because I knew I had to go and learn, I had to get out of the factory and out of the labouring job. I needed something that would allow me to do light work.***

Yet even in adulthood, racism remained a barrier. While studying for a PGCE (post-graduate certificate in education), he was hospitalised, but unlike his white peers, he was denied an extension.

> ***I've got a valid reason why I can't do an extra week, but they can't do it. I'm in hospital and they can't do it. This racism is still there … they've always got a preconceived conception about us. Anything we say, they don't believe us, we don't get the benefit of the doubt.***

What does change look like?

Understandably, when reflecting back on his experience of education, Nigel felt a great deal of anger. He described how his experiences could have easily radicalised him, and that he had considered taking retribution against those responsible for his schooling. Instead however, he is at the heart of a campaign for justice for those who were wrongly placed in ESN schools. He admitted, though, that this is an uphill struggle, with many MPs not wanting to take up his campaign.

When asked what changes he would like to see in education, Nigel, like many people in this study, acknowledged the need for more pastoral support around pupils who are struggling in school. Often, disruptive behaviour is caused by external factors, or by difficulties in engaging with classroom activities. Instead of sending pupils home, schools should do more to support young people with challenging needs through their education.

Beyond this, however, Nigel wanted to see a much simpler but perhaps harder-to-obtain change: every child should have the right to be educated in mainstream provision. For this to happen however, the needs of Black Caribbean pupils have to be better accommodated and supported through schools. For many people in this study, this meant greater training and cultural competency among teachers or mentorship and extracurricular activities that can help to build community and aspirations. Others wanted to see an educational system that prioritises the development of young people rather than striving towards attainment at all costs. Nigel, however, wanted to see an educational system that is no longer able to discriminate against young people due to their race, and that does not see young Black Caribbean pupils as lacking due to the colour of their skin.

What would improve – what would have improved it for me is if they had just treated me normal. But society back then, and still now, they see us as something different. They're not taking a holistic view. We're never just normal people, and they judge me by the colour of my skin. I still see it now. Don't classify me as being a dunce because I'm Black. Give me the normal education that I was capable of. Just give me a proper education. Treat me like everyone else.

"I had a bag with my clothes in it and went into my classroom. When I walked in this boy stood up out of his chair, and he goes 'Oi, N***!' So at that point, I think, I must be a little bit different. [Before that] I didn't realise that I'm different to everybody else."**

4. What needs to be done?

SEND, behaviour and structural barriers for Black pupils

Evidence reveals an alarming pattern of under-diagnosis of SEND among pupils from minoritised ethnic groups – particularly young Black boys – who are too often perceived as disruptive rather than recognised as needing support. This mischaracterisation prevents timely intervention, leads to their disengagement from learning, and places an emotional and logistical burden on parents and carers, who frequently report feeling dismissed or isolated by schools.

Exclusions and the failure of procedural safeguards

This research identifies consistent procedural failings in the way that schools manage exclusions. Many parents are left in legal uncertainty, with children at times kept at home unlawfully due to unclear communication. Exclusion, far from being a last resort, is frequently used prematurely, particularly against pupils from marginalised and minoritised ethnic communities and those with unmet SEND needs. This contributes to worsening educational outcomes and reinforces cycles of disadvantage.

A call for equality and systemic reform

Many parents and communities we engaged in this research highlighted the importance of equitable access to SEND assessments, support that is responsive to cultural contexts and needs, and school environments that do not penalise children for expressions of identity or signs of vulnerability. It is important that school policy takes account of the structural barriers that may affect Black families and pupils and that schools consider implementing changes that are proactive, rather than reactive.

Recommendations:

1. Centre anti-racism in school policies and practice

Creating schools that work for all means embedding anti-racism at the institutional level. Changes to the curriculum must be accompanied by policy reform, leadership accountability and a commitment to eliminating structural racism in education.

Policy actions:

- Schools should explicitly commit to applying an anti-racist approach when exercising decisions and actions that fall under policies on school admissions and exclusions, supporting SEND pupils, safeguarding, behaviour, curriculum development, and staff training and development. This commitment should be supported by local authorities and multi-academy trusts.

- Schools, local authorities, the DfE and anti-racism organisations should develop and implement robust and clear anti-racist policies that provide guidance on how to identify and respond to interpersonal student racism. Policies should also set out how schools plan to centre and deliver an institutional commitment to anti-racism. All existing policies should be reviewed through the lens of anti-racism, in consultation with expert leaders and organisations, to address all implicit norms as well as all forms of racism.
- Schools should conduct anti-racist assessments of uniform and appearance policies to ensure that pupils from minoritised ethnic groups are not disproportionately penalised. School hair policies, in particular, should not unfairly penalise Black students. This should be overseen by school leadership teams in partnership with local authorities and equality experts.

- The DfE, in collaboration with teacher training providers, the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), and professional teaching bodies, should mandate racial literacy teacher training and such training and learning should be embedded in ongoing professional development for teachers across all levels of the education workforce.

2. Invest in early, holistic and culturally appropriate intervention

Schools must be equipped to respond early and appropriately to signs of need, with a recognition that marginalised pupils those from minoritised ethnic communities, particularly Black pupils, are often overlooked or misjudged in existing systems.

Policy actions:

- The DfE, working with local authorities, should fund multi-disciplinary early intervention teams to coordinate SEND, mental health and safeguarding support.

- Local authorities and schools must provide targeted mentoring, peer support programmes and family engagement initiatives – particularly for pupils at disproportionate risk of exclusion, such as Black and marginalised pupils.
- Local authorities, in partnership with schools and community organisations, should address barriers to parental involvement, including language, access and trust, with culturally representative and responsive outreach, communication and engagement.

3. Reform behaviour policies and interventions, to prevent disproportionate sanctions

Behaviour policies must recognise context and lived experience and not impose punitive responses on children facing disadvantage and discrimination.

Policy actions:

- Schools, supported by local authorities and multi-academy trusts, should replace zero-tolerance approaches with restorative, trauma-informed and needs-led models of school discipline.
- The DfE must require annual reporting of exclusion and suspension data, disaggregated by ethnicity, SEND status and socioeconomic background, with independent oversight.
- Schools and local authorities should embed anti-racist principles in behaviour policies and make equality a core metric of school reporting and accountability.
- Schools, with backing from local authorities and mental health services, should strengthen pastoral care provision in schools, recognising that some pupils do not require SEND or behavioural interventions but may benefit from dedicated time, staff and space to support their social, emotional and mental wellbeing. Restore the balance between academic priorities and the wider wellbeing and holistic needs of pupils, by reinvesting in pastoral structures and monitoring their impact and adjusting their design, to strengthen effectiveness over time.

4. Address the disproportionate use and harms of school exclusion

Data shows that marginalised pupils and those from minoritised ethnic groups, particularly Gypsy, Roma and Traveller, Black Caribbean, and 'Mixed' pupils, are excluded at significantly higher rates than their white peers. Exclusion worsens wider structural disadvantage and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Policy actions:

- The DfE should implement a national moratorium on school exclusions, in line with the No More Exclusions campaign, to create the necessary conditions for systemic reform and the development of inclusive, equitable alternatives.
- Local authorities must support schools to trial non-punitive and preventative responses to harm and behavioural challenges, with a focus on restoring relationships to build trust, support, accountability and early intervention rather than punishment.
- Teacher training providers, supported by the DfE and relevant professional bodies (such as the Chartered College of Teaching), must strengthen teacher training on bias and racism and on safeguarding responses and actions in response to pupil behaviour, to prevent misinterpretation of trauma and unmet needs as defiance or disruption.

5. Deliver timely and inclusive SEND support

The lack of early, culturally aware identification and provision for young people with SEND contributes significantly to exclusion and disengagement among marginalised pupils and those from minoritised ethnic groups.

Policy actions:

- Local authorities must work closely with schools, health services and families to ensure the full implementation and regularly review EHCPs for all eligible children.
- The DfE, through funding allocations to local authorities and schools, should ensure that resources are sufficient to support SEND needs in mainstream schools.
- Local authorities, SEND professionals and schools should, with support from the DfE and the ETF, embed anti-racist practice in SEND assessment and decision-making, with an understanding of how racism impacts learning and behaviour.

6. Guarantee educational continuity and support through exclusion

Exclusion must not mean a break in education or the withdrawal of support. Systems must protect pupils' rights and ensure that no family is left to navigate the process alone.

Policy actions:

- Local authorities, in partnership with schools and multi-academy trusts and with support from the DfE, should guarantee access to high-quality, parent-led AP within five working days of any exclusion.
- Local authorities and specialist support services should co-develop reintegration plans with pupils, families and advocates, ensuring that they are personalised and trauma-informed.
- Local authorities, with support from national charities, legal aid organisations and community advocacy groups, should work together and establish a framework capable of delivering financial support for independent advocacy and legal support for families navigating exclusion, with specialist services available for minoritised ethnic communities and those facing systemic barriers.

7. Embed racial literacy and anti-racism as core professional competencies among the education workforce

Disproportionate rates of school exclusion among pupils from minoritised ethnic groups – particularly Black pupils, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, and those with intersecting SEND needs – are symptomatic of deeper institutional and structural inequalities. Many teachers and school leaders remain under-confident in acknowledging and addressing how racism, including adultification bias and deficit-based assumptions, contributes to exclusion decisions. Embedding racial literacy as a professional standard is essential to addressing this imbalance.

Policy actions:

- The DfE, in collaboration with Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers, should mandate racial literacy training as a core competency for entry into the teaching profession, ensuring that all educators understand racism as structural, institutional and interpersonal – particularly in relation to school discipline and pupil vulnerability.

- Ofsted, along with professional teaching associations, should establish national accreditation frameworks for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers[83] and school-based mentors to access robust anti-racist training, with a specific focus on exclusion prevention and inclusive practice.

- The Department for Education, in partnership with teaching unions and the Teaching Regulation Agency (TRA), should update the 2011 Teachers' Standards to include a requirement for demonstrated commitment to anti-racism, equality and inclusive pedagogy – linking these directly to behaviour management, pupil support and safeguarding.

- Schools, local authorities and multi-academy trusts should jointly invest in dedicated time and financial resources for school-based mentors and staff to engage in collaborative professional learning networks focused on race equity and alternatives to exclusion.

- Schools, academies and multi-academy trusts should work with regional schools commissioners and continuing professional development (CPD) providers to ensure that teacher CPD includes training on the racialised dynamics of exclusion, adultification, and the intersections of SEND, race and poverty – equipping teachers with the knowledge and confidence to challenge systemic bias in disciplinary decision-making.

[83] Lidher, S., Bibi, R. and Alexander, C. (2023) Making History Teachers: The Role of Teacher Training and Teacher Education, London: Runnymede Trust, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/making-history-teachers-the-role-of-teacher-training-and-teacher-education.

Conclusion

To create a fair education system that seeks to advance racial justice, we must move beyond superficial gestures of inclusion and commit to sustained, structural change. The disproportionate use of school exclusions against pupils from minoritised ethnic groups, particularly Black Caribbean, Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children, exposes the deep-rooted racial inequalities that persist within our education system. These exclusions often reflect not the behaviour of individual pupils but the failure of education institutions to recognise and respond to unmet needs, structural disadvantage, and the ongoing pervasiveness and impact of racism. In this report, the Runnymede Trust, in collaboration with CEN, has highlighted that school exclusions are not merely an educational policy issue; they are a fundamental matter of racial justice. Exclusions contribute to a broader cycle of harm, reinforcing patterns of poverty, criminalisation and disempowerment. Crucially, exclusions are not inevitable; they are the outcome of choices made within schools and broader policy frameworks.

An anti-racist curriculum cannot function in isolation. It must be delivered by racially literate educators who are equipped to engage with and challenge structural racism. At the same time, institutional policies must actively address and eliminate inequalities, fostering environments in which the wellbeing, identity and agency of all pupils, particularly those who have historically been marginalised, are prioritised. This is not a new issue. The Runnymede Trust and CEN have long documented how exclusion has been used as a tool of structural inequality, disproportionately affecting pupils from minoritised ethnic groups and often intersecting with socioeconomic disadvantage and special educational needs. Our current findings confirm that without meaningful reform, these patterns are at risk of becoming further entrenched.

However, this moment also presents an opportunity for change. The case studies and recommendations set out in this report offer a clear path towards a more equitable and supportive education system: one that recognises the specific needs of Black and racially minoritised communities, addresses the root causes of exclusion and promotes racially just practices in every classroom.

We are clear: addressing exclusions is not simply about reducing numbers. It requires a fundamental rethinking of the values and assumptions that underpin our education system. A racially literate teaching profession, fair and accountable behaviour policies, robust SEND provision, and a commitment to anti-racist practice must become core pillars of educational policy and school life. Ultimately, all children deserve an education that affirms their dignity, supports their development and opens up genuine opportunities for success. Every exclusion represents more than a disruption to learning: it signals a wider failure of the system to provide safety, equality and belonging. The time to act is now. A just, equal and fair education system is not only possible: it is essential.

History on loop:

The sustained impact of school exclusions on Black communities

Simon Hood
Aqsa Suleman
Sarah Bristol-Abbott
Hassaan Anwari
Hannah Francis
Lesley Nelson-Addy