

How trust in education was lost – and how we can win it back

In the past six months, education has been disrupted like never before, and it has come at a huge cost: trust. From late-night Covid guidance to a chaotic examinations process, relationships between all the key parts of education have been put under enormous strain. **John Morgan** investigates how we got here – and how we can repair the damage that has been done ▶



It became a ritual. As the night closed in, as the box set was started, as the stress of the day was beginning to ease from your body, the announcement would come: new guidelines had been published by the Department for Education.

It was all urgent: vital guidance on what would happen with schools in the event of a local coronavirus outbreak, or on full reopening, or on who would be entitled to a place when your school partially reopened, or on face masks, or on providing school meals, or on remote learning.

This constant stream of guidance, sometimes making changes to previous guidance, often published late at night or at weekends, wreaked havoc: schools were left with just days, for implementation.

It took its toll. On the leaders interpreting it, on the teachers implementing it, on the parents and students experiencing it and on the wider public looking on, who made judgements based on what they thought they saw or were told, not on what was actually happening.

And then came the examination results. Confused communication, handbrake U-turns and, once again, leaders and teachers left to try to explain it all to parents and students and to absorb their anger and emotion. And once again, the wider public looked at a scene they thought they knew, but which was in fact very different.

The past six months of education have been described by two sources with knowledge of the DfE's operations as a "complete car crash" and a "meltdown in plain view, demonstrating no leadership, no strategy, no plan".

The impact of this on staff morale in schools has been huge. The impact on students' lives has been just as substantial. But there has also been a significant impact on how education – and teachers – are seen. In some quarters of the media, teachers have been cast as the cause of the problems that have arisen.

Trust is under threat. Trust is central to the DfE's ability to manage England's system of 25,000 schools. While there has never been a golden age of trust in the DfE, it's clear that things have sunk to a new low in the wake of the two crises.

And trust is the basis of the relationships between schools and communities of parents. That trust has perhaps never been put under as much strain as it has in the past few months; neither has it ever been as important, arguably, as it is now.

So, how did it get to this point? And how do we turn things around?



Why trust in education was lost

You can't achieve anything in education without trust. Between government and schools, between government and parents, between parents and school and between pupils and teachers.

"Trust is absolutely vital in education, especially when you have issues around the safety and health of children and the integrity of exam results," says Ed Balls, the former Labour education secretary.

Reflecting on his previous role in charge of the schools system, he adds: "This is not the army or the navy, where the commander-in-chief can issue an order and people can get on and do it. That's not how it works. If you don't win the hearts and minds [of school leaders and teachers] and their governors, then you never, ever make progress."

It's just as vital at every point in the educational system, according to Rosalind Searle, professor in human resource management and organisational psychology at the University of Glasgow's Adam Smith Business School, who researches organisational trust. Trust is "a glue that binds people together", she explains, adding that its opposite, distrust, is "a pervasive, negative expectation of the motives, intentions or actions of the other".

Distrust is "turning a page...it means people start looking in a very different way at your intentions and to believe your intentions are not benign," Searle continues. "From those changes of attribution, you get much more cynicism: people start to disengage."

Within an organisation in which trust is low, leaks and whistleblowers may begin to emerge, she warns.

How close to being sucked into a cycle of distrust are those in education? The government and schools don't seem to trust

The DfE in crisis: a timeline

- **18 March:** Boris Johnson announces the indefinite closure of schools in England, except for children of key workers and vulnerable children, following announcements in Scotland and Wales. Education secretary Gavin Williamson announces the cancellation of exams.
- **15 May:** A *Daily Mail* front page attacks "militant unions" for supposedly blocking a return to the classroom.
- **1 June:** "Phased reopening" of primary schools in England begins for Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 pupils.
- **9 June:** The government abandons the plan to fully reopen primary schools before the summer holidays.
- **13 August:** A-level results are published, to outrage over algorithm-allocated grades.
- **15 August:** Williamson pledges that there will be no U-turn on use of the algorithm.
- **17 August:** Williamson U-turns and scraps the algorithm.
- **1-2 September:** Full reopening of English schools.

each other, the government and unions don't seem to trust each other and that fragile relationship between parents and schools is being strained like never before.

The reasons for this are varied and cumulative. It started with the coronavirus guidance. Clearly, the number of unknowns around the coronavirus and the speed at which facts and situations changed made the government's job a difficult one. But schools and unions believe that, even in that context, things could have been better handled.

"There were too many occasions on which people were given very little notice to put in place quite complex arrangements – arrangements that were always going to

be controversial," says James Bowen, policy director at the NAHT school leaders' union.

So why did it happen? The government's late-night guidance releases and ever-shifting instructions may be down to government process, according to one insider: they explain that guidance is delayed and arrives at absurd hours because the DfE struggles to get sign-off on documents worked on by so many in Number 10 and the Cabinet Office.

"All the DfE guidance since March looks like it is written by a cast of hundreds because it is," the source says.

However, school leaders say the past six months have actually just shown how little trust the government has in the profession.

One secondary comprehensive head, who asked to remain anonymous, says of guidance published at "crazy" hours: "It's as if those issuing it have never spoken to a current headteacher about what the impact might be of a 10.30pm announcement and how this could be mitigated."

She asks why heads have not been provided with the guidance in advance under embargo, or with a preview.

"Give us time to prepare a statement for anxious staff, worried pupils, off-the-scale scared parents and carers...It's as if [the DfE] do not trust school leaders," the head adds.

And because of that lack of trust, those staff, pupils and off-the-scale scared

parents and carers began to mistrust school leaders, too. A lack of trust is contagious.

One assistant head new to her role, who also asked to remain anonymous, highlights the challenge of fielding questions from anxious parents in response to guidance.

“Being a new school leader at this confusing and complicated time has allowed me to see how school leaders are left with ambiguous guidance [and] all the consequences,” she says. “It’s made me question my own future career.”

Many heads report incredibly difficult conversations with parents. Some parents have accused school leaders of “making it up as you go along”. One told a primary head in the South of England: “This is not the government – this is you doing what you want to do, trying to have days off. You are betraying the values of this school.”

Some media reports have not helped. A narrative emerged of schools and their communities being in opposition about whether they reopened, how they reopened, how much work was provided and whether teachers were “pulling their weight”, as one parent commented on a media forum.

What we were left with, by the end of the summer term, was a situation in which no one – government, schools, unions or parents – trusted anyone else to fulfil their part of the bargain.

Did that all stem from the government’s behaviour around giving out guidance? Most believe that this was at least the catalyst for everything else that followed.

For example, John Jolly, chief executive of Parentkind (formerly PTA UK), which champions parents’ involvement in their children’s education, says that the issues with parents stem from the government’s failure to “acknowledge where parents’ concerns are and to have an honest conversation”.

Drawing a contrast with its relationship with the DfE in England, Jolly says that in Parentkind’s work in Wales and Northern Ireland, “we’ve worked closely with the education ministers, we’ve worked with education officials, to really be able to input parents’ voice into what’s happening”.

Into this already sticky web of mistrust landed the exams crisis. After a summer term of chaos, what was needed before the start of term was a clear, rational examinations results process. We didn’t get it.

U-turns, confusion, disappointment, options derailed, anger – there were two weeks of crisis that the education sector was already too damaged to absorb. And again, the blame of government was mixed into headlines about teacher grade inflation, about teacher assessment being unreliable. That thin wire of trust between government and schools,



and between schools and their communities, was pulled to breaking point again.

Balls argues that the department’s initial fixation on preventing grade inflation and maintaining the distribution of grades from the previous year was to blame. This “fails the test of understanding that you have to start from the view of every parent and every child” as education secretary, he says.

Balls also highlights failures to consult, arguing that “part of the reason why the reaction from schools was so bad at the end was because none of the schools were really involved in the process of how [awarding grades] was to be done”.

The comprehensive head quoted earlier says that “surely someone, somewhere, should have tried the algorithm [which was to be used

to calculate grades] and used a small focus group of leaders and analysts who had all signed non-disclosure agreements to see how it went. There was plenty of time to do this”.

So, where does all of the above leave us now? Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), describes school leaders as “wearing by the government’s handling of education”, adding that there “seems to have been little in the way of strategy or meaningful consultation”.

The postmortem has begun, and a few factors are believed to have contributed to the problems.

One may be that the strength of the department has been undermined by rapid changes in its ministerial leadership: four education secretaries since 2016,

plus a revolving door for junior ministers, barring the enduring Nick Gibb.

“Where secretaries of state are weaker, or less experienced, then Number 10 will try to drive education policy – sometimes driving it for headlines,” says Sir John Dunford, who served as ASCL general secretary for 12 years before stepping down in 2010.

Then there’s the profile of senior civil servants in the DfE and their ability to guide ministers.

Sir David Bell is a former headteacher who became the department’s permanent secretary (top civil servant) before resigning in an exodus of senior officials in 2011, after Michael Gove took over as secretary of state.

“If you look at both the Conservatives in the 1990s and the Labour era, they both

The cycle of distrust

- People start to believe that an organisation’s intentions are not benign.
- Processes become protracted.
- People become cynical and start to disengage from the organisation.
- Within the organisation, leaks and whistleblowers may begin to emerge.

made strenuous efforts to draw people in from the world of education – and I speak as somebody who was part of that move,” says Sir David, now vice-chancellor of the University of Sunderland. Bringing in people from the education sector to work as departmental officials “didn’t work in every case, but it did at least ensure that the department was better connected to its front line than many other parts of Whitehall”, he adds.

Since 2010, the DfE has shifted away from having senior civil servants with education experience. That shift happened “because it appeared as if the political steer was: the system is not to be trusted,” Sir David suggests. In the recent crises, “you wonder if any educationalists have been in the room when decisions were being made”, he adds.

But one source who knows the DfE well says that the department doesn’t need former senior leaders in education as policymakers, as “those are two different skill sets”.

Critics also point to another potential systemic problem in the DfE: its ability, or inability, to work with the unions of school leaders and teachers (ASCL, the NAHT, the NASUWT and the NEU). Has that been a factor in the failures around reopening schools?

“When I talk to the teaching unions and representatives, what shocks me is how rarely they speak to ministers,” says Balls.

In the 2000s, the Labour government followed a “social partnership” approach with the teaching unions. Sir John recalls routine weekly, day-long meetings between the unions and officials in the department, with the secretary of state involved once a month, creating close working relationships that he says helped ministers to put their policies into action in schools.

Balls says that, under the social partnership approach, “the process of working out how to get kids back to school would have gone through days and weeks of discussion with ASCL and the local authorities, the NAHT and the NASUWT”.

Ministers should have been “out speaking to headteachers and teachers, and also on the TV all the time, persuading them” that the reopening of schools “was collective, that it was in the best interests of schools and teachers”, Balls argues.

However, to what extent were unions open to those discussions this time around? Sources who were in some of the union meetings that did take place suggest that some were more willing to compromise than others.

And what about consulting with schools directly?

“The DfE talks about talking to school leaders,” says the secondary comprehensive head. “Much has been tweeted about exactly who these school leaders are. The cynic in me says they are the large [multi-academy trust] leaders – the good old boys and girls held close in the inner sanctum – but actually I wonder who on earth they can be to have supported such poor decision making and guidance sharing.

“Nobody has ever asked me how a potential strategy might work in my context. I’ve not known any of my colleagues being asked either.”

Others agree that a failure to reach out far and wide enough to schools has been fundamental.

“I feel as though the breakdown in trust around exams and also around going back to school comes back to these central points,” says Balls. “You have got to win the hearts and minds of the school community by working really closely with them. You have got to start with the views of individual parents about their child. You have to have a strong relationship of challenge, as well as trust, between senior officials and the ministers. If you haven’t got any of those things, you get into a lot of trouble – and that’s where we are.”

This crisis of trust will have a long tail, warn school leaders. The new assistant head talks of the stresses of “leading a profession that has been battered in the media” in the political battle over reopening schools. “We’re pretty resilient, as teachers, but this really has affected so many and left them questioning whether they want to stay in the profession,” she adds.

The picture painted by those who work in schools is that we are at rock bottom with trust in education. The government is not trusted by schools, the schools are experiencing growing mistrust from parents and trust in the very system of measuring education – exams at 16 and 18 years old – is at an all-time low, too.

So, where do we go next?

How the trust can be rebuilt

Why should a government department care about trust? Self-interest, for a start. Searle, who has

advised businesses and government agencies on organisational trust, says that trust “allows people to discount a single example of bad behaviour...It makes people more resilient [when mistakes are made] and more inclined to go with you.”

As to how to go about getting to that position of trust, Scotland is an interesting place to start. Scottish schools were more firmly closed throughout lockdown than those in England, and Scottish government ministers were guilty of very similar errors on exams.

“I cannot think of any aspect of education policy in the past six months on which the Scottish government could reasonably be said to have done better than the government in England,” says Lindsay Paterson, professor of education policy at the University of Edinburgh.

He argues that Scotland’s exams quango failed to consult teachers on how to award grades, while the education quango failed to help teachers with plans for teaching online during lockdown or for catch-up: “Ministers were let down by the quangos as much as were pupils, teachers and parents.”

Yet despite the comparable errors in Scotland and England, there isn’t the same sense of crisis north of the border.

Searle sees a contrast between the exam crises responses of secretary of state for education Gavin Williamson and John Swinney, cabinet secretary for education in the Scottish government.

Swinney and the Scottish government have been “much more contrite and willing to admit when they got it wrong”, she says. In a “crisis situation when information is imperfect”, apologising “means that people are willing to go with you”, she adds.

Another factor is likely to be that, in general, according to polling, public trust in the Scottish government is far higher than it is in the UK government.

Speaking last month, Joanna Murphy, chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland, noted that infection rates are lower in Scotland



than in England at the time (although they have been rising of late), perhaps making anxieties over reopening schools less pressing. And there has been communication, such as the recent open letter to parents from Scotland’s national clinical director, offering guidance about when children need to be tested for the coronavirus (eg, if it’s just a runny nose, there is no need).

And compared with England, close-to-the-ground local authorities in Scotland have a bigger role in running schools. There has

been “quite a good system of communications to try to reassure parents”, says Murphy.

So perhaps any DfE exercise in rebuilding trust ought to involve looking north?

Certainly, honesty and understanding would be a good start, many argue.

The DfE “could get far better at ensuring schools’ leaders get at least some advanced warning of major changes and immediate access to the detailed guidance”, says Bowen.

Sir John calls for “careful planning for the 2021 exams – that should be a consultative

planning process, involving teaching unions as well as exam boards and ministers”.

And he backs a call already made by ASCL for an independent inquiry into this year’s exams crisis. “There has got to be a clearing of the air,” he says. “And a learning of lessons. And we can only really do that, I think, with an independent inquiry.”

Balls agrees: “There will be an independent inquiry; of course, there has to be.”

Sir David also sees “a real opportunity for the department to reset relationships” now, and

“for the DfE to make some big, bold gestures about drawing in others” to decision making.

Consultation should build more understanding into any guidance, create systems where guidance is more useful, and enable more time for implementation. And the knock-on effect of that, heads believe, would be better relationships with parents, and an ability to rebuild that relationship, too.

Then there are relations with the unions. “It may be difficult for the government at the moment, but the unions are a fact of life,”

says Sir David. “They represent hundreds of thousands of members across the country. That’s enough of a reason to try to draw them in a bit more.”

But in the fast-moving situation with the coronavirus, is all the above always going to be possible?

The secondary head urges the DfE to convene “regional working groups” of school leaders “so it’s not just the same old alleged ‘voices’ being listened to”.

“Get guidance to headteachers first,” she adds. “Show that you trust them. There isn’t a teacher I know who doesn’t want to be back. The media is creating a perception and it is being fuelled by a lack of clarity from the podium [ministers] about what expectations there are of schools and how brilliantly they are fulfilling them.”

Balls calls for the DfE to focus on “the nature of communication and explanation and building of consensus...The process of rebuilding trust with parents and teachers and heads will not be an easy one. But it should start tomorrow.”

And ASCL’s Barton says: “The profession’s trust in the government has unquestionably been damaged, but we hope that things will improve, and we continue to do our utmost to work constructively with ministers and officials in the best interests of children and young people.”

Essentially, the message is that through collaboration, even fast-paced changes can be made to work. Because there will be trust.

Will any of this happen? The DfE claims it already is collaborating. It says the education secretary had regular meetings with all the major teacher and headteacher unions from March to July and is continuing to meet them regularly. It says it did consult all stakeholders properly before guidance was issued. And it says it did give adequate time for preparation.

“Our plans for a full-time return of all schools and colleges were published in early July, which allowed staff, parents and pupils time to prepare for the start of the autumn term,” a spokesperson said. “Every decision we have taken during this unprecedented time has been informed by the best scientific and medical advice, and we engage with key stakeholders, including teaching unions, regularly.”

If that were the case, why do very few people in education agree? Was this engagement not carried out well enough?

Perhaps to ensure improvements, say many of those interviewed for this article, the DfE may be in need of a little guidance itself. **John Morgan is a freelance journalist**