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Research Report

Rethinking What Schools Measure

Updated April 2026

Academic attainment remains important. But it is no longer sufficient as a sole indicator of success. A concise synthesis of where educational expectations are heading, and what schools need to respond.

The Shift Is Already Happening

Across the UK and internationally, expectations of schools are changing. Academic attainment remains essential, but it is no longer sufficient on its own.

Frameworks from the OECD, Ofsted, and the Education Endowment Foundation increasingly point in the same direction:

Schools are now expected to evidence not just what students achieve, but how they develop, personally, socially, and emotionally.

This includes wellbeing and belonging; behaviour and attitudes; and character and contribution. The challenge is no longer recognising this shift. It is proving it — clearly, consistently, and over time.

A broader definition of success

Education policy is converging around a more holistic model. Several major frameworks now make this explicit:

- The [OECD Learning Compass 2030](#) emphasises student agency and real-world competencies
- The [European LifeComp framework](#) defines personal and social capability as core skills
- [Ofsted's evolving framework](#) places increasing weight on personal development and inclusion

"Student success requires a broader set of competencies, including social and emotional skills."

OECD

In practical terms, schools are now expected to demonstrate impact across confidence and resilience; relationships and behaviour; and contribution to community. Academic results are still necessary — but no longer complete.

Why this matters now

This shift is not just policy-driven. It reflects wider societal and economic change. The World Economic Forum (2025) identifies resilience, adaptability, and active learning as among the most important skills for the future workforce.

As automation reshapes technical roles, human capabilities are becoming more valuable. Schools are increasingly responsible for developing — and evidencing — these traits.

What Drives Positive Student Outcomes

Research provides consistent guidance on what works.

1. Motivation comes from within

[Self-Determination Theory \(Deci & Ryan\)](#) identifies three key drivers that, when supported, improve motivation and wellbeing:

Driver	What it means
Autonomy	Feeling in control of one's own actions and development
Competence	Seeing progress and experiencing meaningful achievement
Relatedness	Feeling recognised, connected, and valued

"When autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported, motivation and wellbeing improve."

When these are present, students are more likely to engage, persist, and take ownership of their learning.

2. Recognition shapes behaviour

Evidence from the [Education Endowment Foundation](#) shows that positive reinforcement is more effective than punishment, consistency across staff is critical, and specific, timely feedback increases impact. A simple principle underpins this: what is recognised becomes repeated.

Social and emotional learning approaches deliver three months of additional progress on average.

Education Endowment Foundation – Teaching & Learning Toolkit

3. Belonging drives engagement

Students who feel they belong are more likely to attend regularly, participate in learning, and achieve better outcomes.

The Measurement Gap

Despite this clarity, most schools still measure only part of the picture. This creates a structural imbalance.

Measured well	Less visible
Attainment and progress	Effort and improvement
Attendance	Contribution and participation
Behaviour incidents	Character and personal growth

Negative behaviours are logged in detail. Positive behaviours are noticed — but not systematically tracked.

"What is assessed becomes what is valued."

The result: schools hold detailed evidence of problems, but limited evidence of their positive impact.

Why This Is Becoming Urgent

Inspection expectations are evolving

Ofsted's direction of travel places greater emphasis on inclusion across all groups, consistency of behaviour culture, and evidence of personal development. Inspectors evaluate how well schools support disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils — and this requires more than narrative. It requires evidence over time.

Parental expectations are rising

Parents increasingly want a fuller picture of their child's development, insight into wellbeing and confidence, and evidence beyond academic results. Education is no longer seen as purely academic. It is developmental — and expected to be visible.

54% of UK parents said they would prefer a school that prioritises life skills and character development alongside academic outcomes.

[Public First — Parent & Teacher Survey, 2023](#)

What Schools Are Already Doing

Most schools are not starting from scratch. Common approaches include values-based recognition systems, house points and rewards, assemblies and certificates, and pastoral tracking.

These are important, but often limited by:

- Inconsistency across staff
- Limited visibility beyond the classroom
- Lack of long-term tracking
- Time constraints on staff

The issue is not effort. It is structured.

The Risk of Standing Still

Without more structured approaches, schools face:

- Difficulty evidencing impact in inspections
- Limited visibility for students and parents
- Gaps in recognising all pupils consistently
- Over-reliance on anecdotal evidence

At a system level, the gap is clear: schools are doing the work. But they cannot always show it.

What Needs to Change

The next phase is not about adding more initiatives. It is about improving how existing work is captured and understood. Effective systems will need to support:

Requirement	What it means
'Consistency	Recognition that is clear, shared, and used by all staff
Longitudinal insight	The ability to track development over time — not just moments
Visibility	Clear insight for staff, students, and parents
Efficiency	Low effort, integrated into everyday practice

This represents a fundamental change in how schools operate:

From	To
Recognising moments	Tracking development
Anecdotes	Evidence
Isolated systems	Shared visibility
Incident records	Character records

The direction of travel is clear.

Schools are increasingly expected to demonstrate impact not just in attainment, but in wellbeing, character, and contribution.

Most schools are already doing this work. The challenge now is making it visible, consistent, and evidence-based.

Make the good visible, structured, and reportable.