The trust deficit in England: emerging research evidence about school leaders and the pandemic

Pat Thomson[a,] Toby Greany[a] and Nicholas Martindale [b]

[a] School of Education, The University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK; [b] Nuffield College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

RAPID COMMUNICATION

> 'Some messages have just been sobbing': phone line helps headteachers with burden of Covid (Melissa Benn, The Guardian, April 17, 2021)
> DfE looks to spend another £800k on headteacher wellbeing and mental health support. (Freddie Whittaker, Schools Week, May 31, 2021)

England has been living with Covid-19, through peaks and troughs, since March 2020. Hospitals, care staff and workers in utilities and the food chain have had to keep working, often in very risky conditions. School staff have also continued to work. During periods of hard lockdown, they provided face-to-face education for children of 'key workers' while also offering online learning to children and young people at home. When lock- downs eased, schools offered face-to-face teaching to all pupils.

Policymakers see schools as integral to economic and social maintenance and recovery and have thus placed a high priority on education as a stable provision operating throughout a very long period of considerable uncertainty and instability. Because of rapidly changing levels of infection and scientific understandings of transmission and prevention measures, the government has adjusted, often at the last minute, the legal requirements around the opening and closing of schools in line with the various levels of lockdown. English school leaders have been in continued crisis management mode (Fotheringham et al. 2021).

School leaders have been faced with challenges unimaginable prior to the pandemic. Because schools are a major site for virus transmission, leaders have had to pay particular attention to the management of staff, pupils and buildings (Beauchamp et al. 2021). At the same time as the curriculum had to be digitised and teaching moved largely online, they have had to adapt old and invent new, management procedures. Providing deep cleaning is an easier task than adequate ventilation in England's schools – many are run down and designed to keep the air and warmth in. The management of people, time and space are considerably harder. Pupils are now routinely placed into year-level 'bubbles' so that it is possible for only some of the schools to be quarantined if there is an outbreak. Schools must try to regulate movement in corridors, and avoid crowded playgrounds to avoid aerosol transmission. Masks were mandatory in secondary schools for most of the 2020–2021 school year. In early 2021, schools were integrated into local test-and-trace systems with routine lateral flow testing administered to both staff and students. The 2021–22 school year sees CO_2 monitors promised but not delivered.

The locus of some key decisions has shifted from the local level to the national. This is significant in a school system that has rhetorically placed local autonomy as the key to education reform. Schools

that serve the most disadvantaged communities saw decisions about the provision of school meals and access to the technology necessary for learning contracted out through the dubious and inefficient procurement practices that have characterised nearly all government pandemic transactions (Thomson 2020). Oak National Academy was created to provide online resources for teachers, some 40,000 lesson plans are currently available free to schools, a move that could be seen as accelerating the trend to see teachers as expert technicians of pre-prepared materials (Ball 2018). A media-fuelled 'moral panic' about 'learning loss' has led to nationally contracted tutoring services – in this instance, a contract awarded to an off-shore provider (as was the case for school meal vouchers). Despite schools remaining open, the government chose not to prioritise teachers for vaccination, creating additional tensions between headteacher and staff unions. Over Christmas, the Greenwich Local Authority and a headteacher were instructed by the Schools Minister to keep schools open and were threatened with legal action if they did otherwise, a decision the Schools Minister recently defended. Academies – schools funded by central rather than local government, which supposedly have greater autonomy than local authority maintained schools – faced similar threats. All schools opened for a single day in January before doors were shut again to all but keyworkers.

There have been and still are considerable and conflicting pressures on, and ongoing scrutiny of, school leaders from policymakers, parents and communities, and media. Since the first lockdown in spring 2020, English leadership associations have worried that the pandemic might lead to accelerated retirements and further erosion of the already 'leaky promotion pipeline' (NAHT 2017). These concerns became acute after the third lockdown in early 2021, when the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) reported significant increases in calls to their advice lines, reflecting a 'sea-change' in school leaders' attitudes and a level of exhaustion in the face of prolonged change, as the headlines at the start of this commentary suggest.

Researching leader's experiences during the pandemic.

Limited research has assessed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on school leaders specifically. The National Foundation for Education Research (Walker, Sharp, and Sims 2020) found the main sources of stress in May 2020 were 'opening the school more fully in future' (86%), the 'health and well-being of my staff' (76%), and 'directives from government' (67%). A TeacherTapp fortnightly survey further indicated that levels of 'very high work-related anxiety' rose sharply among headteachers each time schools were closed (Allen, Jerrim, and Sims 2021). Earlier research shows that certain types of schools, such as those in deprived contexts and small rural and faith schools (Lynch et al. 2017; National College for School Leadership, undated) face additional leadership supply challenges, and we wait to see if this pattern holds post-pandemic.

Working together with the two leader associations, we designed and conducted a national survey to assess the impact of the pandemic on leaders' well-being and career plans.1 NAHT/ASCL wanted to understand the scale and nature of the crisis and what they, and government, might do to support leaders' well-being and retention. Our survey in May 2021 (n = 1491) allowed us to address many of the gaps in information. We are currently analysing the results, but headline findings indicate:

- Significant proportions of leaders in all types of schools and in all demographic groups have struggled with work-related stress, workload and change fatigue during the pan- demic. Two thirds (65%) report that they have been 'mostly surviving' (42%) or 'some- times/mostly sinking' (23%). This group reports that the pandemic has impacted negatively on their well-being as well as their ability to think clearly and solve work-related problems. Nevertheless,

most feel that their school has 'survived' the crisis/crises even if their own wellbeing and health have suffered.

- Three -fifths (61%) of school leaders say that their experiences during the pandemic have influenced their career plans. Over a third (36%) of leaders are planning to leave the profession early (for reasons other than normal retirement) within the next five years, of which a significant proportion states that the pandemic has either been a main or contributing factor. Primary heads and executive heads are among the groups most likely to leave early.
- While leaders have valued collaboration with internal colleagues and support/advice from professional associations, the vast majority feel that the Department for Edu- cation (DfE) has not provided timely and straightforward advice. This has led to a serious lack of trust in government. The survey results for DfE are starkly negative, with two-thirds (65%) disagreeing with the statement 'I have trusted the advice and guidance provided by DfE' (32% disagree / 33% strongly disagree), and just 14% agree- ing (1% strongly agree). Heads reported that it would take 'more government trust', more resources and reduced workload in order for them to change their current career plans.

While we have not yet completed interviewing a sample of those intending to leave and those intending to stay, it is abundantly clear that the government has some way to go to win back the school leaders on whom they depend.

A ticking time bomb?

In the light of the potential departure of heads and long-term distrust in government, it seems obvious that England's 21,000 headteachers need more than £800k for support ser- vices. As one head remarked on Twitter, when divvied out this amount was barely enough for a meal out – when restaurants and pubs fully re-open. Of course, some of the intending early retirees may change their minds next school year if the going gets any easier, and it is notable that recruitment into teaching has improved during the pandemic, after many years of missed recruitment targets. The two leader associations may also successfully lobby for further development of the existing phased retirement package to dampen the effect of a significant number retiring at the same time, leaving some schools competing with each other and others left with caretaker leaders. Perhaps the associations might even win incentives for veteran heads to stay on as part-time mentors to newly appointed leaders.

However, the longer-term picture looks particularly challenging. While the early departure of the most experienced school leaders requires immediate action, leaders' lack of trust in government suggests that longer-term strategy will be required. The British population had low levels of trust in government before the pandemic; in 2019, the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS)2 showed that only 15% trusted the government all the time, while a third (34%) said they almost never trusted them. These statistics are not disaggregated by employment group, so we have no way of knowing if school leaders were typical of this group before lockdown, but our survey indicates that school leaders are now even less likely to trust the government than the population as a whole, a remark- able finding given that these leaders are responsible for our publicly funded schools.

The OECD (2013) argues that trust is the basis for the legitimacy of government. Trust enhances well-being and social cohesion, they say, and reduces the need for coercion, thus also reducing inefficient transaction costs. Furthermore, the OECD suggests, trust is necessary for the fair and effective functioning of government institutions ...

> *may help government to implement long term structural reforms with long term benefits ... could improve compliance with rules and regulations ... and could help to increase confidence in the economy. (22)*

Similarly, a recent comparative review of education reforms across multiple countries argues persuasively that trust between government and the profession is an essential foundation for success (Ehren and Baxter 2021). Because education systems rely heavily on school leaders to carry out their policies, the government's failure to address the combination of issues that have led to a lack of leader trust in England seems highly risky. The effective removal of local government from the oversight of schools over the past decade has created a more centralised system, arguably making trust more tenuous but even more important (Greany and Higham 2018). Platitudes and selective awards seem likely to exacerbate the situation. Continuation of policy by media announcement and last-minute emails late at night or on the weekend will produce more frustration.

The restoration of local autonomy and networks, additional well-targeted resourcing, and an inspection regime geared to support rather than punish seem likely core components of any long-term strategy to rebuild trust and persuade more leaders to stay. But current government announcements – to resume standardised testing and routine inspections next school year; to extend the school day to provide catch up learning; to fully academise the entire system as soon as possible – work in exactly the opposite direction. In addition, enthusiasm for pre-pandemic policies has been accompanied by indifference to the need for more equitable schools resourcing. In the light of this policy myopia, we cannot help but think that there seems little likelihood that the trust deficit will be reduced any time soon.

Notes
1. Results of the research can be found on the research blog site
   https:// schoolleadersworkandwellbeing.com.
2. https://bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-37/consequences-of-brexit. aspx.

Notes on contributors
Pat Thomson is Professor of Education in the School of Education, The University of Nottingham. Her research focuses on pedagogies and practices that make for more socially just schooling and she often through the lens of arts education, alternative education and whole school change.
Toby Greany is Professor of Education in the School of Education, The University of Nottingham. His research is focused on understanding the ways in which educational policy and practice inter- act and the roles of system governance, leadership agency and evidence in this process.
Nicholas Martindale is a postdoctoral research fellow in Sociology at Nuffield College, Oxford University. His current research focuses on the governance and performance of Academy trusts, the class structure of modern Britain and protest in the gig economy.

ORCID
Pat Thomson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4801-0000
Toby Greany http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3045-7047
Nicholas Martindale http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2939-5061

References
Allen, R., J. Jerrim, and S. Sims. 2021. "How Did the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic Affect Teacher Wellbeing?" Teacher Tapp. https://johnjerrim.files.wordpress.com/2020/09/ allen_jerrim_covid_final.pdf.
Ball, S. 2018. *The Education Debate.* 3rd ed. Bristol: The Policy Press.
Beauchamp, G., M. Hulme, L. Clarke, L. Hamilton, and J. A. Harvey. 2021. "'People Miss People':

A Study of School Leadership and Management in the Four Nations of the United Kingdom in the Early Stage of the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership* 49 (3): 375–392.

Ehren, M., and J. Baxter. 2021. *Trust, Accountability and Capacity in Education System Reform*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Fotheringham, P., T. Harriott, G. Healy, G. Arenge, and E. Wiison. 2021. "Pressures and Influences on School Leaders Navigating Policy Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *British Educational Research Journal*. doi:10.1002/berj.3760.

Greany, T., and R. Higham. 2018. *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks. Analysing the 'Self-Improving School'-led System' Agenda in England and the Implications for Schools*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.

Lynch, S., J. Worth, K. Theobald, and B. Mills. 2017. *Keeping Your Head. NFER Analysis of Headteacher Retention*. Slough: NFER.

NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers). 2017. *The Leaky Pipeline. Recruitment and Retention 2017*. Haywards Heath: NAHT.

National College for School Leadership. undated. *Recruiting Headteachers and Senior Leaders. Seven Steps to Success.* Nottingham: NCSL.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2013. "Government at a Glance." OECD. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/gov_glance-2013-6-en.pdf?expires=guest.

Thomson, P. 2020. *School Scandals. Blowing the Whistle on the Corruption of the Education System.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Walker, M., C. Sharp, and D. Sims. 2020. *Job Satisfaction and Workload of Teachers and Senior Leaders. Schools Responses to Covid-9.* Slough: NFER.