Coastal ACTION

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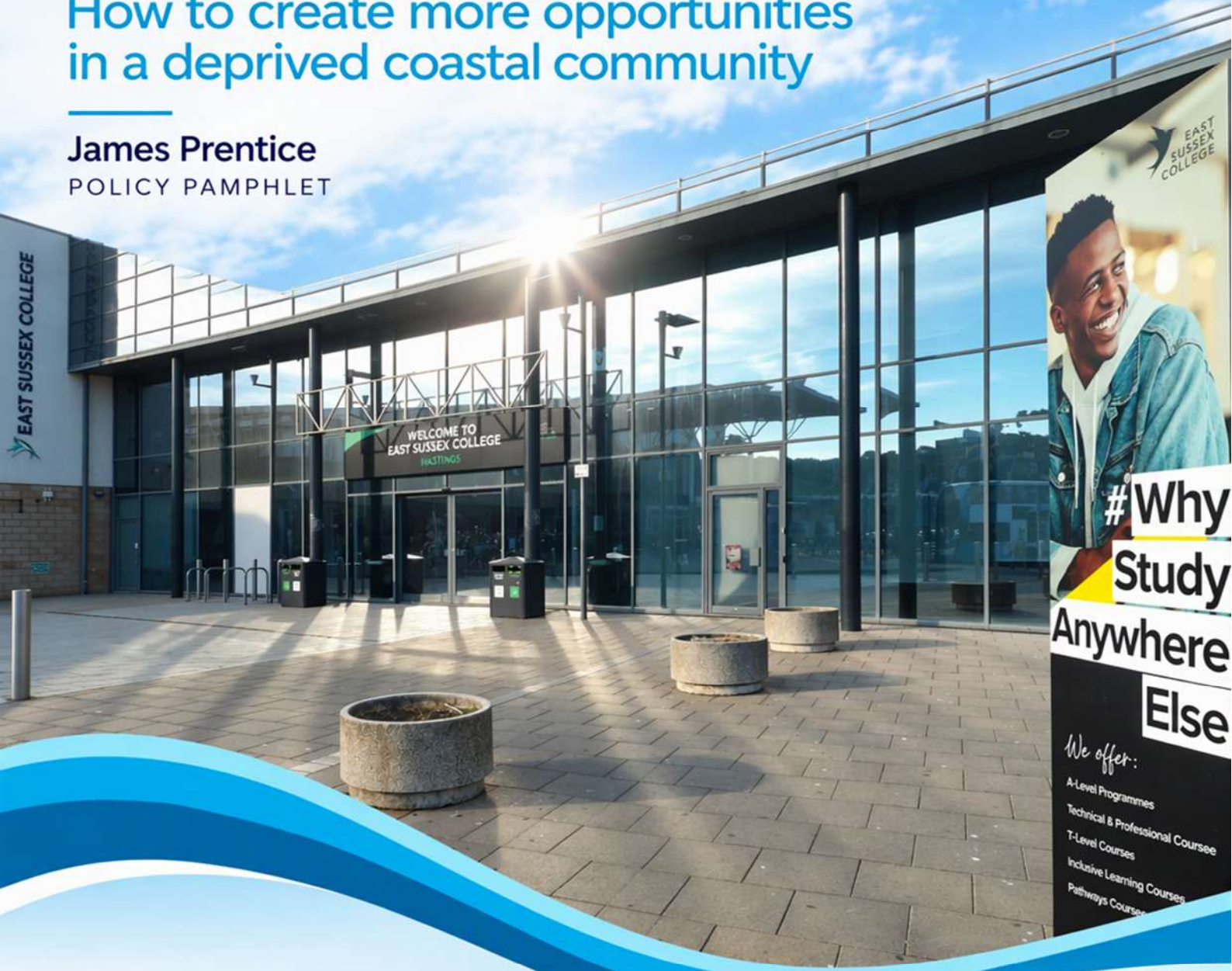
IMPROVING ATTAINMENT IN A DEPRIVED COASTAL COMMUNITY

Improving Education in Hastings & Rye

How to create more opportunities in a deprived coastal community

James Prentice

POLICY PAMPHLET



FINDING SOLUTIONS TO THE POLICY PROBLEM HARMING COASTAL COMMUNITIES

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Education & Skills

There is a large barrier to creating a more competitive economy within the Hastings & Rye area. Local schools are not delivering the results and skills needed to incentivise businesses to invest in the town. This is because too many children are not meeting the expected minimum requirements by the time they leave the education system.

The state of education:

Primary schools:

The results at the end of primary school, Key Stage 2, are not significantly worse than the national average. In England, 59% of pupils meet the expected standard by the end of Key Stage 2, and in Hastings & Rye, 57% of students meet this standard[1]. The average score in maths, writing and reading is also in line with the national averages, with there being less than a one percentage point difference. The proportion of students meeting the higher standard (5%) is also only 2% lower than the national average of 7%[2]. Primary school pupils are also no more absent from school than they are elsewhere in the country. Out of all possible teaching sessions, only 7% are missed, which is roughly in line with the national average of 6%. The percentage of students who are defined as persistently absent is 21% within Hastings & Rye, only 2% higher than the regional and national average of 18%[3]. On top of this, local primary schools' most recent Ofsted inspections are generally positive. Out of the 22 Primary schools within the Hastings & Rye area, 2 are rated outstanding and 19 are categorised as good. Only 1 is rated as inadequate[4].

This begs the question: why are education outcomes within Hastings & Rye so poor? One answer lies in more detailed assessments of primary school performances. In terms of reading, out of the 22 schools that have received an assessment, 6 are rated as below average (28%), with 5 of these 6 being graded as well below average (23%)[5]. Writing standards are slightly worse, with 8 schools being rated as below the average standard (36% of all primary

schools). Out of these 8, 6 are rated as well below average for writing (27%)[6]. The standard of maths in some primary schools could be better. Out of the 22 primary schools in the local area, 36% (8) are graded as below average, with 5 of these schools being assessed to be well below average (23%)[7]. The main losers from these trends appear to be the most disadvantaged pupils. Only 47% of pupils in Hastings & Rye from a disadvantaged background were recorded as meeting the standard, whilst 66% of all students in England meet this standard[8]. Further, only 1% of students from a disadvantaged background met the higher standard, whilst 10% of all students across the UK met this higher threshold. Therefore, a cause of poorer outcomes may be that Hastings & Rye has more disadvantaged students. This theory is supported by the town having 31% of all primary school students on free school meals, considerably above the national average of 24%[9]. Yet, it should be noted that the overall reading and maths scores for disadvantaged students were only slightly lower than the English average. This may be because the inequalities that Hastings & Rye face may only fully manifest themselves later in a child's development, such as when they take compulsory end-of-education exams. Indeed, this does appear to be the case as the major problems within our local education system appear to materialise during secondary school education.

Secondary School results:

Poor attainment clearly manifests itself by the age of 16. In terms of GCSE results, over time the gap between Hastings & Rye and the national average has increased, see Figure 5.1. A similar proportion of students gained the standard 5 GCSEs including English and Maths, 50%[10]. Yet, the proportion of children gaining this grade across England rose to 67%, meaning Hastings & Rye has fallen behind the national average[11].

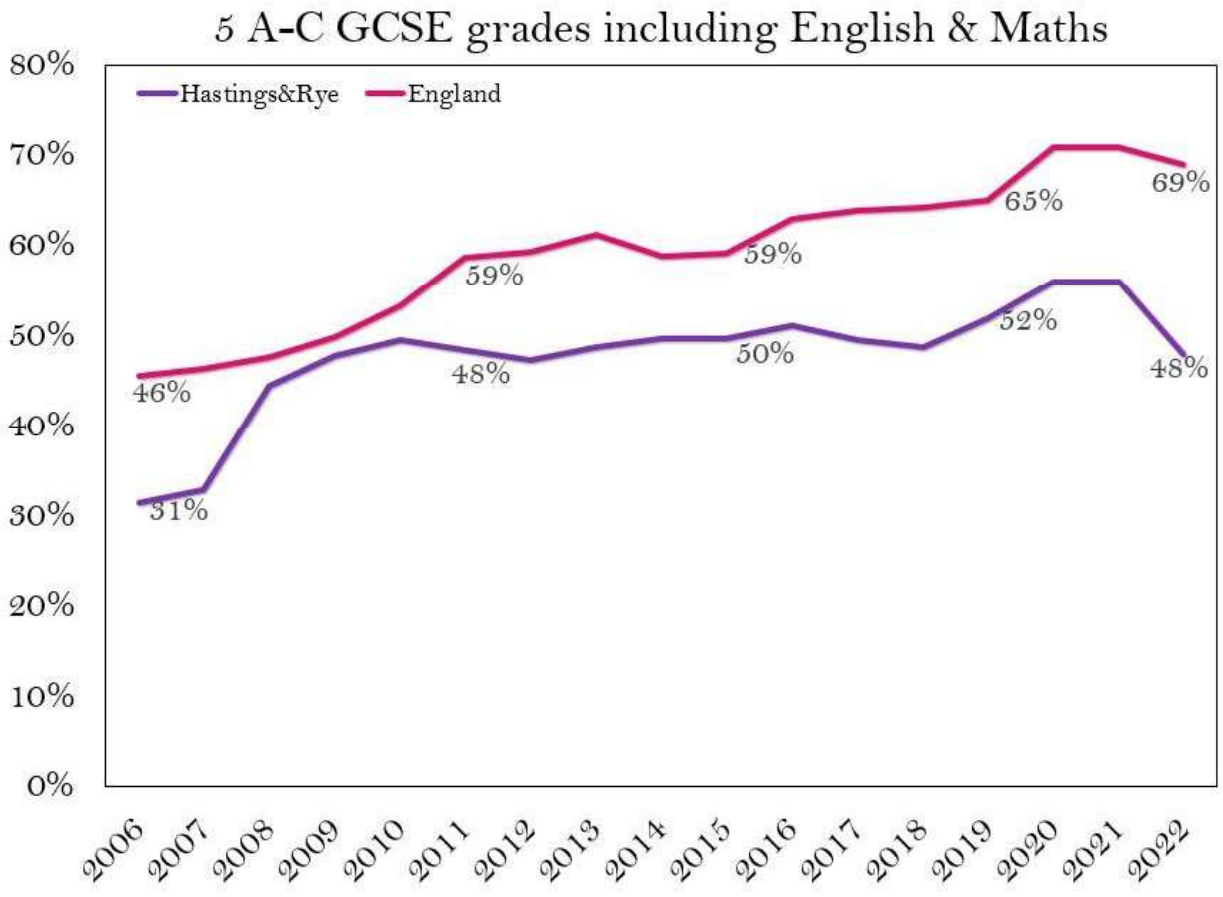


Figure 5.1 Percentage of Secondary School pupils achieving the basic minimum standard of 5 GCSE grades (A - C). Source: Department of Education, East Sussex County Council and House of Commons Library.*

With the modern grading system, this means that for the last 10 years, roughly 50% of students obtain a grade 4 or above. This means that in 2024, 460 pupils in a single year were not meeting the absolute minimum standard expected of students aged 16[12]. However, a good grade is considered a 5 or above, which is equivalent to a strong C grade or above. Here, only 31.8% of students secured a level 5 grade or above in 5 subjects (including English and Maths)[13]. Three schools, Ark Alexandra, The St Leonards Academy and The Hastings Academy achieve less than 30%. The national average is 46%. This means that in 2024, 646 students were not achieving this desirable minimum standard by the age of 16[14]. Only 11% of students within the constituency were entered into the English Baccalaureate in 2024, compared to 39% of all students across England[15]. The Hastings and St Leonards Academies had less than 10% of all students enrolled on the baccalaureate. According to the

government, the English baccalaureate is a secondary education that “puts students on a set of subjects at GCSE that keeps young people’s options open for further study and future careers”. Therefore, gaining a good score on this programme is generally considered a sign of gaining a good quality secondary education. It is also a useful tool to push more able students who are capable of undertaking a more diverse and challenging curriculum. Out of the small group of students who take this pathway, the secondary schools within Hastings & Rye average a score of 2.90, whereas the English average is 4.05[16]. Consequently, it can be said that even the quality of education that the more able students receive is below the English average.

Another sign that our secondary schools are not delivering an adequate education can be found in the Progress 8 score. This score measures how much progress a student makes in secondary school compared to similar students with the same starting point at the end of primary school. It measures this progress based on a child’s 8 best subjects. In Hastings & Rye, the Progress 8 score is -1.04[17]. Therefore, based on local students’ primary school results, it can be said that state-educated children are not making any progress during their time at secondary school. If anything, they fall behind where they should be if they were to perform similarly to how they did in primary school. The St Leonards Academy particularly has a poor Progress 8 score, with it having a score of 1.27. The Hastings Academy has a score of -0.85, and the Ark Alexandra Academy has a score of -0.55. Although Rye College performs best, it has a Progress 8 score of -0.44[18].

In terms of the most disadvantaged pupils, only 11% of all pupils achieve the required GCSE standard, 5 GCSEs A* - C, including English and Maths. This is compared to 51% of students in the local area and 67% of all students in England[19], see Figure 5.2. This is also compared to 25% of all disadvantaged students in the country[20]. Rye College, The St Leonards Academy and The Hastings Academy all had less than 10% of disadvantaged students achieving a strong passing grade. Disadvantaged pupils’ average Progress 8 score is -1.47, compared to -1.04 for all students, again being much higher than the national

average[21]. The St Leonards Academy particularly has a poor Progress 8 score, -1.74. This would all indicate that disadvantaged pupils are particularly not progressing from primary school onwards, and if anything, are not meeting the grades they should be achieving based on their primary school results (if they were not to make further progress in key stages 3 and 4).

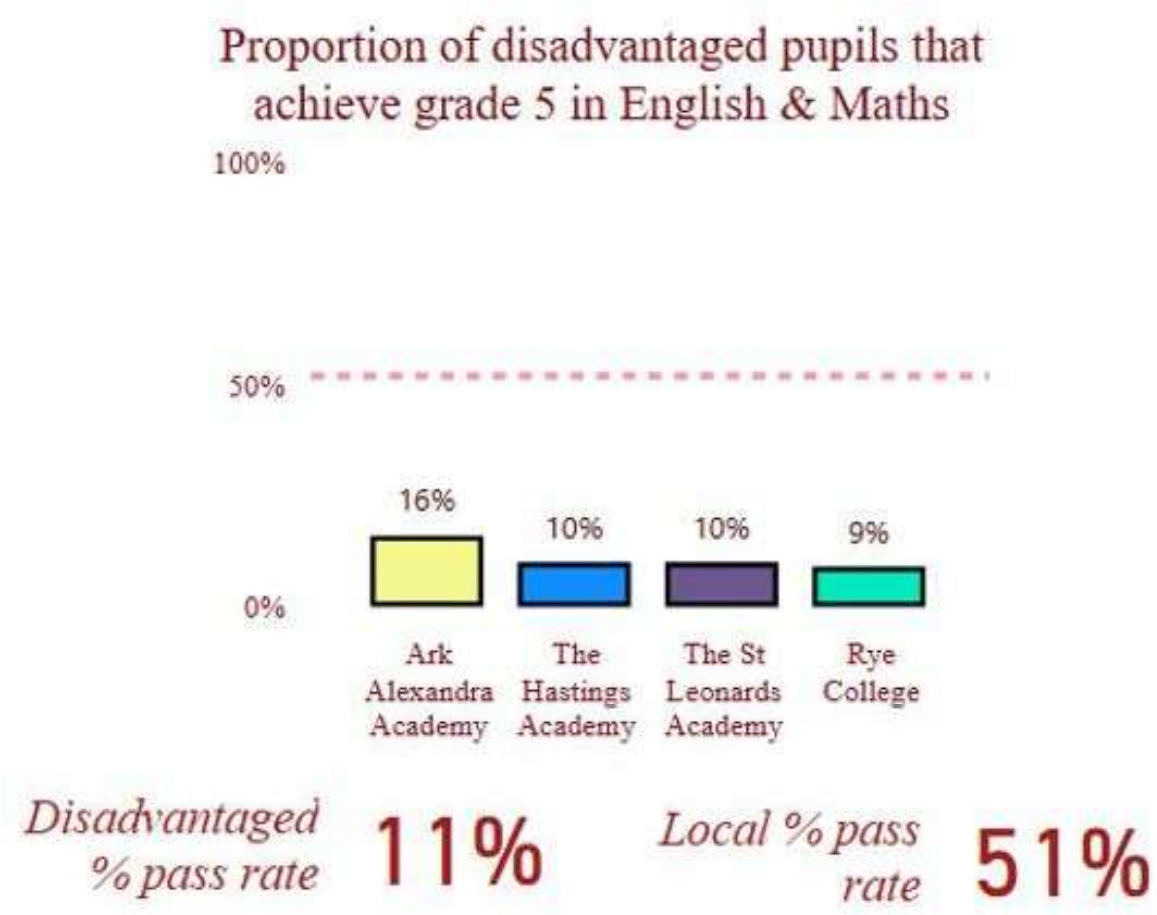


Figure 5.2: Proportion of disadvantaged pupils who achieve a Grade 5 in English and Maths. Source: gov.uk Compare schools data.

Therefore, one reason why a smaller proportion of Hastings & Rye students achieve the minimum secondary school standard may be that the area has a higher number of disadvantaged students. One way to measure this is to identify the proportion of students on free school meals. In Hastings & Rye, 35% of all secondary school pupils are recorded as being on free school meals. This is compared to the national average of 24%. The Hastings and St Leonards academies have a particularly high percentage of such students, with 40% of students being on free school meals[22]. 43% of students

attending these schools had used free school meals for a period of time within the 5 years of being at the secondary school, again much higher than the national average of 27%[23].

Secondary School performance:

Ofsted Reports:

The most recent Ofsted reports reveal that one reason why students in Hastings & Rye fall behind the national average during secondary education might be because all the secondary schools in the area are underperforming. Over the last 15 years, secondary schools within the local areas have gradually received poorer Ofsted ratings. All schools that were rated as good have gone through periods of being required to improve or being rated as inadequate. The St Leonards Academy is currently rated inadequate, and The Hastings Academy currently requires improvement. The Ark Alexandra Academy (which merged Helenswood and William Parker School) has been requiring improvement since its inception.

A more detailed breakdown shows us that Ark Alexandra's overall assessment falls down on behaviour and attitudes, indicating problems in maintaining a classroom environment in which students can effectively learn. The other two schools' assessment is more troubling when delving into the detail. The Hastings Academy required improvement in the quality of education delivered, the behaviour and general attitude of the students, the development of students' potential and the overall management of the school. The St Leonards Academy was rated inadequate in all these aspects[24]. Firstly, this highlights the problems of academies taking over multiple schools within one area, as when they perform poorly, the quality of education across an entire town can decline. This gives parents limited options. Secondly, this shows that to get all the schools in Hastings back to a good rating, there are multiple challenges that need to be overcome. To make matters worse, these two academies were run by the Brighton Academies Trust, an organisation that was found to be "reserving an extremely high percentage of funding money for '*central services*'"[25]. This led the trust's board to ask the Department of

Education to assign all their schools to other academy chains[26], something that has brought these schools a great deal of instability. This has made it harder to tackle these challenges due to these problems being allowed to worsen and remain unaddressed for a long period of time. Further, this instability will likely have lost teachers as they naturally seek a more stable environment to work in[27], again only making it harder to address these schools' tough challenges.

School	Current	Post-2020 Rating	2015-2020	2010-15 Rating	Change overtime
Ark Alexandra Academy	Requires Improvement	Requires Improvement	Requires Improvement	Requires Improvement	None
Rye College	Good	Good	Inadequate	Good	Hard to compare - New leadership
The Hastings Academy	Requires Improvement	Requires Improvement	Requires Improvement	Good	Worse
The St Leonards Academy	Inadequate	Requires Improvement	No report	Good	Worse

Out of the two academies, the St Leonards Academy clearly faces the toughest challenges. According to the Ofsted report, the new academy trust chosen to take over the St Leonards Academy will face the following challenges[28]:

- "Too many pupils miss vital time in school due to absence, so their learning is severely disrupted. Many are at risk of falling further behind."
- "A substantial number fail to engage with their learning, and this is often not challenged by staff".
- "The school does not prioritise reading strongly enough. The school does not support pupils who need help with comprehension and fluency".
- "The school's ambitions for pupils' achievement remain too low. Teaching does not routinely enable pupils to remember knowledge securely over time".
- "In most subjects, teachers do not check that pupils understand and remember important information before they move on. Pupils develop misconceptions, and gaps in their learning – this goes unaddressed".

- “A considerable minority of pupils do not respect each other or the school’s expectations for behaviour. The rate of suspensions remains too high and continues to increase”.
- “In class, the needs of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN) are not well met”.

The trust that takes over the Hastings Academy will face the following challenges[29]:

- “Too many pupils are regularly absent from school. Actions taken by leaders have increased attendance across all groups, but the school acknowledges that there is more work to do”.
- “Suspensions and exclusions are reducing over time, but are still high. Learning in lessons does not always build clearly and deliberately on pupils’ previous work”.
- “Behaviour is not consistently good. At times, behaviour can be disruptive to learning”.
- “The curriculum is not taught consistently well, so not all pupils make the progress they should.”
- “Pupils are supported appropriately to develop their literacy skills. However, the quality of pupils’ written work is variable”.
- “Support for pupils, including those with SEN, is not effective”.
- “Careers education - some pupils feel that advice is not tailored to their needs or provided often enough”.

The trust that will continue to run ARK will be forced to tackle the following challenges to improve the school[30]:

- Too many pupils who do not attend school regularly, including relatively high proportions of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN).
- Additionally, there is a high proportion of suspensions because of pupils’ behaviour, and too many days are missed by absence. Pupils with SEN and other disadvantaged pupils are particularly affected by these two issues.
- There are still too many pupils who do not meet the school’s high expectations of behaviour.
- Too many pupils are not benefiting from the high-quality curriculum, especially more vulnerable pupils.
- Some staff feel that their workload is not being considered carefully enough when changes are introduced.

How did our secondary schools decline?

Across the last 15 years, schools in Hastings have all declined, with all of the main secondary schools exhibiting some major challenges. According to a senior teacher within the secondary school system within Hastings, there are three major problems damaging all schools' ability to perform[31].

Firstly, there is a major challenge with attendance, something that was exacerbated by the pandemic[32]. This has meant local schools have been required to spend more time addressing the attendance problem rather than focusing on improving the quality of provision. The attendance problem has also been made harder to address due to the high rate of mental health cases that have steadily increased in recent years, some of which are still undiagnosed. It is estimated by some teachers that consistent attendance only exists for around 80% of students[33]. This is reinforced by the data, with statistics from the Department of Education showing the average student losing 15% of total sessions across an academic year in the Hastings & St Leonards Academies[34]. Further, in 2023, 40% of students were recorded as being persistently absent, meaning they missed more than 10% of all possible teaching sessions[35] - see Figure 5.3. This problem has been hard to address due to a lack of provision to deal with the core reason behind increasing absences. One such provision that has been cut is the amount of support staff, meaning children who do not have strong support networks at home often fall through the cracks in the attendance monitoring system[36]. Also, government grants to improve attendance and opportunities for students have been cut. For example, a local attendance improvement scheme, the "get a grip" scheme, was cut. Due to having more disadvantaged students, Hastings has particularly seen a large cut to such services, something that has particularly created attendance challenges amongst disadvantaged pupils[37]. Again, the data supports this, with The Hastings Academy having lost £802 per student and the St Leonards Academy having £460 per pupil since 2010 – a total loss of £1.88m for all secondary schools in Hastings & Rye[38].

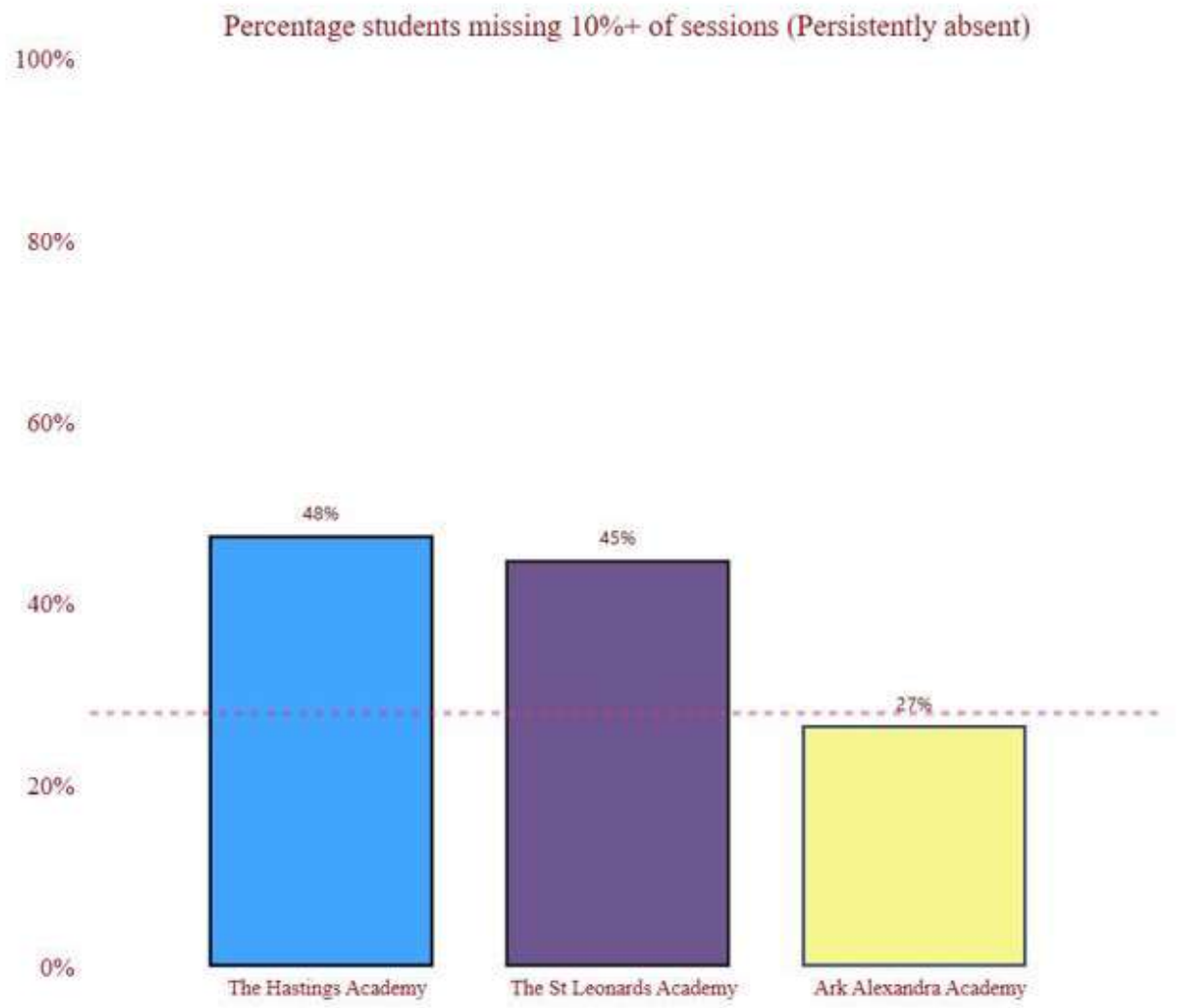


Figure 5.3: Percentage of students defined as persistently absent within Hastings Secondary Schools. Source: [Compare school performance - Gov.UK]

Secondly, behavioural problems persist. For those who do attend but struggle to learn in a classroom environment, isolation and exclusion rates are high[39]. This negatively affects the learning environment, something that likely impacts school results. This matter has been hard to address as there is no pupil referral unit in Hastings, and the nearest one is located in Eastbourne, meaning a large travelling distance to access key support services. For these students, there is no alternative provision[40]. Sometimes these children get passed around the different Secondary schools, but this is not always an effective method of dealing with some students' needs, and they eventually fall out of the system altogether.

Provision is then left for the family, and this often doesn't address the underlying causes of why these children are not learning[41]. As these children can spend large periods outside of school, poor attendance becomes the norm, and this can create a feeling that it is acceptable for some children not to be sent to school each morning. This then requires parents to be supported so that this thinking can be challenged, and parents can push the child to go to school. This requires time and strong support services, something that schools no longer have due to cuts within the system. It also means that schools spend more time dealing with poor behaviour, detentions, suspensions and trying to get parents to send their children back into school[42]. This is worsened by rising school uniform costs (due to their only being one supplier) and strict enforcement of uniform rules. Secondary School uniforms on average cost £175, which calculates to 9% of monthly income for an average earner[43]. As women earn on average less than the median average income, this represents over 10% of the average single mother's salary[44]. This expense is much higher than the £88 for a Primary School uniform, meaning that problems due to incomplete uniforms are greater at the secondary school level. Incomplete uniforms often lead to children being sent home, causing disruptive learning for the most disadvantaged students. This damages a student's education, and sometimes it can encourage low-income parents not to send their child to school, so to avoid costs.

Thirdly, SEN provision is another core issue local secondary schools face. Due to a lack of support staff, meeting all these students' needs is proving challenging[45]. These students are more vulnerable to low attendance and dropping out of the school system. This is likely compounded by some schools' very strict behaviour enforcement policies, as SEN children find it harder to adjust to new rules. This is clearly reflected in one secondary school, where 28% of all leavers were SEN students - way higher than the 14% local average[46]. Schools are struggling to identify these students' needs and secure them an EHCP (An Education Health Care Plan – a legally binding document that outlines the additional needs of a student)[47]. Therefore, this

is being left to parents to sort out, and those unsure how to navigate the system are often left without provision, even when it is needed. Parents who know the system often challenge a decision from the County Council not to award a student an EHCP. 90% of these tribunals are lost by the County Council, meaning that students who should be awarded provisions are often not being awarded the support they need[48]. As a result, their education often suffers. This might occur because the County Council is now facing severe financial pressures and may be seeking to avoid growing costs. Therefore, schools having fewer resources to identify these students' needs and provide additional services through support staff means these schools are struggling to provide[49]. As these schools have a larger-than-average proportion of these students in their annual intake, this has put additional pressure on these schools, thus contributing to their current challenging position.

The fourth major problem these schools face is a recruitment problem and high staff turnover, leading to higher vacancy rates. A leading teacher within the Hastings secondary school system has witnessed an increase in staff turnover over the many years they have been teaching in the town[50]. They argue that these schools have become less desirable to teach in for a number of reasons. One reason is that due to rising behavioural challenges, lessons are increasingly becoming about behavioural management. Another is the enforcement of strict new rules, meaning teachers spend increasing amounts of time handing out detentions. The data supports this, with 2% fewer teachers lasting more than two years within the profession than was the case 10 years ago[51], and within the South East, trends show a higher-than-average turnover rate[52]. To deal with these issues, it is crucial to retain experienced staff who can keep standards below the minimum threshold. Yet, due to the challenges within these schools, many of these teachers have had enough and moved on. Again, Department of Education data confirms this. Schools are churning through staff at a higher rate. In 2011/12, one secondary school had 79 full-time staff teaching in one academic year. By the end of 2023/24, it had 92. Comparing the same academic years,

another secondary school had 52, up from 42[53]. One reason for this increase is due to the growth of staff leaving, creating the need to increasingly hire new full-time staff. In 2023/24, one secondary school had 14% of its staff move to another state sector school, up from 1% in 2011/12. Comparing the same years, another school had 11% of its staff leave the state sector, up from 5%. During this same time, another secondary school had 12% of staff leaving the state sector entirely, up from 7%. Another had 14% leave, up from 4%[54]. This is very problematic as it highlights how Hastings not only loses teachers, but costs the profession staff, possibly leaving other areas short.

Before moving on, they often face pressures inside the school in dealing with children's challenging behaviour, meaning lesson time increasingly involves managing behaviour rather than teaching. They are also being made responsible for tasks that support staff once took on, further increasing the workload burden. More experienced teachers also struggle to follow the constant changes to the education system, something many feel is impeding their ability to teach[55]. This added workload is raising the number of days staff take off due to sickness that is related to these pressures (such as stress and mental health challenges). Again, this is supported by data from the Department of Education, where the total number of teaching days lost in a year is higher than the national average of 320. The St Leonards Academy has 909 teaching days lost, Ark Alexandra lost 630, and The Hastings Academy lost 536[56]. The percentage of teachers going through periods of absence is also higher than the national average of 58%. All four secondary schools in Hastings have an average of 86%[57]. This has led to not just the loss of inexperienced staff, but also more experienced staff and leaders within the local schooling system[58]. This is something that has created gaps in leadership within some schools locally, making it harder for these schools to maintain standards. Further, due to this high turnover of staff, delays in teaching occur, and there is a reliance on agency supply teacher staffing. Figure 5.4 outlines how the data supports this, with the town having a much higher vacancy and temping rate than the national average of 0.7. The Ark Alexandra Academy had a rate of 3.2, Rye College 9.8, The Hastings Academy

4.5 and The St Leonards Academy 3.7[59]. This means that there is often no consistency in lesson delivery and effective following up on previous learning.

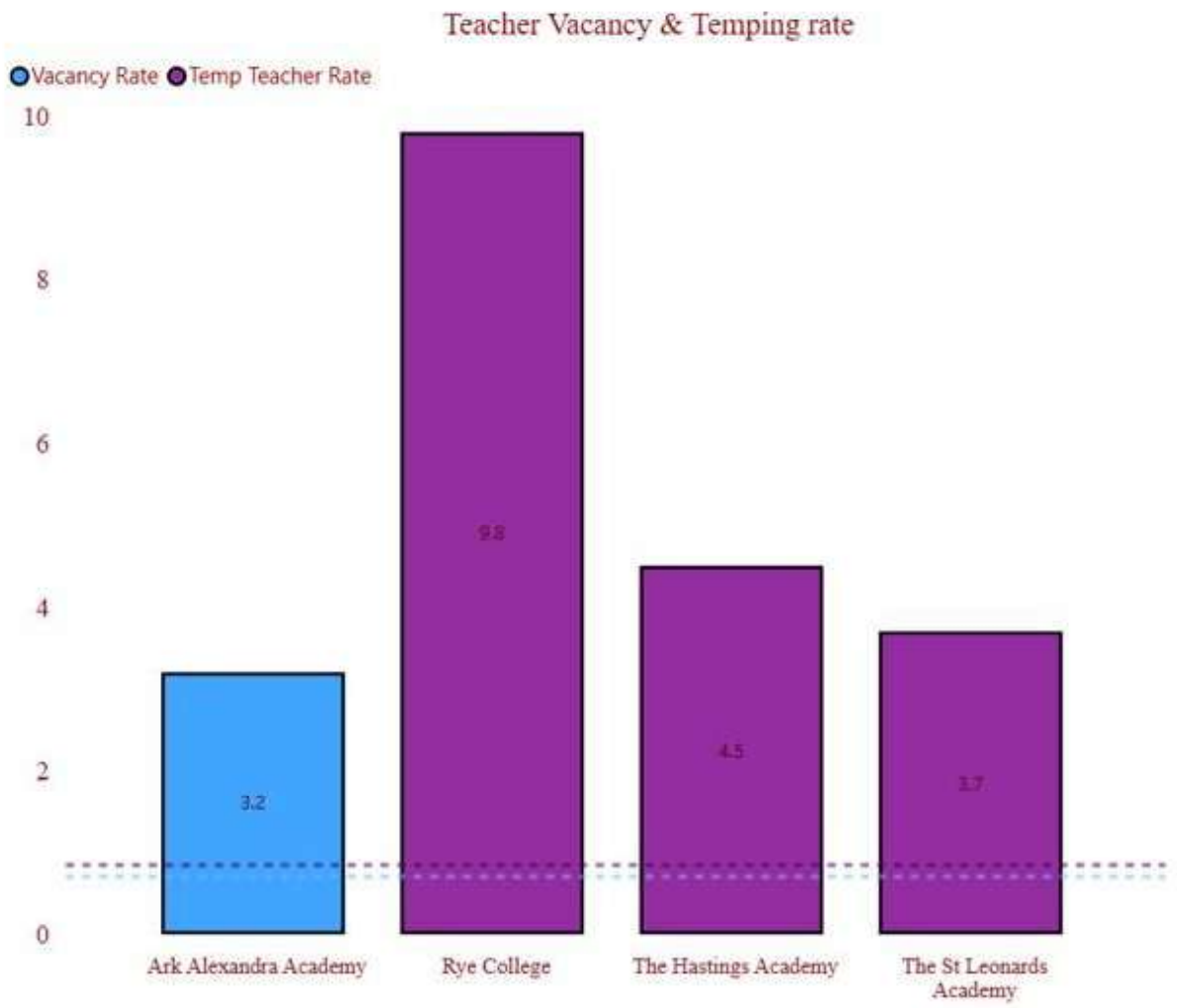


Figure 5.4: Teacher and Vacancy rates in Hastings Secondary Schools. Source: [Explore Education Statistics - Gov.UK]

The lack of staff means that no schools in the local area are fully staffed, and this requires a regular cycle of recruitment throughout the academic year. Recruitment has become harder. This has especially become the case amongst younger people post-pandemic due to the expansion of working from home and teaching being seen as less desirable due to a lack of flexibility, low pay, limited work-life balance and poor working environments[60]. In the early 2000s, it wasn't uncommon to get over 20 applicants for one teaching post. Now, most posts will get a maximum of 5, and some only get one or two applicants[61]. Some will get none, leading to

increased teacher vacancies. From 2011/12 to 2024/25, one school has gone from no vacancies to having at least 4 within one given time. Again, this is because of stagnant pay and these schools being seen as a very difficult working environment. Once a new teacher is recruited, time is needed for them to settle in and develop teaching from previous lesson plans. Also, some training in how the school operates and the rules it has for student behaviour takes time to implement. Again, this produces delays to learning, as such activities take up a greater proportion of a school's time and detract from the focus on improving the quality of education[62]. The lack of applicants for jobs also results in a higher pupil-to-teacher ratio, with the town having 20 students per teacher, with the average being 17 students[63]. This further stretches staff and increases the burden, something generally thought to lower the quality of education delivery and increase staff turnover[64]. Again, this increased staff turnover is reflected in Department of Education data. This increased turnover only decreases the quality of education delivery further down the line, thus partly explaining the gradual decline in service delivery in the last decade within Hastings & Rye.

Children outside the state system:

Due to the poor results and Ofsted inspections local schools obtain, and the internal challenges they face, many parents who can afford to send their kids to a private school do so. This is becoming much more common, with some noticing that out-of-town private schools have hired a bus to pick up children from Hastings. Alternatively, others use the train to send them to nearby state schools, such as St Richard's in Bexhill. However, for those who can't access state schools out of town or afford private options, parents are increasingly deciding to take their kids out of school and elect to home-school. Across the last decade, the number of children being identified as having elected for home education, an EHE pupil, has risen from 356 to 1,221, a 243% increase[65] – see Figure 5.5. In 2015, Hastings comprised 41% of all EHE students. At the end of the 2024 academic year, it comprised 45% of all cases, despite representing only 19% of the East Sussex population[66]. Therefore, it is fair to say that the county council's 200% growth in EHE

children has been partially driven by events in Hastings. The increase has primarily come from Secondary school pupils after the start of the 2019/20 academic year, with there being a 608% increase in the number of Secondary school (Year 7 – 11) aged pupils electing for home learning. This compares to a 122% rise in primary aged pupils (Yr1 – Yr6) within the same period[67]. This means that whilst in 2015 the split between EHE pupils by education level was roughly 50-50. In 2025, it is 70-30 in favour of secondary-aged pupils.

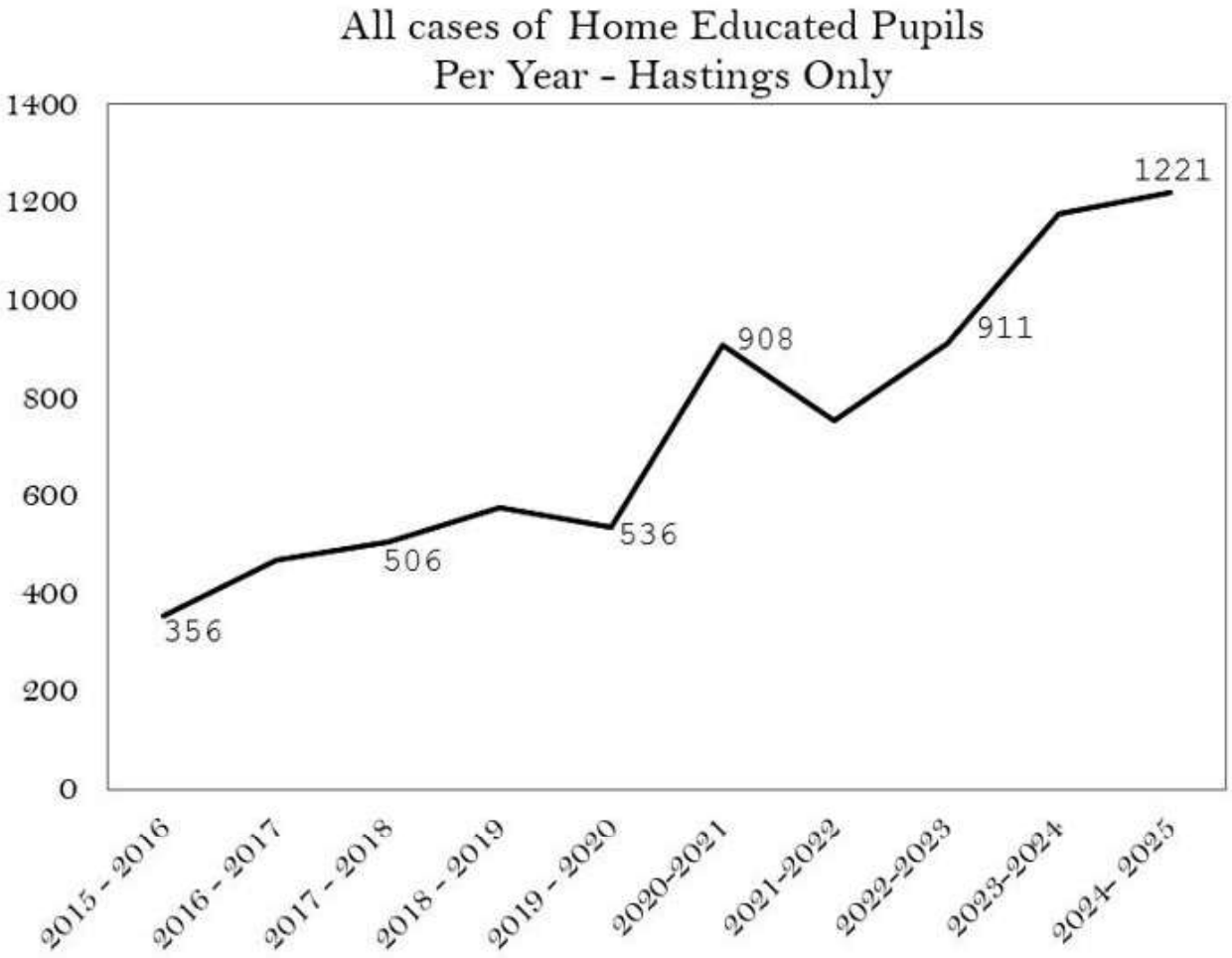


Figure 5.5: Yearly number of home-educated children within the Hastings area. Source: ESCC FOI request.

There are many reasons for this increase. Firstly, those in the home-educated sector argue that COVID-19 and the rush back to school post-lockdown is deemed crucial. This is because the underlying reasons of children who have behavioural challenges, or developed them during lockdown, have not been addressed before education was resumed. With the lengthy delays to local

services that deal with challenges, like child mental health services (CAMHS), these challenges will likely continue to go unaddressed. Again, this can help to explain why SEN children are disproportionately withdrawing from schools and electing for home education.

Secondly, a core reason is that many parents simply view local schools so poorly that they believe that their child is better off out of the system. Parents of children who home educate often cite concerns of a high turnover of teaching staff and a reliance on inexperienced teachers, supply teachers and teaching assistants to fill vacancies and deliver lessons. One parent who elected to have their child home-schooled told teachers at a charity learning session that their child had gone through 6 different maths teachers in one academic year. Additionally, parents who elect to home school their child frequently report that their child was without adequate support staff. Therefore, such trends have created a lack of consistent teaching. This particularly affects students with learning difficulties and mental health issues badly, as these students most require consistent teaching and additional support. This helps to explain why recent home education increases disproportionately involve students with additional support needs.

Secondary schools in particular come under criticism. A South East ITV Meridian News broadcast in July 2025 revealed that one school (ARK Alexandra) had 472 children being de-registered in the previous 3 academic years, with 123 cases occurring in the most recent spring term[68]. One education research organisation argues this represents a loss of 1 in 10 children within a single term. According to East Sussex County Council, 188 of these cases have opted for home education, 39% of all leavers[69]. In 2015/16, 18 students from this school opted for home education. In 2024/25, it was 94, more than a 5-fold increase. This increase is partly linked to Covid-19, with yearly cases rising to 34 post-pandemic. Yet, the rise to 94 from 2023-25 represents an additional 3-fold increase[70].

Interestingly, only 4% of students who have recently been pulled out of secondary school by their parents were at some point expelled, meaning the

vast majority choose to leave[71]. 57% seek alternative provision, such as another local school. Yet, this is often not the solution parents hope for. The number of children leaving the St Leonards Academy, a school on the other side of town, for home education has increased from 4 cases per year to 57 between 2015 and 2025[72]. Therefore, parents sometimes find themselves moving between local secondary schools, only to find no school can give their child the education they are looking for. It is this dissatisfaction and negative experiences that are thought to have partially led to increased numbers withdrawing from the state sector.

Thirdly, those who work for charities that assist home-schooled legal guardians say a lack of support staff helping SEN students is a driving factor. Indeed, SEN children were found to be disproportionately leaving one secondary school in Hastings, with 28% of all leavers falling under SEN - despite only making 14% of the population[73]. Those in the 3rd sector highlight how new behaviour management policies are discouraging attendance for all students, and particularly SEN students. Sussex teaching unions have reported teachers being instructed to hand out 25 detentions as a mandatory weekly target. This has led to reports of a child being held in isolation and detention for leaving their jacket in the wrong place and walking on the wrong side of the corridor[74]. Other cases occurred for a child not putting up their arms in the right way and not sitting straight enough. For SEN students who naturally struggle to follow these tasks, this results in a high detention, isolation and exclusion rate. For one SEN child with autism, they experienced 3 hours of detention in as few as 12 days of school. This led to the parents pulling the child from the school due to what they argued was a “hostile environment that created anxiety for pupils”[75]. For many children, their experience is so horrible that their parents decide to withdraw.

Fourthly, according to local senior teachers, this new working culture has also negatively impacted the staff, likely adding to stress and increasing sick leave. They also argue that the strain on teaching staff has resulted in an unhappy, less experienced staff looking to join either the private sector, home school support services or a different sector. As stated earlier, this is confirmed by

Department of Education data showing an increase in staff taking sick leave and leaving local schools. For instance, secondary schools in 2015/16 had 61% of staff who had taken sickness leave, rising to 79% in 2024/25[76]. Data also confirms that larger numbers of teachers in Hastings are leaving the sector entirely. This only adds to the destabilisation of children's teaching and makes inconsistent learning more problematic. Such interferences with a child's education can damage a student's progress and weaken their education. It is argued that led some parents to think that, over the course of their secondary age schooling, their child will be better off learning at home.

Therefore, these developments have likely increased the rate of home education expansion. For those most unable to pay, the appeal of home schooling is often seen as a cheaper and more viable solution than trying to find alternative or private provision. For instance, parents can see the immediate benefits of not having to pay for increasingly expensive school uniforms or tuition costs. Yet, there are often hidden costs that home-schooled parents don't realise. This is especially the case post-primary school, where secondary school examinations can be very costly. Once parents realise these hidden costs, they sometimes try to get their child back into school, but often find challenges in doing so. This has led to an increasing number of students being without adequate provision. The number of children recorded as Missing in Education (CME) has increased from 69 to 200 in the last four full academic years, a 190% increase[77], see Figure 5.6. CME's are children of compulsory school age who are not registered at a school and are not receiving a suitable education elsewhere. This increase was much bigger than the 111% increase across ESCC, once more showing how Hastings is partly driving trends across East Sussex[78]. Again, this increase primarily came from Secondary education-aged pupils. In 2015/16, there was roughly a 50-50 split between primary and secondary-aged children missing in education. For 2024/25, it was a 30-70 split in favour of children aged 11-16[79]. This rapid growth in children being defined as "missing in education" highlights the concerns of the large increase in home-schooling.

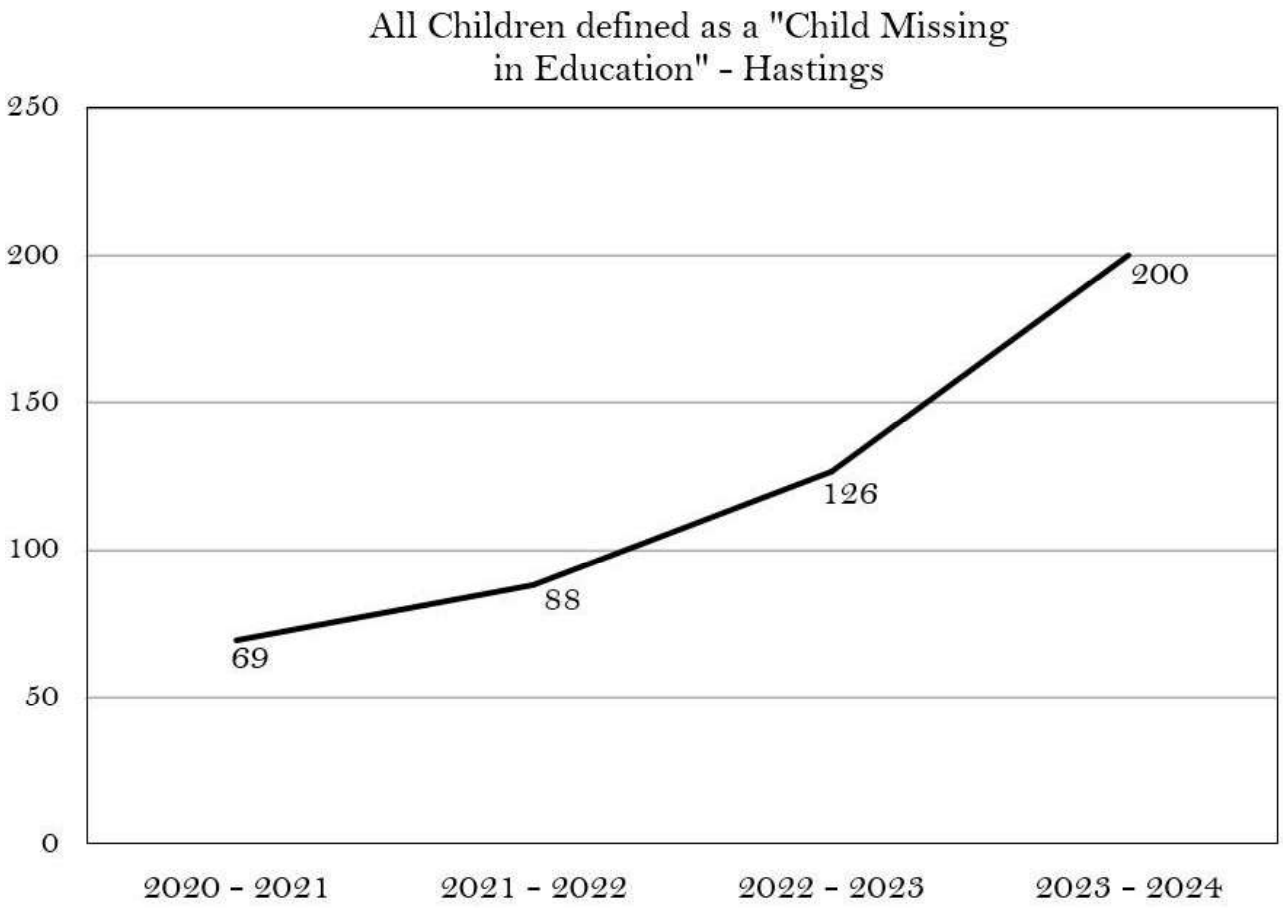


Figure 5.6. Yearly number of children defined as missing in education within the Hastings area. Source: ESCC FOI request.

The rise in home education is alarming even for those who work to support parents who home-school. This is because the rapid exodus has increased the chances that children may be in environments not conducive to a positive learning experience. Indeed, for some children, home is not a happy place, and a school environment is the best chance they have for a good quality education. A section 437 order identifies the suitability of alternative provision and can order children back to mandatory school attendance if the provision is deemed unacceptable. The number of these orders has increased from 20 per year to 78, an increase of 290%[80]. Indeed, this increase only counts identified problematic cases, and due to the large increase, some children who should be ordered back to school may have fallen through the cracks. Further, this rapid increase within a short period has meant that schools with inadequate support staff may not be able to identify who is receiving

inadequate education at home. This means that children fall through the cracks and never get the education or qualifications they could have gained if they had received an adequate education.

Post 16 education:

Out of those who get through the secondary aged schooling with the minimum requirements, their A-level (or equivalent) prospects are slightly below the national average. The average grade obtained in vocational subjects is only slightly lower than the national average. The average T-Level score is 26, and nationally it is 29[81]. Applied general qualification average scores stand at 25, and nationally it is 30, meaning the average grade in Hastings is a Merit, whereas in England it is a Merit+[82]. The overall quality of the A-Level providers within Hastings & Rye has been graded by Ofsted as good. The average grade obtained in a student's A-levels within Hastings is a low C grade, whilst nationally it is a low B grade. In terms of the average score, nationally, a student averages 35, whereas in Hastings it is 29[83]. The percentage of students who achieve the higher standard (an AAB grade) in Hastings is only 1%, whereas 18% of students reach this standard in England. This would indicate these students are not getting grades high enough to go to university. It also indicates that few get the grades to go to good and high-ranking universities. However, these results being lower may be because A-level providers take on more disadvantaged students[84].

Again, students defined as "disadvantaged" obtain noticeably worse outcomes. Nationally, 21% of A-level students are considered as disadvantaged, but in Hastings, it is 24%. This could explain why post-16 students in Hastings are more likely not to go into further education or employment (NEET). Nationally, 10% of these students are described as NEET, but in Hastings & Rye, it is 31%[85]. Further, only 24% of disadvantaged pupils in Hastings are likely to stay in some form of education, compared to 53% nationally[86]. This explains why the proportion of the population that has obtained a Degree or equivalent qualification, or higher, is quite a bit lower than the national average (29%-36%)[87]. Further, such metrics would again

indicate that the town generates fewer positive education outcomes due to the disproportionate number of students that come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Once more, this indicates that poorer education outcomes occur in the earlier stages of a child's education, where disadvantage then materialises in test scores in adolescence.

Policy solutions:

Before outlining possible solutions, it is worth noting education successes in Hastings and what can be learnt from them.

Learning from the not-for-profit education sector in Hastings:

Not-for-profits in Hastings can provide useful lessons. "*Enjoyeduction*" specialises in taking children in the Hastings area who have fallen out of the state school system and provides education up to a GCSE level. They have a 96% pass rate, and student satisfaction is high, with most students getting through their GCSEs in one year. Some children have then gone on to be successful at college and university. Due to this success, the school has no need to advertise, as parents hear about past successes and are just relieved they have somewhere where their child can access education services. Most of their students require some form of SEN provision or mental health support, and often require flexible learning, something most mainstream schools are unable to provide. These students often have not been in school for long periods and are afraid of entering a classroom. Some of these children are then forced into school by teachers, often making anxiety about school worse. Indeed, some children have often had very bad experiences in mainstream schools, which can be unnecessarily strict. This school's approach asks students to come into the classroom before they join and ease the child back into a learning environment.

The school operates on a no child left behind principle and seeks to bring joy into learning for these students. There are a few rules (such as no uniforms), as these children have often reacted against the strict rules of the schools they have left. But, students are encouraged to be kind, happy in their

learning and work with each other. Students are offered well-being services to help them get back into education, with the school being connected to local charities offering support to children. There are usually 16 children in the core subjects, like Maths and English, and homework is done with parents' support. This allows the school to build quality relationships with students and parents, helping to make home education an enjoyable experience. It also allows the schools to provide flexible education services, allowing education to fit in with their children's more complex lives and needs. Due to the school's success, "*Enjoyeduction*" have parents willing to pay these fees and to help in fundraising and securing investment when needed. Whilst such support occurs on a small scale, it highlights how outcomes can be improved for the most challenging students when the right culture and policies are in place. Specifically, it highlights the importance of having the right management and learning culture when trying to create a successful learning environment.

From the evidence presented, it is likely that local schools' problems mostly stem from being unable to recruit and retain staff, low attendance, poor behaviour and failed management. This problem can be addressed by the following measures.

Addressing staffing challenges:

- Aim to bring more university students into the teaching profession, especially amongst those who obtain high scores.
- Expand programmes like "Teach First" which place successful postgraduate university students into teaching placements within deprived areas of the UK.
- Increase teacher pay to make the profession more appealing to new graduates.
- Offer better career progression to younger and new people entering the profession.
- Invest in support staff that will reduce the workload burden on teachers.

- Decrease the administrative burden on teachers to help reduce the increasing pressures of the job. This will also help to improve the current poor work-life balance.
- Eliminate policies of mandatory detention targets. This will help create a better teaching environment for students.
- Create a friendlier school environment that will provide a more enjoyable teaching experience.

Improving attendance:

- Increase the number of support staff in schools who focus on improving attendance. Schools with more problematic attendance records could be prioritised and given more support staff when required.
- Increase the number of attendance officers who work with parents to return children Missing in Education to school.
- Create a more welcoming environment for local schools for students whose attendance is very low and for students who have dropped out.
- Reform the curriculum to allow students to focus on subjects they enjoy once progressing to year 8 in secondary school.
- Improve mental health diagnosis and support for children. This can be done by increasing the number of staff with mental health training and ensuring all schools have access to specialist support.
- Invest in CHAMS (child mental health support services) to ensure that the increasing demand can be met much better.
- Create a pupil referral unit in Hastings to get on top of the backlogged cases of children with very low attendance rates.
- Ease long-term absent pupils back into the classroom, gradually improving attendance across several terms.

Improving behaviour:

- Enforce a standardised behaviour rulebook approved by central government for schools that are found to be struggling with behaviour management.

- Encourage parental involvement in shaping behaviour rules and standards. This could be done with parent-teacher association meetings.
- Schools that have addressed any behaviour problems from students could be encouraged to share their policies with other schools, to help spread best practice.
- Simplify the uniform code to reduce costs and make it easier for parents and students to follow the uniform rules. Eliminating branded uniforms could help achieve this.
- Have a zero tolerance approach towards bullying, which would also help increase attendance amongst students subject to bullying behaviours.
- Create a culture where students are encouraged to be kind to each other and work with each other.
- Create a dedicated support centre with staff who deal with students who are excluded from school for poor behaviour.

Improving school management:

- Return all schools run by failing academy chains to local authority control or academy trusts with more successful track records.
- Bar any academy trusts from managing schools that are found to have mismanaged school funds.
- A greater focus on learning Writing, Reading and Maths skills during primary school may be needed to reduce inequalities at younger ages.
- Earlier intervention in primary schools that are graded as below average for core skills, such as Reading, Writing and Maths. Again, this will help reduce inequalities at the early stages of education.
- Provide more government controls over the actions academy trusts can take in pupil behaviour management.
- Build a federation of school leaders programme to share best practices so they can be replicated across all schools within a local authority.
- Provide incentives to successful school leaders to take over failing schools in deprived communities, such as pay incentives.

- Ensure school management policies are compatible with creating a welcoming and friendly learning environment.
- Creating parent-teacher associations so that parents can help shape the school's policies in ways that will most benefit their children. This could also extend into shaping homework tasks, so parents can help their children engage with their education.
- Creating a more flexible learning environment, especially for SEN students.

Chapter Endnotes:

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[48] Information gathered from a local leading SEN teacher & parent of a child on an ECHP plan who submitted an FOI request on tribunal case success rates.

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