



# Exploring the issue of off-rolling

On behalf of Ofsted



# Summary

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1. There's mixed understanding of what off-rolling is, but many are aware that it's happening and that it's on the increase.
2. Many education professionals perceive there to be an overlap between off-rolling and other (sometimes legitimate) practices.
3. Off-rolling is triggered by league table position - both SLT and classroom teachers feel the pressure of needing to maintain high performance and good Ofsted ratings.
4. Vulnerable students, with SEN or other needs, are more likely to be affected.
5. While schools may say pupils are off-rolled due to behaviour, teachers personally believe academic achievement is more important in the decision making.
6. It's an informal process, during which schools collect data on behaviour and correspondence with the parents.
7. Parents are pressured to accept off-rolling and many teachers think more support is needed for them, especially for those with the least understanding of their children's rights and/or EAL needs.
8. A minority would like to see more support for schools around how to deal with low attendance/SEN pupils when all other possible solutions have been exhausted.

# Teachers who've experienced off-rolling are more likely to be...

## MORE LIKELY TO BE MALE



## MORE LIKELY TO BE TEACHING SECONDARY

61% (43%)



## MORE LIKELY TO BE TEACHING IN A LARGE SCHOOL (1,201+ PUPILS)

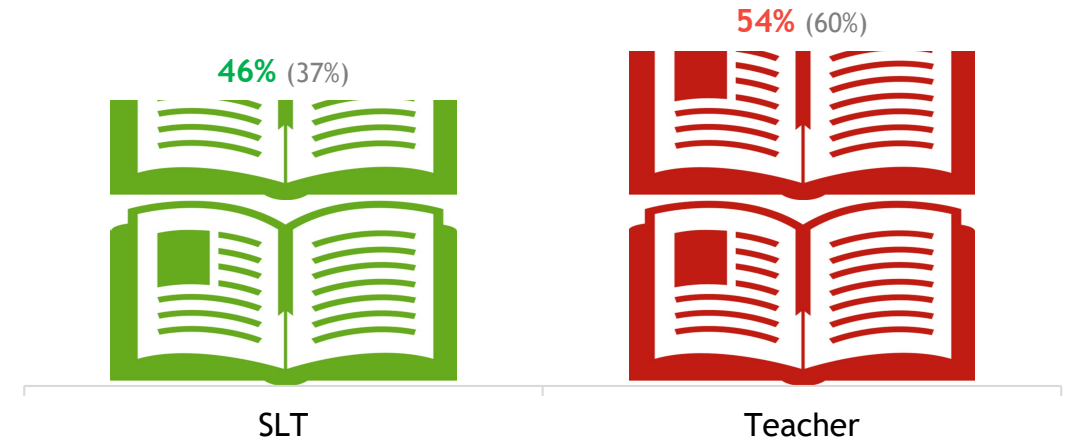
29% (17%)



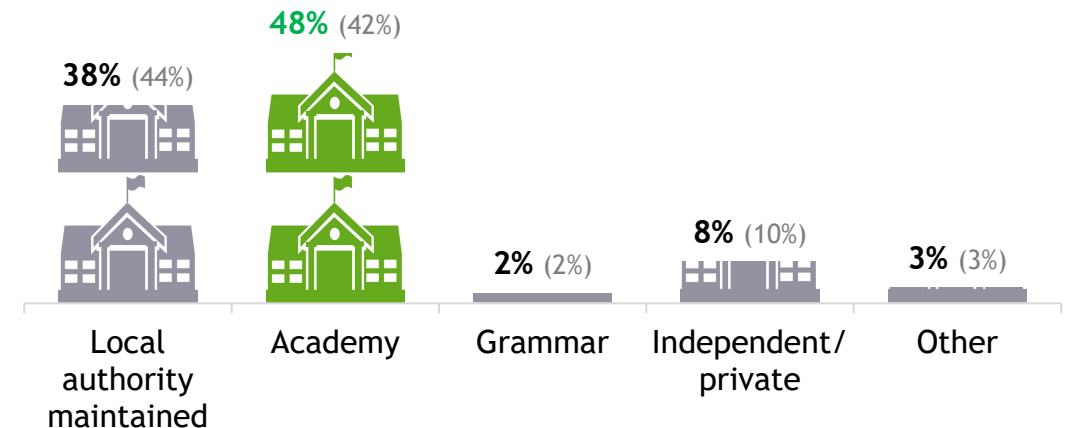
## MORE LIKELY TO BE 'INADEQUATE/SPECIAL MEASURES'

5% (3%)

## MORE LIKELY TO BE SLT



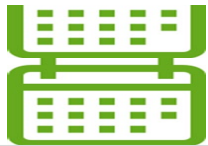
## MORE LIKELY TO BE IN AN ACADEMY



# Teachers who've experienced off-rolling were more likely than teachers overall to say...

IT HAPPENS A LOT/A FAIR AMOUNT

64% (30%)



Happens a lot/ a fair amount

22% (26%)



Doesn't happen very much/ at all



IT HAPPENS IN AUTUMN TERM (SEP-DEC)

21% (13%)



BEHAVIOUR IS THE NAMED REASON

24% (14%)



BUT THEY THINK ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IS A FACTOR

24% (14%)



THEY SUPPORT SCHOOLS BEING ABLE TO OFF-ROLL

24% (14%)



IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE IF SCHOOLS CANNOT ADDRESS UNDERLYING PROBLEMS (E.G. SEN)

44% (36%)

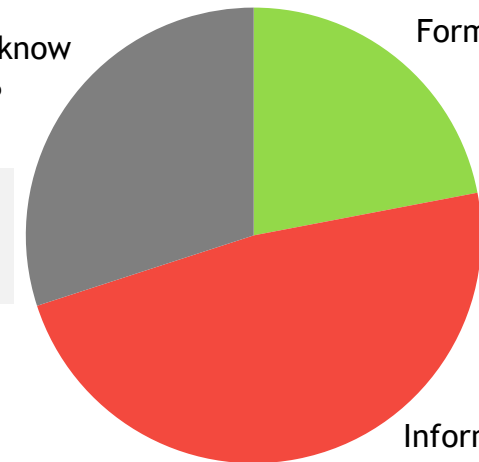


SCHOOLS PRESSURE PARENTS TO ACCEPT THEIR CHILDREN BEING OFF-ROLLED

62% (47%)

IT'S AN INFORMAL PROCESS

Don't know 30%



AND PUPILS DO NOT CONTINUE IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

17% (15%)



5

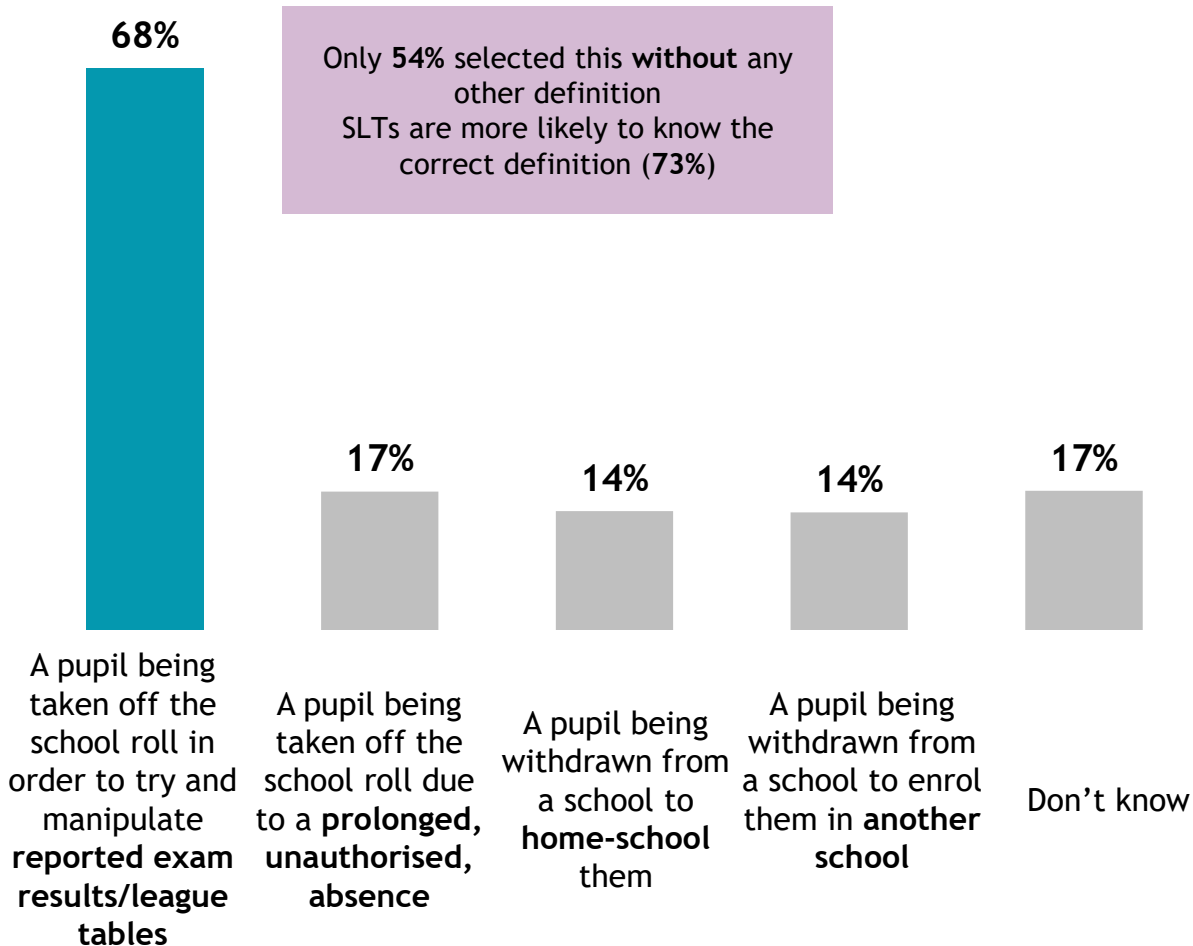
Total surveyed population percentage shown in brackets, if available

Significantly higher than total sample  
Significantly lower than total sample

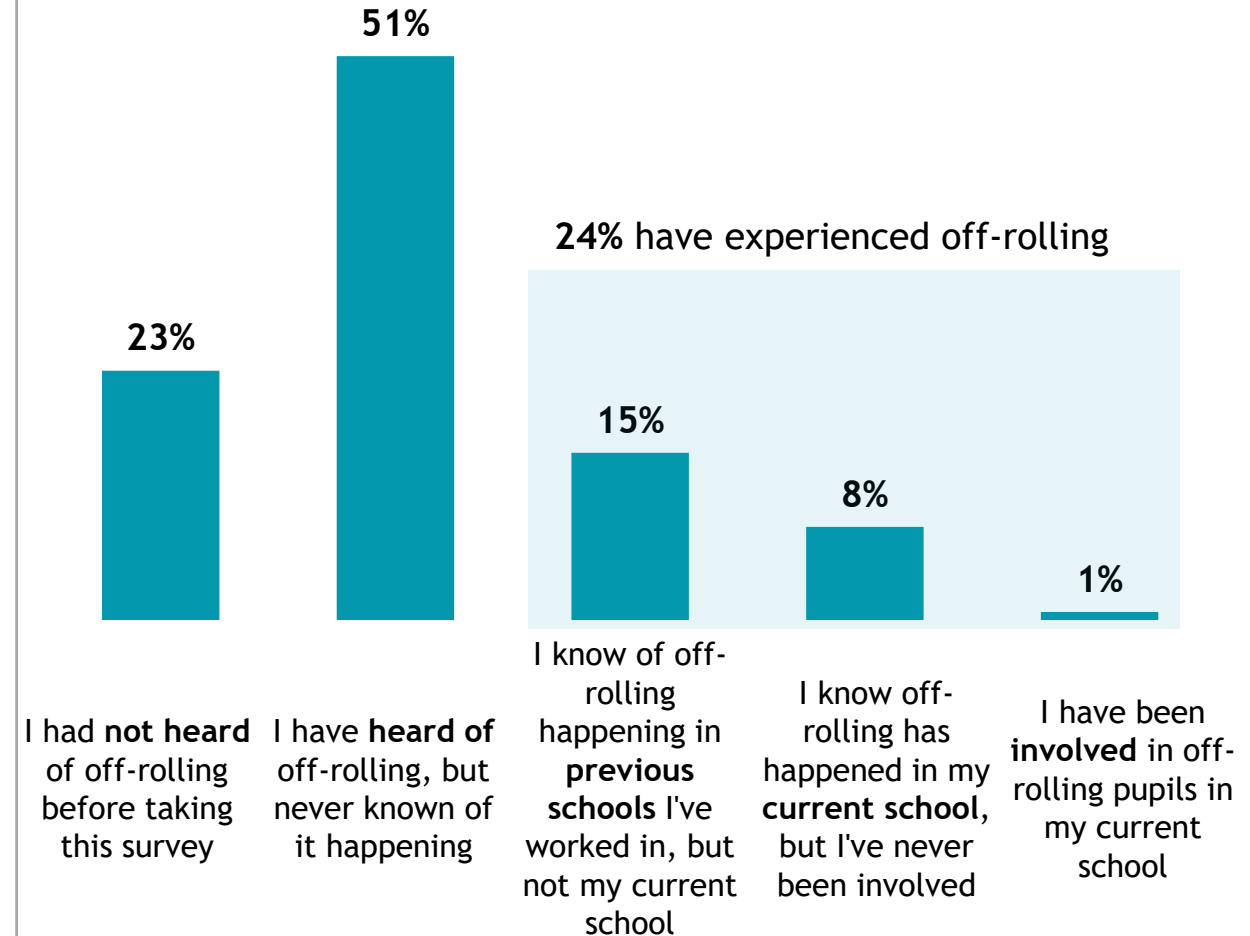
# — Awareness and knowledge of off-rolling

# Two thirds of teachers correctly identified 'off-rolling', and a quarter have seen it happen in their schools

Q4. Which of the following do you think describes 'off-rolling'?



Q5. Which of the following statements best applies to you?



# Some ambiguities exist in teachers' understanding of which practices are technically 'off-rolling'

- **Most feel confident in agreeing that off-rolling is done to 'fix statistics' for the benefit of the school.**
  - Exam results/league table performance is top of mind and many readily identify off-rolling as a way to manipulate these figures.
- **However, confusion exists over other practices that teachers are aware of. A number feel that the lines between (sometimes) legitimate practices of removing a pupil from the school and off-rolling can be blurred.**
  - Absence records were spontaneously raised during the telephone interviews. A few speak of temporarily removing pupil's from the school roll to improve absence data during Ofsted inspections.
  - Schools in receipt of students are sometimes suspicious about a cohort of pupils when the school transfer happens within key timeframes in the academic year and the pupils' school reports indicate that they should have been excluded.
  - One or two question situations where a pupil had left the school for home schooling, believing that the senior leadership team (SLT) had been quick to accept the decision and not necessarily acting in the best interests of the pupil.

“To me it’s something where schools are trying to game the system, probably because of Ofsted and Governor pressures... After GCSEs all data is reported, if you know a certain student will get poor grades and not achieve their potential, there could be a temptation to off-roll them so they don’t bring the schools’ results down... Morally I don’t agree with it but I can see why schools do it...”  
**Deputy Head, secondary grammar school**

“I would understand the term to generally mean something that is done temporarily by schools to hide poor attendance if there is a need due to Ofsted inspection, and such like that. It’s primarily taking students off-roll for a short period of time and putting them back on roll after the outside interest has lessened.”  
**Teacher (with attendance responsibilities), secondary grammar school**



# Knowledge of off-rolling is limited among classroom teachers; media is important in building knowledge

- **Off-rolling is not openly discussed in schools - the vast majority agree that it's reprehensible and, due to the taboo surrounding off-rolling, it's often done 'behind the scenes'. This leaves it open to speculation among non-decision makers.**
  - Classroom teachers are informed when a pupil leaves and often draw their own conclusions that the pupil has been off-rolled, although this is never communicated by the SLT.
  - Teachers are likely to believe that the pupil has been off-rolled if they have been asked to provide evidence on the pupil's behaviour and they are known to be a low academic achiever, or if a pupil leaves abruptly.
- **Those who are aware of off-rolling but have not had experience of it have learnt about it through:**
  - **General media coverage** - Most have learnt about it through the news/reading articles on sites such as the BBC
  - **Word of mouth/professional networks** - Some spoke about learning about off-rolling through their professional networks (e.g. discussing it with other heads; watercooler conversation at training sessions)
  - **Industry news** - A few SLT note that there is increased coverage on off-rolling by organisations such as Ofsted.

"We're not consulted before, I've never been involved in making those decisions... children just disappear."

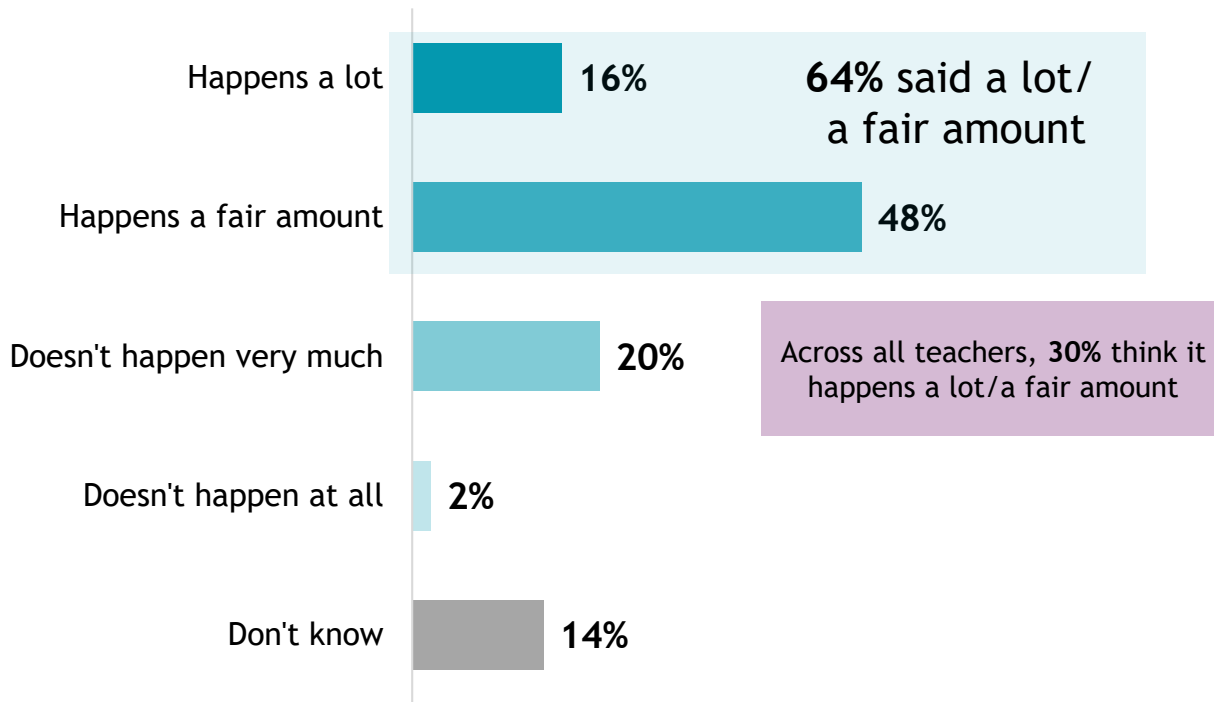
Teacher, secondary academy

"I was reading about attendance and exam results, and there was an article on 'off-rolling, is it acceptable' on the BBC."

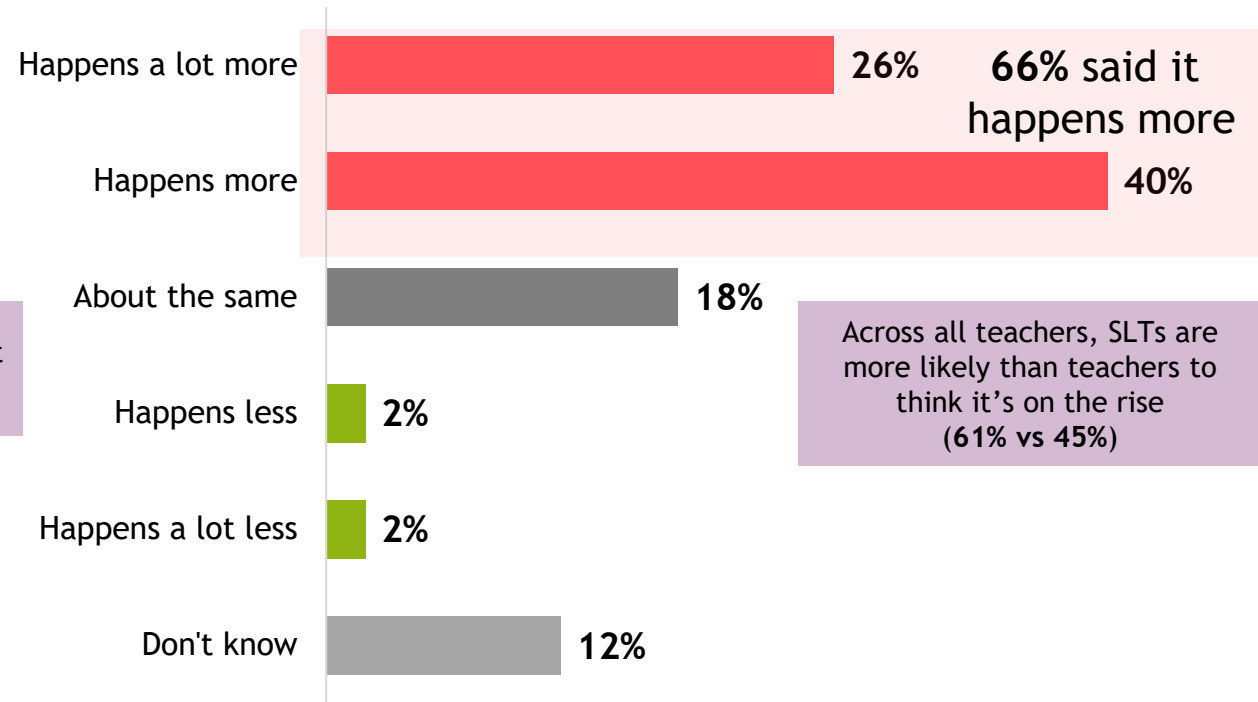
Assistant Head, primary academy

# Teachers who've seen off-rolling think it happens a fair amount in their local area and many think it's on the rise

Q7. How often do you think off-rolling happens in schools within your local authority area?



Q8. And do you think off-rolling happens more or less than it did five years ago, or is it about the same?

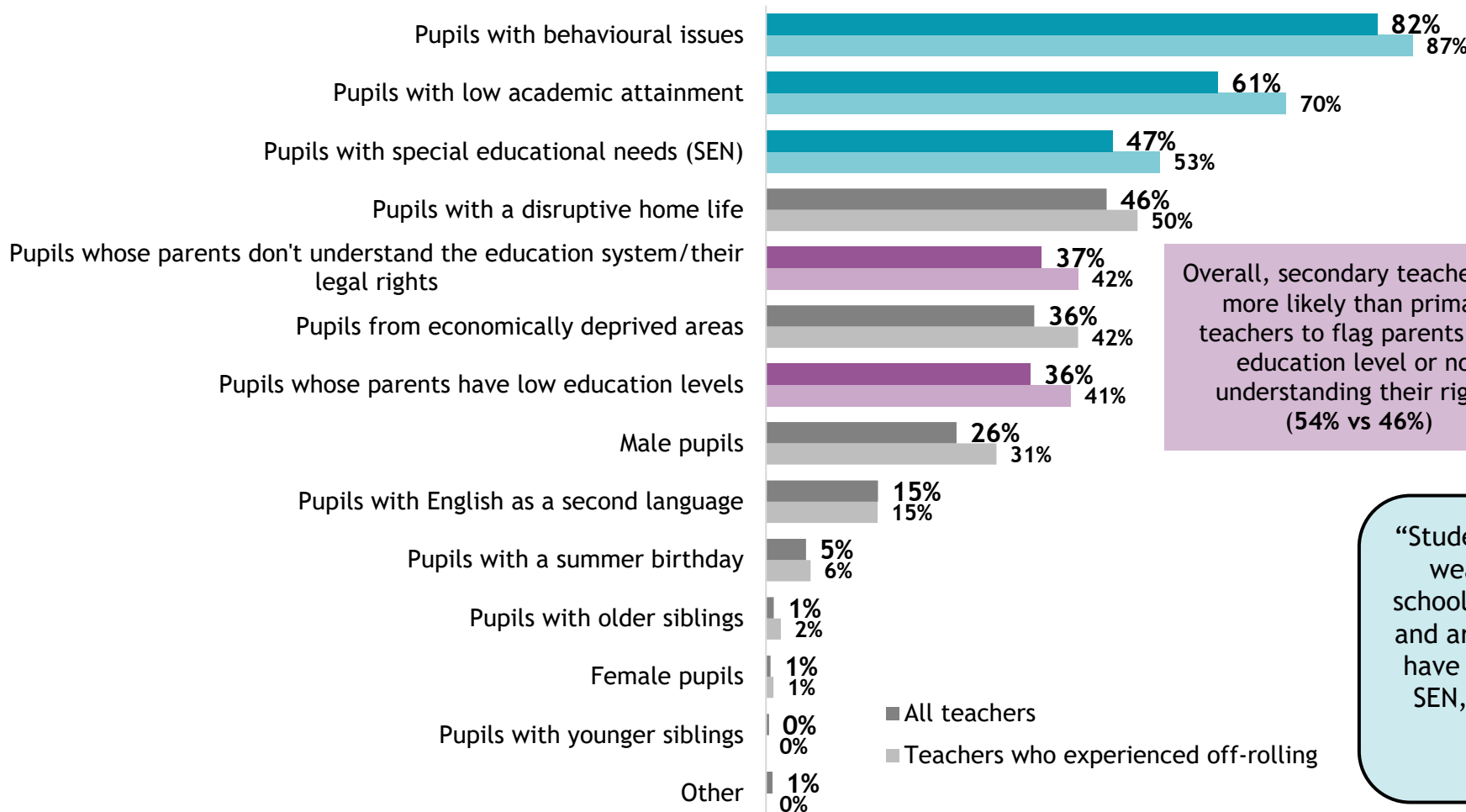


“...at my previous schools that was commonplace.”  
SLT, secondary academy

“I think it's more common than people think it is... it's gone up dramatically in the last 10 years...”  
Assistant Headteacher, primary academy

# Teachers think that pupils with behavioural issues are most at risk of being off-rolled

Q9. What type of pupils do you think off-rolling is more likely to happen to?



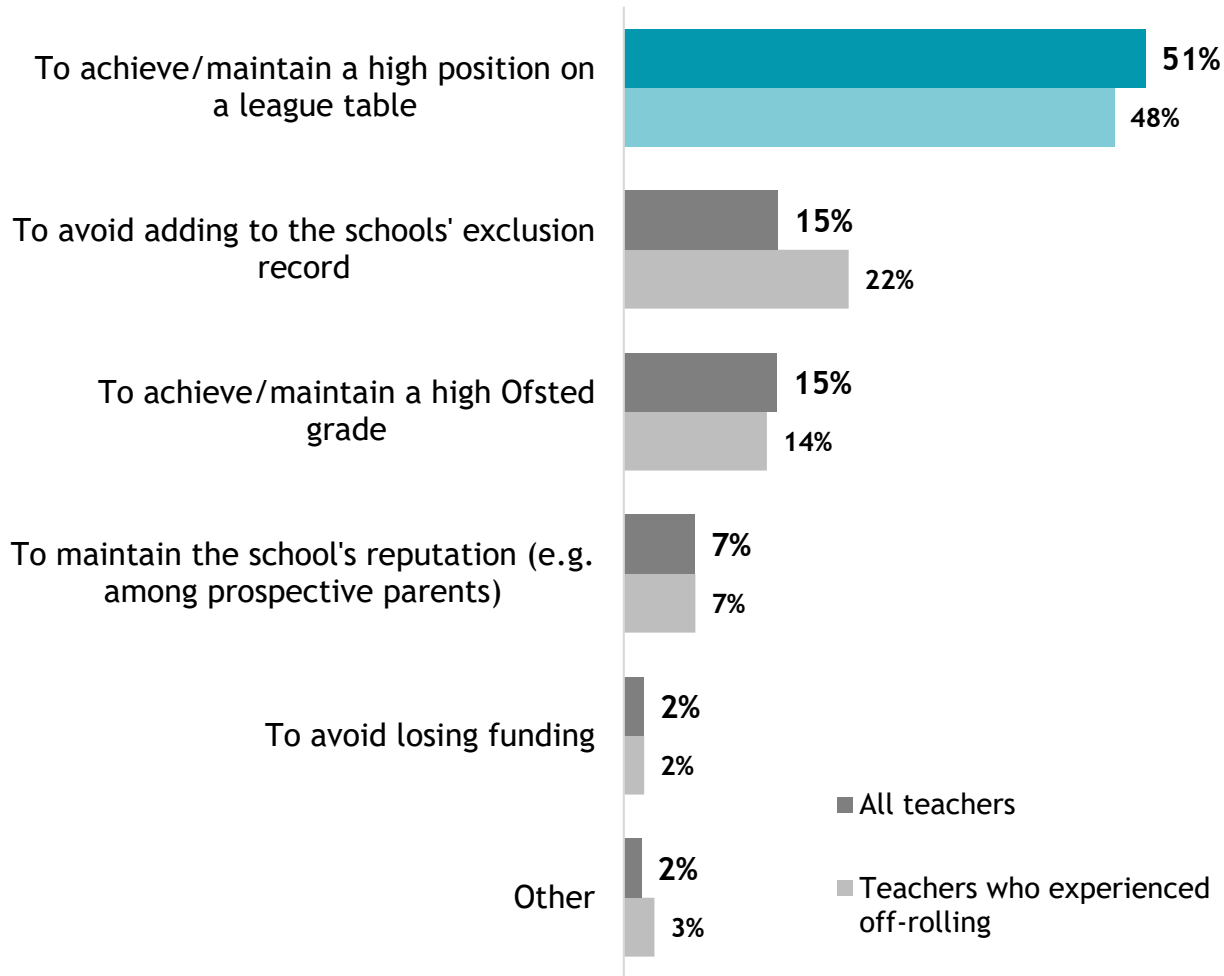
Overall, secondary teachers are more likely than primary teachers to flag parents' low education level or not understanding their rights (54% vs 46%)

In the qualitative interviews, a number acknowledge that an overlap exists between students that exhibit behavioural issues, SEN students and those with low academic attainment.

“Students with challenging behaviours and obviously weaker students, because of the pressures the school perceives itself to be under, they are a target and are more likely to be off-rolled. Within that you have more SEN students. ‘Non-adult’ behaviours of SEN, such as lashing out, aren’t accepted well by senior leaders...”  
**Department Head, secondary academy**

# Half of teachers said the main reason for schools to off-roll a pupil is to manipulate league tables

Q12. What do you think is the main reason for schools off-rolling pupils?

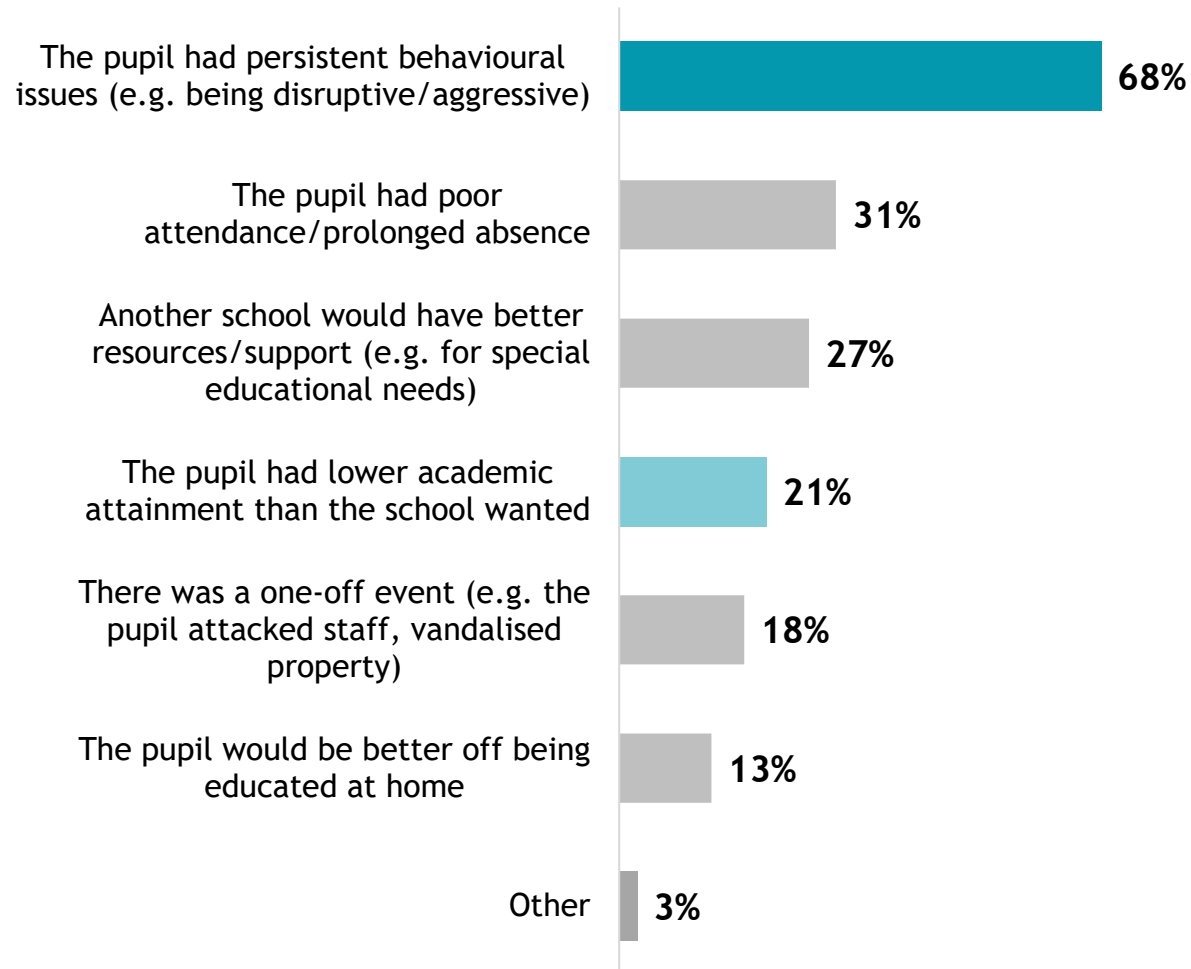


- During the interviews, league tables results were highlighted as the key driver for off-rolling pupils. A school's performance in the league tables dictates how it's perceived among key stakeholders - current pupils and parents, potential pupils and parents, Governors, future teaching staff and Government.
- Off-rolling students is seen as a better alternative to exclusions as the school's exclusion record is taken into account by Ofsted.

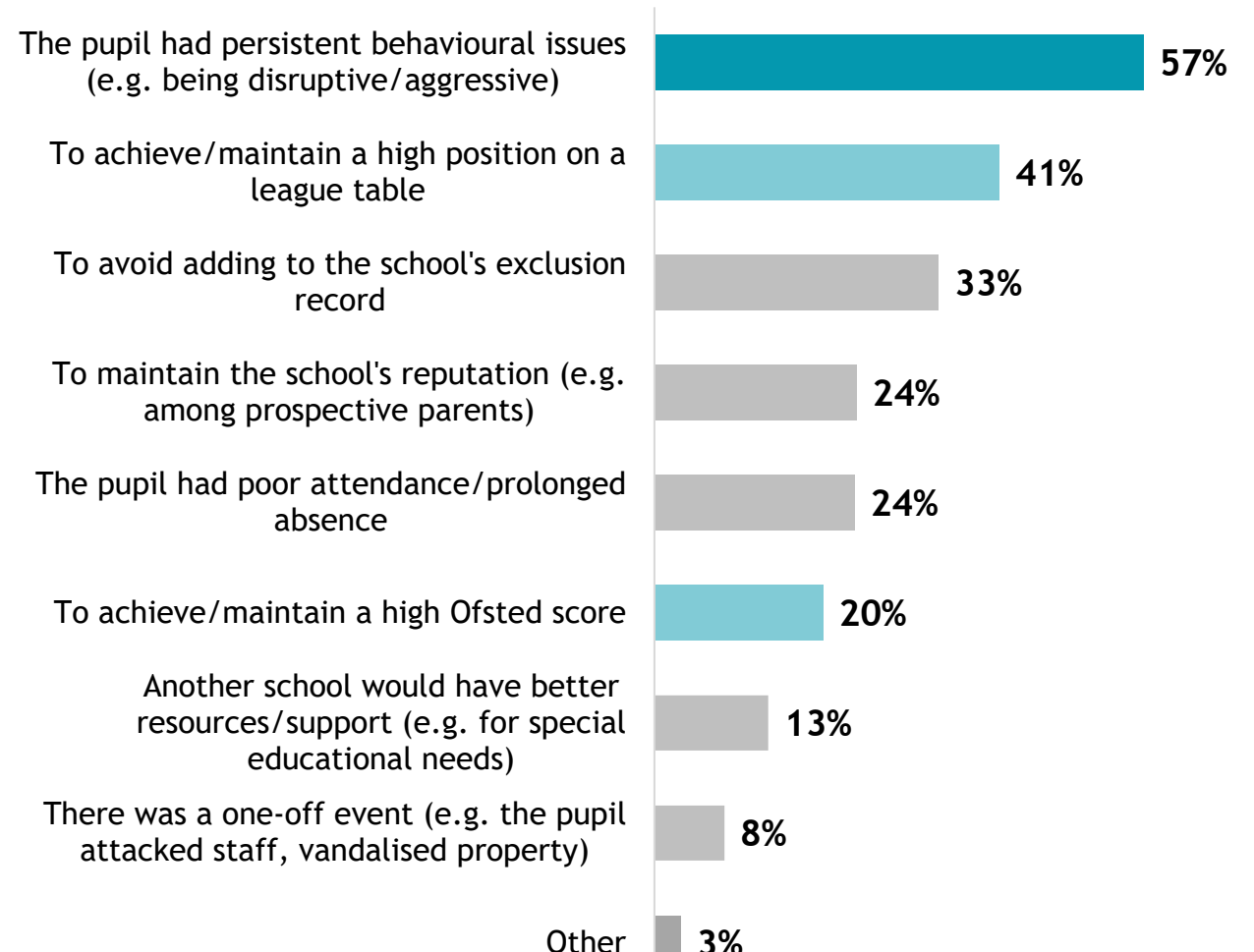
“[Off-rolling happens] due to the external pressures the school is under, the emphasis on data... off-rolling is a better solution to exclusions... it can be done without having exclusion on the record, and without months of additional paperwork.”  
**Headteacher, primary LA school**

# In actual examples, while behavioural issues are the top reasons given for a pupil being off-rolled, league tables come second when asking for teachers' personal views

Q16. What were the reasons the school gave (e.g. to the pupil, their parents) for off-rolling this pupil?



Q17. And what do you personally think were the reasons to off-roll these pupils?



# Education professionals agree it's easier to justify off-rolling when there are behavioural concerns

- During the off-rolling process, the majority spoke about collecting evidence on and discussing behavioural concerns with parents.
  - However, education professionals agree that behavioural issues often go hand in hand with low academic attainment.
  - Some feel that behavioural issues are often 'dressed up' as a way to justify the pupils' removal.
  - One teacher from a SEN school in receipt of pupils off-rolled for behaviour felt that behavioural reports had sometimes been over exaggerated and did not reflect their experience of the child.
  - Another teacher from a mainstream secondary school stated that pupils who had exhibited the same level of behaviour (sometimes worse) than pupils who had been off-rolled but achieved academically had remained at the school.

"I think it's common, yeah. Obviously it's dressed up as other issues because schools would get into a huge amount of trouble if they knew we were doing it, but I think it's common...The school would never say you're below target so we are going to find you another school..."

**Department Head, Secondary Academy**

"In terms of [communicating] academic reasons [for off-rolling], this is not so popular as it is harder to do..."

**Headteacher, primary LA school**

# Education professionals perceive struggling schools in disadvantaged areas to be most likely to off-roll

- **Most think that off-rolling happens most in secondary schools in deprived areas where it's more challenging to maintain performance.**
  - There is a general consensus that higher achieving schools are better able to 'take the hit' of poor results from a few pupils, whereas schools with an overall lower performing cohort will feel the impact of negative data more severely.
  - Similarly, some felt that small schools had a higher propensity to off-roll because their pupils represent a larger percentage and so have a stronger impact on results.
- **At the same time, a few mention schools that they think 'play hard' and off-roll pupils to maintain high performance and Ofsted rating.**
  - Education professionals are mindful of the 'spiral of decline' caused by poor league table results - as the school becomes less appealing to parents/ambitious students, the academic ability of a cohort declines as does parental engagement, and so it becomes more challenging to lift results back up.
  - During the telephone interviews, many classroom teachers spoke about feeling pressure from SLT to get results, especially in core subject areas that are recorded in league table statistics.

"League tables and Ofsted go hand in hand, they are the entire motivations for people doing those things... there are more pressures on English and Maths, they are double weighted, if they are below a certain level, or aren't improving at a certain rate, you can't get an outstanding Ofsted result. That certainly has been a reason in the past for manipulating the figures..."

There is the reputation for the school to maintain or improve, if you have an outstanding Ofsted result, you'll be over subscribed and have a full year 7; you'll have a good calibre of students...

I've worked at failing schools in the past. If you are failing, you end up with some students whose parents haven't really thought about where they will go, they aren't motivated, they aren't that bothered and therefore, gradually over the space of a few years you get more and more of those students in, the intake goes down, the numbers go down, the academic attainment goes down, parent involvement goes down..."

**Department Deputy Head, secondary academy**

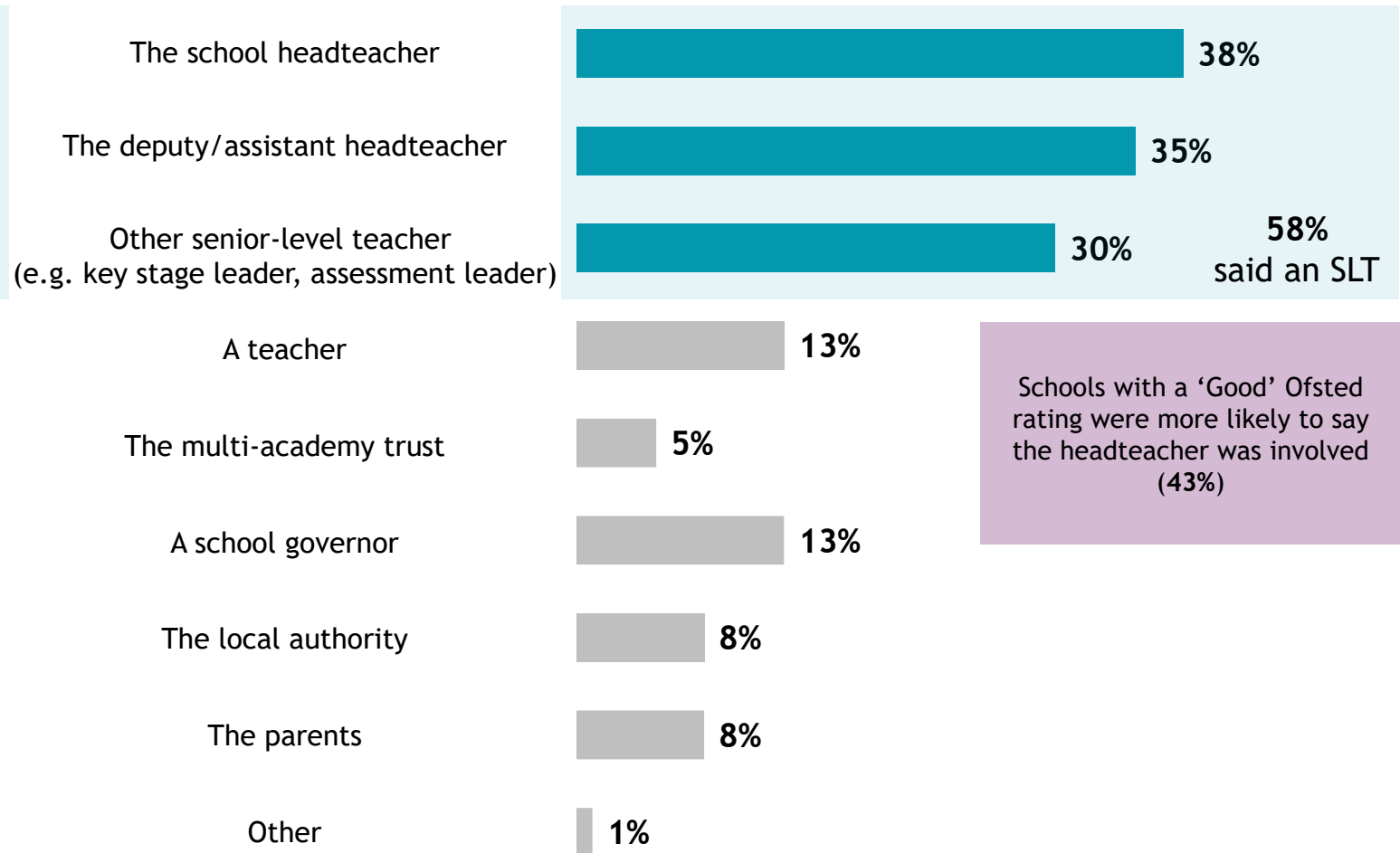
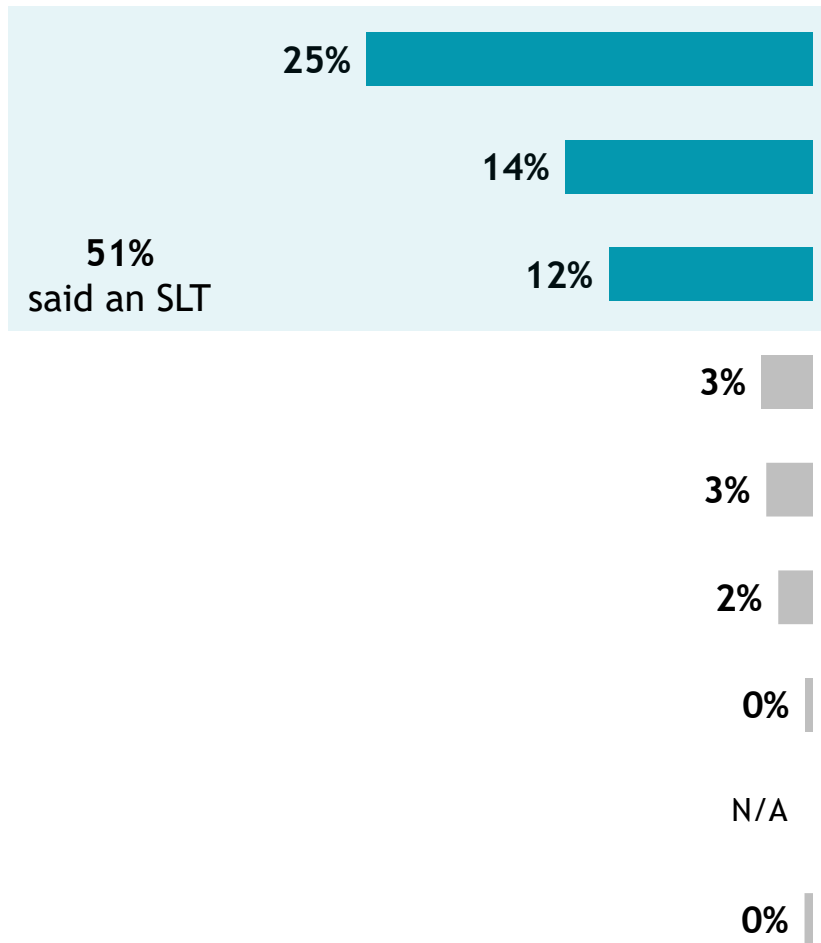
# — The process of off-rolling pupils



# An SLT is often cited as the initiator of off-rolling, but all roles are involved in the process to a differing extent

Q18. Who made the first suggestion to off-roll this pupil?

Q19. Who else was involved in off-rolling this pupil (e.g. collecting evidence, speaking to the pupil/parent)?

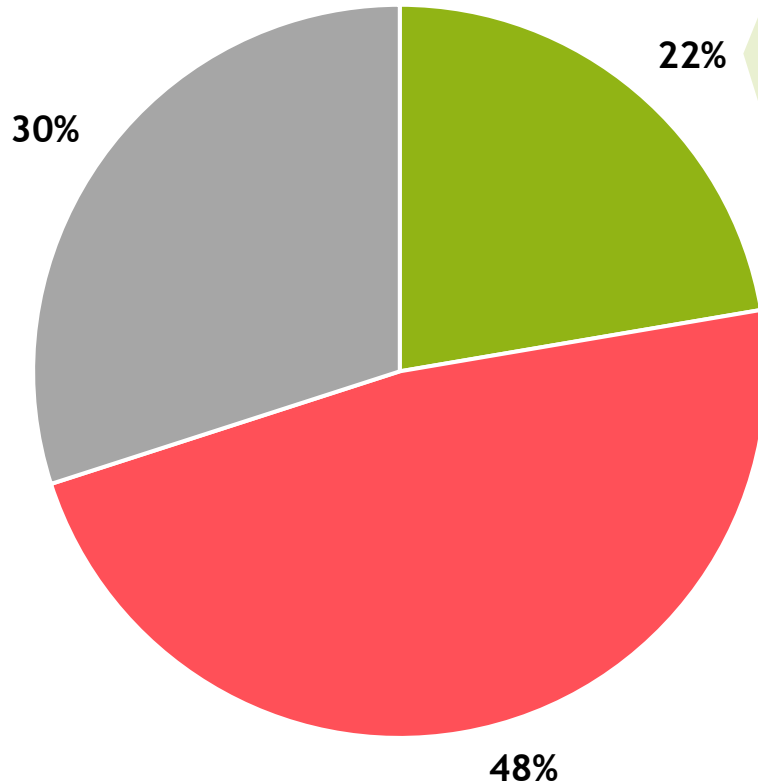


Schools with a 'Good' Ofsted rating were more likely to say the headteacher was involved (43%)

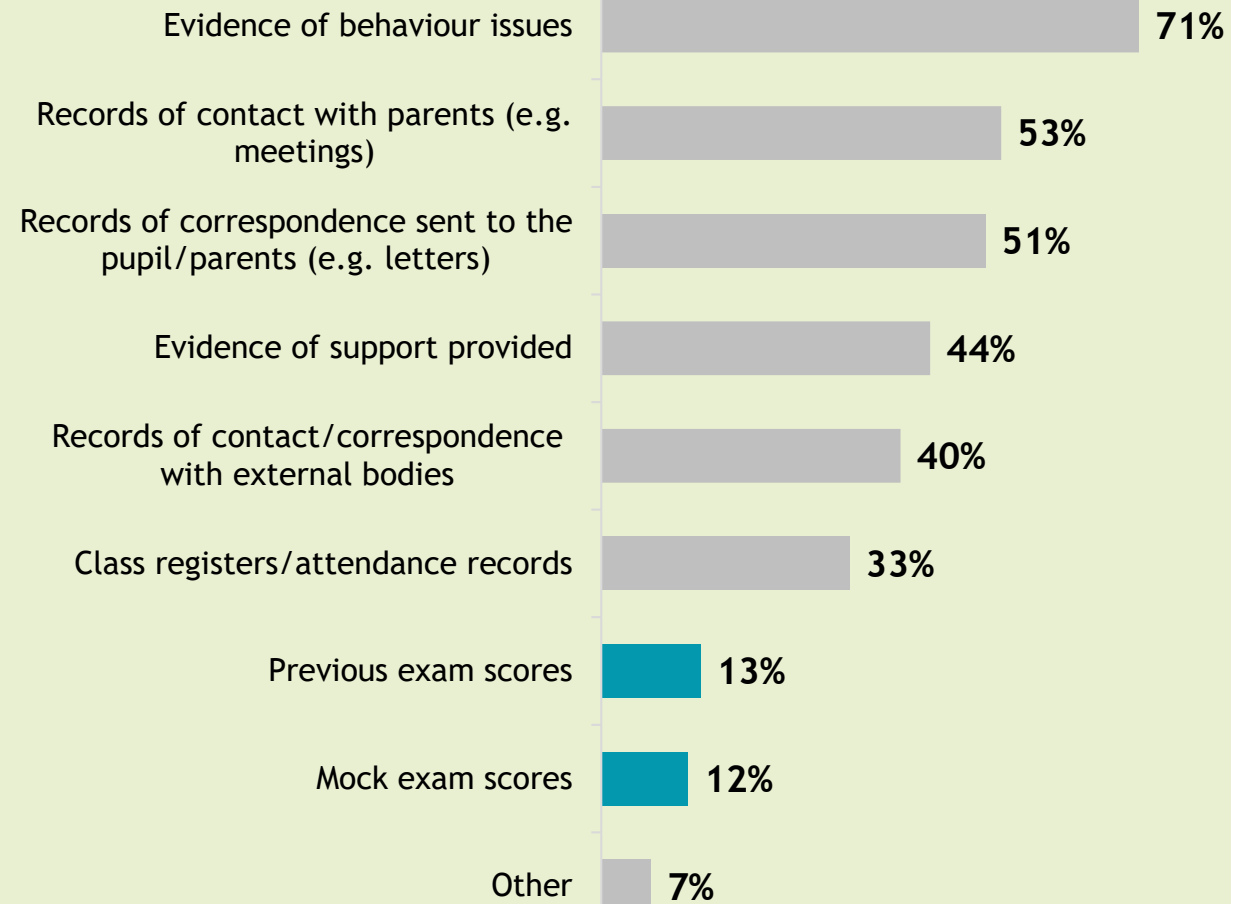
# Off-rolling often happens informally and when evidence is collected, it's rarely academic

Q20. Was the process of off-rolling this pupil formal or informal?

- Formal (e.g. a rigid approach that involved collecting data and speaking to external bodies)
- Informal (e.g. a less rigid approach with less external involvement)
- Don't know



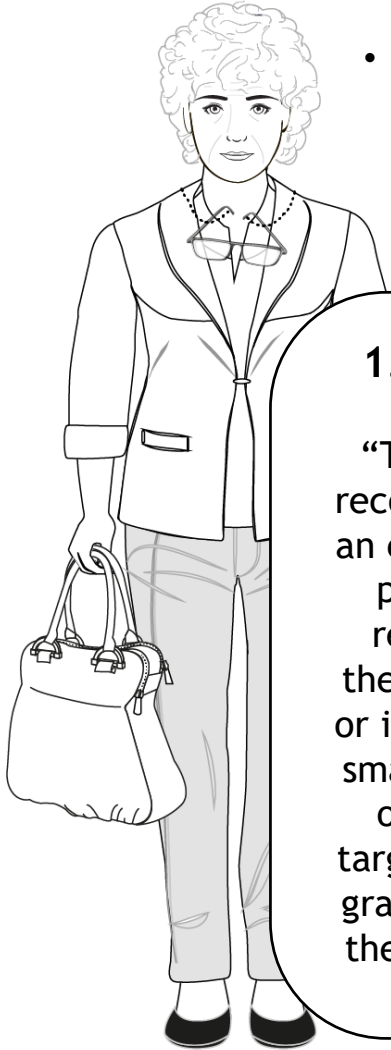
Q21. What evidence, if any, was collected?



# Case study: the off-rolling process

- Those with experience of off-rolling agree that it occurs before GCSEs; either throughout Years 10/11 before results are collected, or in Year 9 before teaching beds in.

## Department Head, secondary academy



### 1. Behaviour is recorded

“Teachers would be vigilant on recording behaviour of that child, an email might be sent out saying please record any incidences regarding student ‘x’... either there would be a major blow out or it would be an accumulation of smaller points... Students are put on booklets, they have three targets and each member of staff grades them. To pass the booklet they would have to get a certain mark for the week...”

### 2. SLT are involved

“The Deputy Head or Headteacher would be involved at that point. Governors would be involved as well but the issue is that some of the Governors are not educational professionals, so they are trusting the knowledge of the professionals, but the professionals are obviously sometimes self-interested in it...”

### 3. Parents are communicated with, face-to-face

“They make it easy for a parent to do it themselves, so make it clear that it will be difficult for their child to stay and make the arrangements for the child to move school... If they have decided that a parent could be an easy touch or is not well educated themselves then they take the informal approach...”

# Parents with low understanding of the education system are most at risk of being pressured

- Throughout the telephone interviews, examples of parents being pressured into off-rolling their child emerged.
  - Most commonly, schools emphasised how an alternative school with specialist provision for SEN would be more suited to the pupil. While true in many cases, a few felt that this argument was not always accurate and instead used to leverage out a pupil with behavioural issues who also has low academic attainment.
  - Some spoke of fear-mongering among parents, with management painting a 'worse case scenario' for the child's future if they remained within the school. One mentioned how this tactic could be used to encourage a school transfer in place of an exclusion (which would be included on the schools' exclusions record).
- Most believe that pupils who had less engaged and/or less informed parents were more likely to be off-rolled by schools.
  - Some spoke about how it was easier to remove a pupil with parents who had less understanding of the education system and their legal rights. Often these parents also had lower education levels and/or were EAL.

"They talk about school records and things, but I don't think they exist anymore. There is a lot of talk of 'oh it could be on their record and it could be bought up if they applied for a job', which is a load of rubbish..."

Department Head, secondary academy

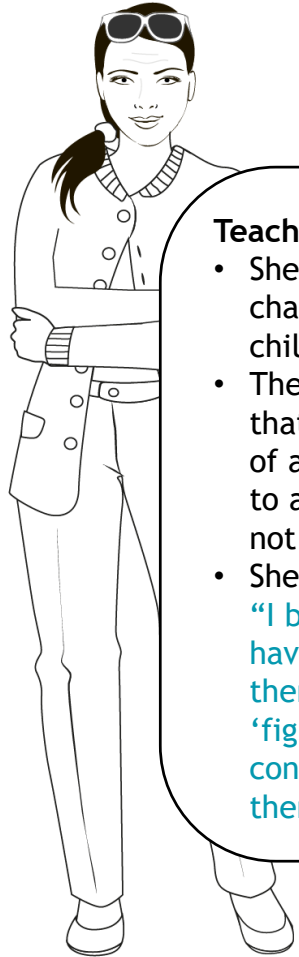
"I strongly suspect some schools are saying, 'right the situation is this - your child is underachieving, their behaviour record is bad... you can either fill in this transfer form, or we will go through a permanent exclusion process and they will end up having to attend a PRU school with young criminals.'"

Deputy Head, secondary grammar

"Schools sometimes just rail road parents who don't know what their rights are and that's very wrong... At my previous school a few times parents got educational lawyers in and the school would get very scared at that stage..."

Department Head, secondary academy

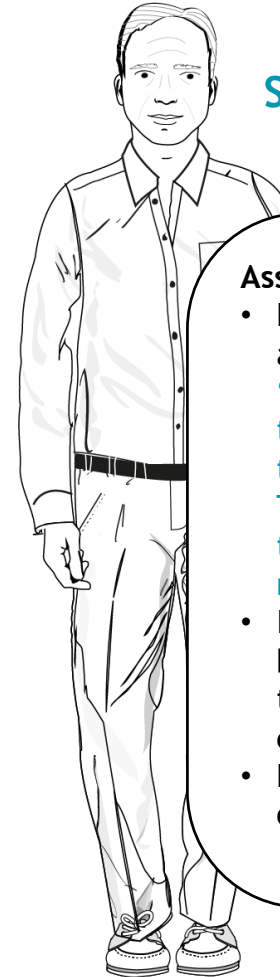
# Case studies: pressurising parents into their children leaving via legitimate routes



## SEN scapegoating?

### Teacher, primary LA maintained school

- She has a reputation for being able to deal with challenging behaviour, and so works closely with children displaying problem behaviours.
- There was an occasion where the school was arguing that a SEN school would be better suited to the needs of a pupil. The parents did not want their child to go to an SEN school and she agreed that the child did not need SEN provision.
- She advised the parents to fight the schools decision - “I believed that this pupil didn’t need to leave... I have a good relationship with the parents, so I told them that he is entitled to stay in this school and to ‘fight back’... I said to them, ‘this is an off the record conversation if you go to the headteacher and tell them I’ve said it, I will deny it...”



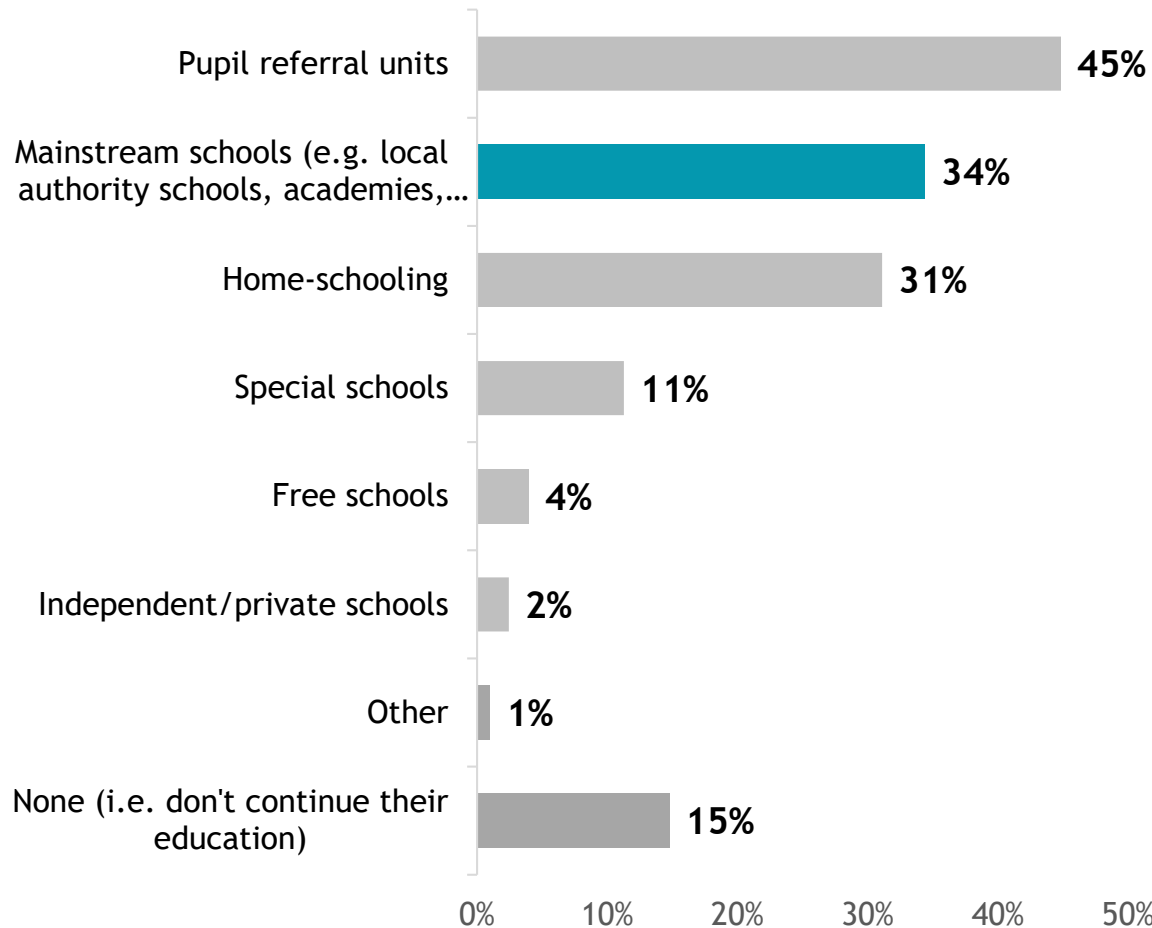
## School transfers in place of exclusions

### Assistant Headteacher, secondary free school

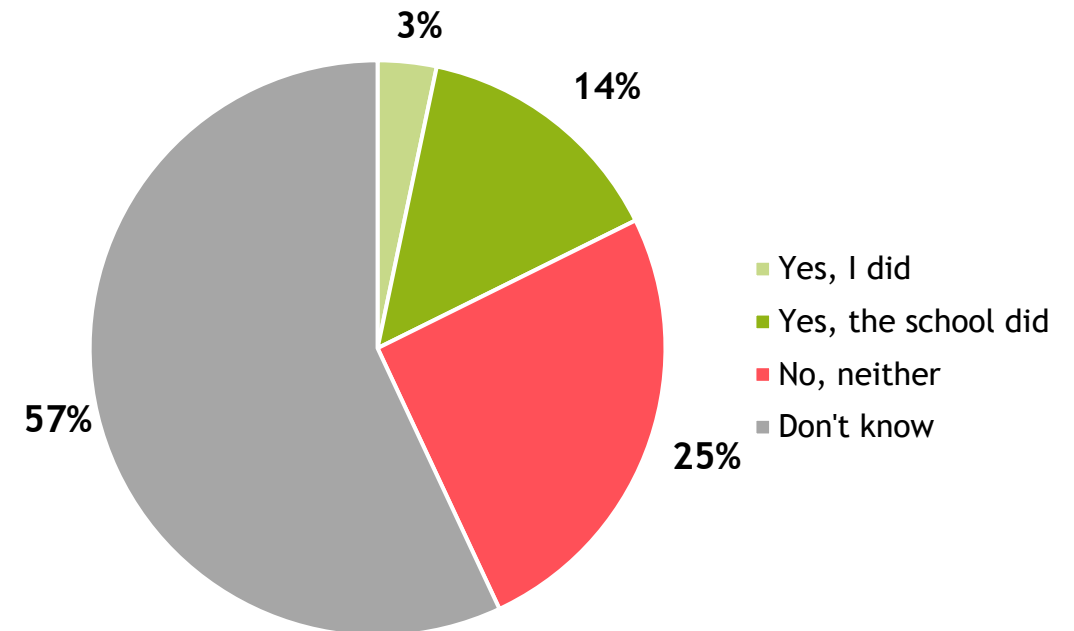
- He has experience off off-rolling low achieving pupils ahead of the GCSE results at a previous school - “Effectively, when you have students that are likely to underachieve and to find a way to get them off the school roll so they do not appear on their results. There are ways of doing that that will get you in trouble but there are also ways of doing it that will not.”
- In his new school, he can identify pupils who have been transferred but when the school reports come through it’s clear that they should have been excluded.
- He is aware of some schools who will accept students onto their roll for a fee.

# Only a third thought off-rolled pupils went on to other mainstream schools, and only a fifth of those with experience said there was any follow-up

Q10. And what kind of education do you think off-rolled pupils end up in?



Q23. Did you or the school follow up with either the parent or the pupil once they had left the school?

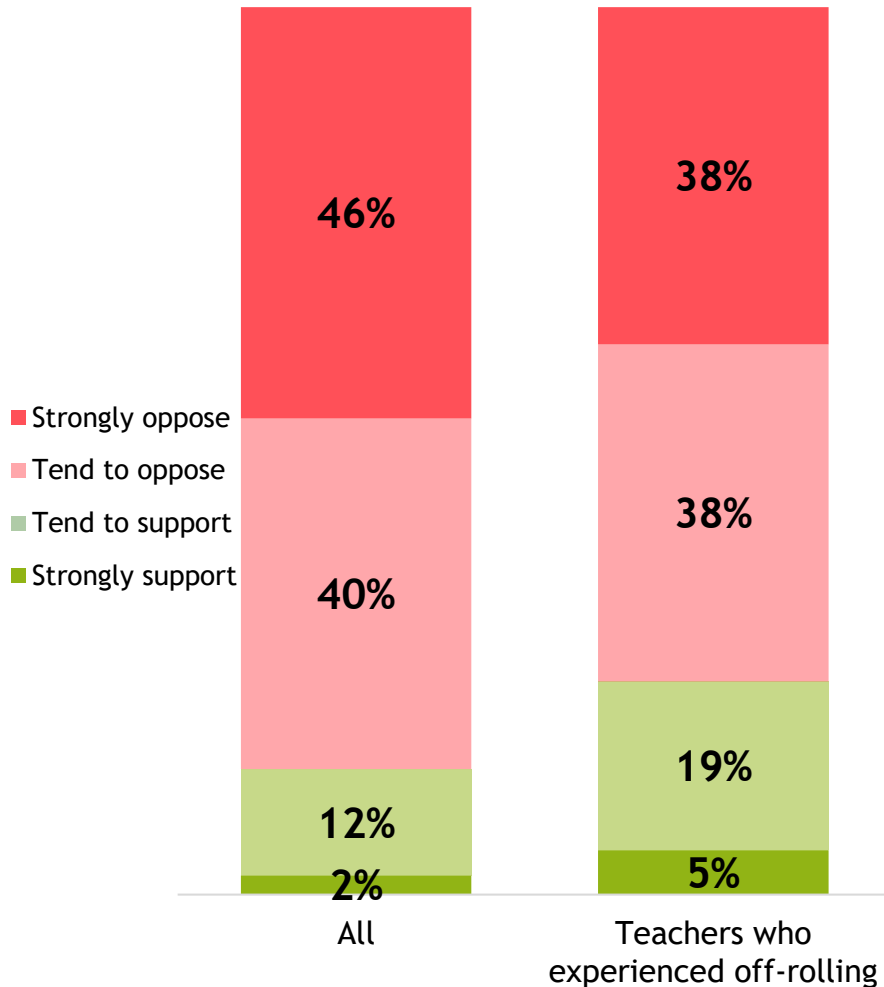


“Once they have left, they are not the school’s responsibility. It’s only through more informal conversation with pupils, to ask them if they still see so and so who used to go here?”  
**Department Deputy Head, secondary academy**

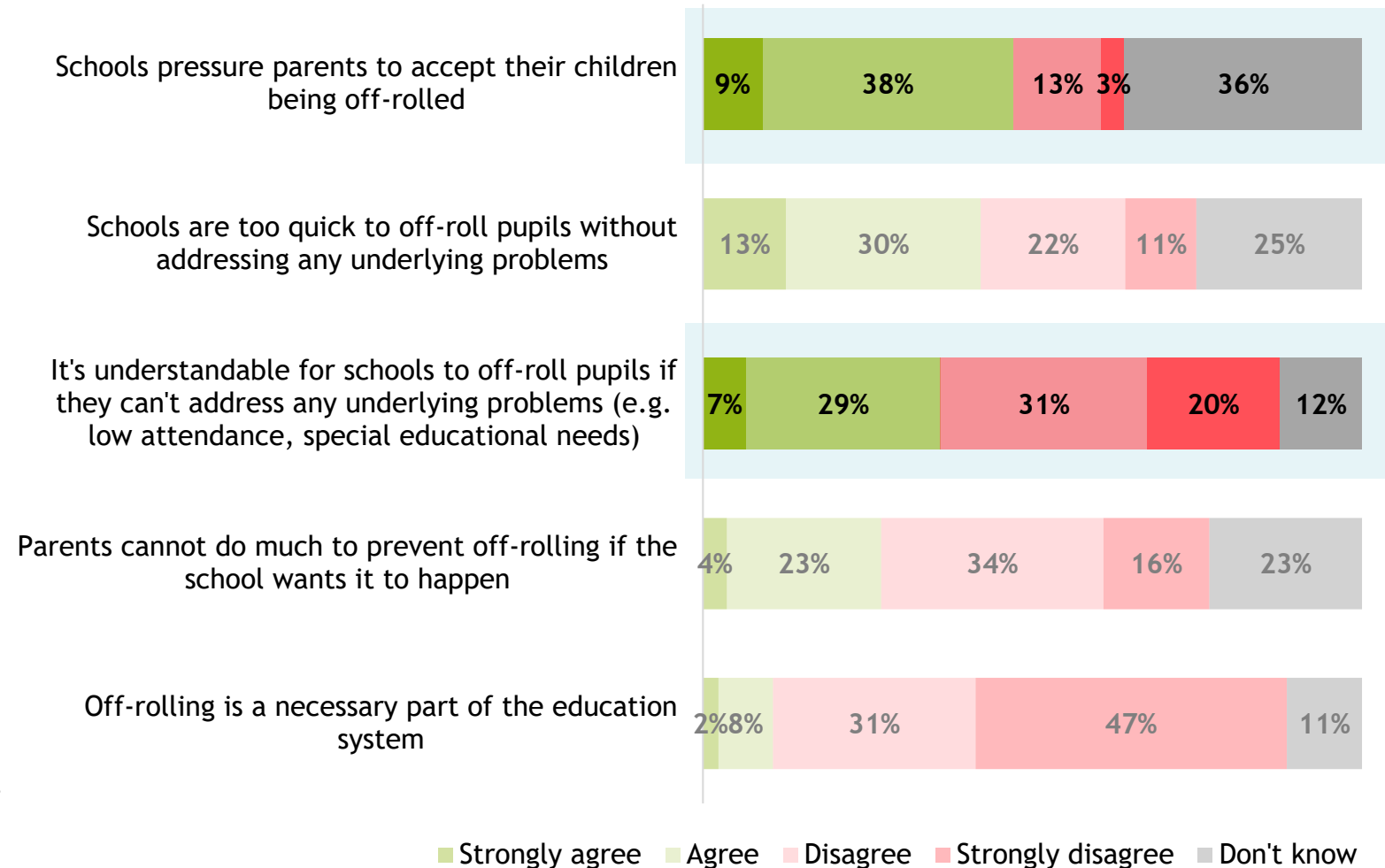
# — Support around off-rolling

# Most teachers oppose off-rolling, but some think it's understandable when there are underlying issues at play

Q13. Do you support or oppose schools being able to off-roll pupils?



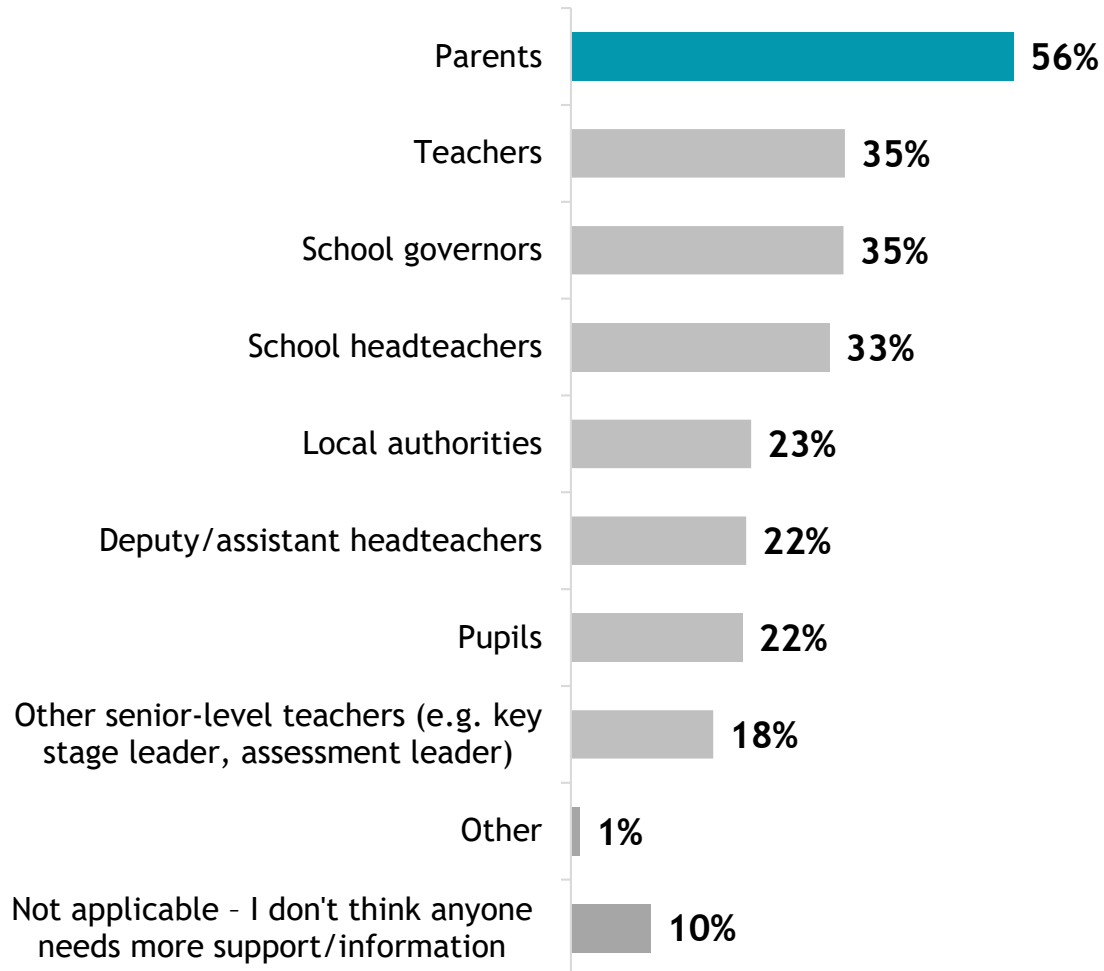
Q14. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?





# Teachers particularly wanted more support for parents around off-rolling, but also more support for schools to address the underlying issues linked to off-rolling

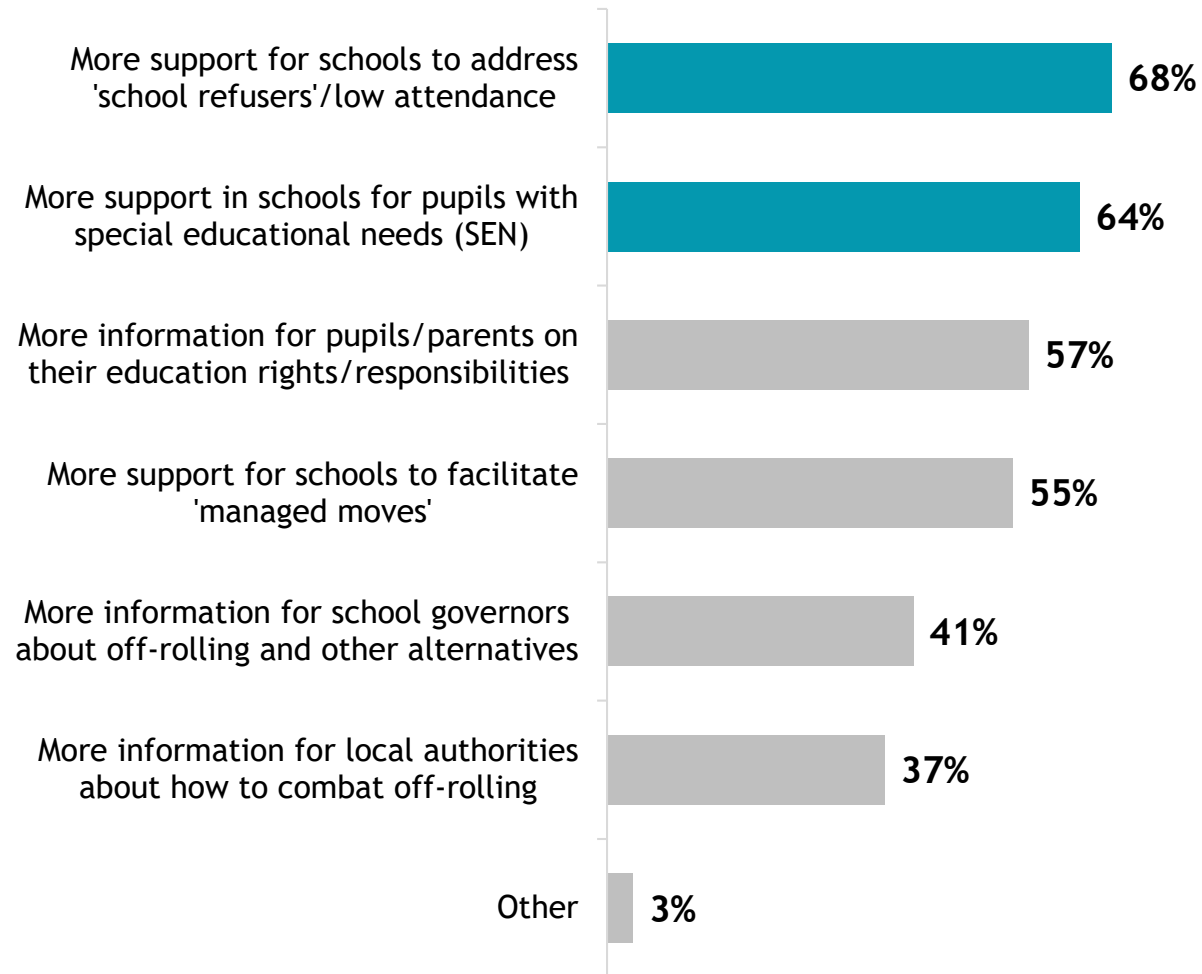
Q26. Who, if anyone, do you think needs more support and information around off-rolling?



- Teachers would like parents to be able to access resources that would explain their rights and outline their options in a clear and easy-to-understand way.
- Additional support should be provided to EAL parents to help comprehend the materials that they receive.
- Teachers would feel reassured if they knew that those pupils/parents leaving the school would have access to on-going support - they do not want the child to 'fall through the gaps'.

“Sometimes the parents are not aware that by taking their children out of school it will have a huge impact on their life... They don't know what their rights are. They don't know that they can say, if you don't want my child then it's your responsibility to find another school where my child can go... Students with parents who speak another language, I don't think that they are given enough support to understand letters. I know that they can ask for interpreters, but I don't think that they know that.”  
**Department Deputy Head, secondary academy**

# But they also thought schools needed more support to address SEN and other behaviours linked to off-rolling



- During the telephone interviews, some education professionals detailed how they had invested in interventions with pupils with underlying issues but could not see a solution.
  - **SEN:** One Deputy Headteacher (in a 'struggling' primary school) stated that they had hired two members of staff to support a SEN pupil with very complex needs. There had been a delay in getting funding for the pupil through an Educational Healthcare Plan, which meant that the staff were being funded for directly from the school's already limited budget.
  - **Poor attendance:** One fulfilling an attendance role discussed challenges with encouraging school refusers to partake in education. According to the law, the pupil has to be absent for more than 20 days and the school must not know the location of the child. However, because they knew the address of the pupil in question they were unable to take them off their books and so this pupil continued to affect its data.

# — Appendix

# Methodology

- This report presents findings from a study commissioned by Ofsted to understand the extent of off-rolling in English schools.
- There were two stages to the project:
  1. **Depth telephone interviews** with teachers and members of SLT.
  2. Representative **online survey** of teachers from primary and secondary schools across England.
- The objective of the research is to explore the triggers and barriers to off-rolling pupils in English schools, including teacher's perceptions of off-rolling.
- The findings of this research will be used by Ofsted to understand and illustrate the extent of off-rolling in English schools, enabling them to better address the key issues through policy and other work.

# Sample profile

## Qualitative

- 14 telephone interviews were conducted with members of SLT and teaching professionals from across England.
- All had direct experience of off-rolling (either through teaching the pupils who have been taken off the schools' roll or by being involved in decisions around off rolling).
- Professionals fulfilling a range of roles, from a range of school types, were included in the interviews:

11 interviews were completed with teaching professionals from secondary schools  
3 interviews were completed with teaching professionals from primary schools

### Range of roles:

- 1 x Headteacher
- 4 x Deputy/Assistant Headteachers
- 2 x Head of Department
- 1 x Head of Year
- 1 x Head of Key Stage
- 5 x Teachers

### Range of school type:

- 3 x LA maintained schools
- 1 x SEN school
- 5 x Academies
- 1 x Free school
- 2 x Grammar schools
- 2 x Independent schools

# Sample profile

## Quantitative

- **1,018** teaching professionals from primary and secondary schools across England took part in an online survey.
- The fieldwork took place between 21 February and 7 March 2019.
- The sample was weighted to be representative of the teaching population of England by age, gender, region, phase and school type.

Age	Unweighted base	Weighted base
Under 45	538	684
45 and over	480	334

Gender	Unweighted base	Weighted base
Male	339	265
Female	679	753

Phase	Unweighted base	Weighted base
Primary	373	536
Secondary	565	436
All through	80	46

Region	Unweighted base	Weighted base
North East	48	92
North West	150	107
Yorkshire and the Humber	97	107
East Midlands	82	143
West Midlands	114	154
East of England	112	50
London	144	101
South East	178	143
South West	93	123

School type	Unweighted base	Weighted base
Local authority maintained school	409	445
Academy	407	425
Grammar school	29	20
Independent/private	137	102
Special school	18	12
Pupil referral unit	5	1
Free school	13	13



# Exploring the issue of off-rolling

Jane Rowe (Senior Research Executive, Quantitative): [Jane.Rowe@YouGov.com](mailto:Jane.Rowe@YouGov.com)

Ian Neale (Research Director, Quantitative): [Ian.Neale@YouGov.com](mailto:Ian.Neale@YouGov.com)

Lorien Perryfrost (Research Manager, Qualitative): [Lorien.Perryfrost@YouGov.com](mailto:Lorien.Perryfrost@YouGov.com)

