NASUWT THE TEACHERS' UNION

TACKLING THE FAR RIGHT, RACISM AND HATE IN UK SCHOOLS

NASUWT REPORT

Far-right extremism, racism and hate are increasingly present in UK schools, reaching young people through online culture, social media and wider political discourse.

Through joint work with the German education union, GEW, shared challenges and approaches have been identified across borders.

Teachers play a vital role in challenging harm; however, in the current context they are having to do so more frequently, while also managing safeguarding, workload and external expectations. They must therefore be supported and backed collectively to uphold equality and democratic values and keep schools safe, inclusive and democratic.

Foreword

NASUWT is first and foremost a trade union representing teachers across the UK. The majority of our members are women, and they come from diverse racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. Our members include teachers who are black and white, of many faiths and none, and LGBTI. Our strength as a union lies in diversity and in the solidarity that binds teachers together.

Anything that seeks to divide teachers weakens that solidarity. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of hate are therefore not abstract social issues for NASUWT. They are direct threats to our members, to the workplaces in which they teach, and to the values that underpin public education. The growth of far-right narratives and movements is particularly dangerous because these ideologies thrive on division and seek to undermine equality, democracy and collective action.

NASUWT has increasingly drawn attention to the ways in which racism, misogyny and extremist narratives are shaping the environment in which teachers work. Teachers are encountering the consequences of social division, online misinformation (erroneous information created by mistake), disinformation (erroneous information intentionally created and spread), malinformation (correct information deliberately used out of context or manipulated to cause harm) and hate in classrooms, in pupil attitudes and behaviour, and increasingly in the challenges directed at schools by parents and external actors.

This report sets out guidance to support teachers in responding to these pressures. It explores how harmful narratives appear in schools, how they can be recognised and challenged, and what schools and the wider education system must do to ensure that teachers are supported in this work. However, school-level responses can only go so far. Schools are part of society, and if far-right ideas continue to grow beyond the school gates, that will inevitably be reflected in school life. Teachers therefore need not only clear policies and leadership support, but also the collective strength of their union.

NASUWT will continue to stand with teachers in this work, defending equality, democratic values and the right of every teacher and pupil to learn and work in a safe and inclusive environment.

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This project was supported by:

Introduction

Schools in the UK are not only places of learning; they are also public institutions with a responsibility to safeguard children and young people, promote equality and prepare pupils for participation in democratic life. In recent years, this aspect of their role has become more prominent. Teachers are increasingly called upon to respond to social division, political polarisation and online disinformation and misinformation, while continuing to meet high expectations around pupil attainment, behaviour, safeguarding and wellbeing.[1]



The challenges facing UK schools are not unique. Across Europe, education systems are experiencing the growing impact of far-right extremism, racism, misogyny and hostility to democratic values. Recognising this shared challenge, NASUWT undertook joint work with the German education trade union Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW). Through exchange visits, professional dialogue and engagement with experts, teachers and union representatives from England and Germany explored how far-right ideas manifest in schools and how education workers can respond safely and effectively.

The collaboration highlighted clear commonalities. Teachers in both countries described the increasing presence of discriminatory language, extremist narratives and online radicalisation among young people, alongside the emotional and professional toll of managing these issues in already pressurised working environments.

1 Public First and Pears Foundation (2025), *Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools*. Research for the Commission highlights the growing presence of misinformation and conspiracy theories in young people's online environments and the increasing expectation that teachers address these issues in classroom discussion. The Commission noted in its launch report that teachers felt that responding to misinformation and conspiracy narratives has become part of their professional responsibilities. The research focused on schools in England only.

The exchange reinforced the value of trade union solidarity and shared learning in responding to challenges that cross national borders, particularly in the digital age.

This report emerges directly from that joint work. While grounded in the UK legal and policy context, it recognises that far-right ideas circulate transnationally, especially online, and reach young people in similar ways across different education systems. The NASUWT-GEW partnership underlined the importance of equipping teachers with context-specific guidance while recognising that the underlying challenge is global.

Alongside this international collaboration, NASUWT is also undertaking work across the nations and regions of the UK that reflects different policy, funding and legislative contexts. In Scotland, this includes a jointly funded project with Time for Inclusive Education (TIE), supported by the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC). This work focuses on tackling hate, discrimination and the influence of far-right narratives through education-led, preventative approaches rooted in equality and human rights. Learning from this project reinforces the importance of partnership working with specialist organisations and demonstrates how devolved approaches can strengthen the Union's wider UK response.

For NASUWT, addressing far-right extremism, racism and hate in schools is inseparable from wider campaigning priorities. Years of underfunding, rising workload, the erosion of youth services and widening inequality have created conditions in which fear, resentment and scapegoating can take hold.[2] Teachers are expected to manage the consequences of these pressures, while also facing rising levels of abuse, harassment and ideologically motivated challenges from pupils, parents and external actors.

This work is underpinned by policy agreed at NASUWT Annual Conference. It builds on the 2022 Conference motion on misogyny, which recognised the growing impact of far-right and online narratives in shaping hostile attitudes towards women and girls, and the need for education-led responses. It is also informed by the 2023 Conference motion 'Educating Refugee and Asylum Seeker Children', which highlighted the harmful impact of racist and xenophobic narratives on children, families and school communities.

2 The Equality Trust (2024), *Briefing: The Link Between Inequality and the Far Right*. The briefing summarises research showing that rising income inequality is associated with increased support for far-right parties, partly through its impact on economic insecurity, distrust in institutions and social fragmentation.

These motions provide a clear policy foundation for this work and will continue to inform further union action and campaigning.

NASUWT research consistently shows that teachers are experiencing increased hostility and discriminatory abuse in schools, including behaviour linked to misogyny, racism and far-right influence.[3] Many report uncertainty about how far they are supported when interventions risk complaints or public scrutiny. This report seeks to address that uncertainty by grounding teachers' actions firmly in law, professional standards and union policy, and by affirming that they should not be left isolated for doing what their role requires.

The report does not position teachers as counter-extremism specialists, nor does it prescribe rigid responses. It recognises that teachers already navigate these issues daily and aims to strengthen confidence by situating that work within a collective framework of safeguarding, democratic education and trade union support.

Crucially, the report rejects the notion that schools can remain neutral in the face of racism, misogyny and hate.

The joint work with GEW reinforced the point that silence or avoidance does not protect pupils or staff. It showed that, on the contrary, they risk normalising harm and leaving those most affected isolated and unsafe. Challenging discrimination and extremism is not political activism; it is a professional responsibility.

3 NASUWT (2025), *Behaviour in Schools Survey*. Findings from a survey of over 5,800 teachers reported high levels of disruptive and abusive behaviour in schools, including verbal threats towards teachers and incidents of racist and homophobic abuse from pupils. The report highlights growing concern among teachers about the impact of online culture and wider societal influences on pupil behaviour: https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/news/campaigns/better-deal-on-behaviour.html

Current challenges: Far-right extremism, racism and hate in UK schools

Teachers in the UK are increasingly encountering far-right extremism, racism and hate in ways that are informal, fragmented and difficult to identify.[4] Rather than appearing through clearly defined groups or overt symbols, harmful ideas often surface through language, humour, online behaviour and classroom interaction. This makes them harder to challenge and increases the risk of discriminatory behaviour being dismissed as trivial, accidental or, simply, provocative.



One of the most significant developments in recent years has been the normalisation of discriminatory language. Teachers report racist, sexist and homophobic remarks being framed as jokes, irony or personal opinion. Language drawn from social media, gaming culture and online commentary is repeated in classrooms without recognition of its origins or impact. In some cases, pupils appear unaware of the harm caused; in others, behaviour is used deliberately to test boundaries or assert dominance over peers.

Misogyny has become a particularly pressing concern. NASUWT evidence and wider research indicates that hostility towards women and girls is increasingly visible among some boys and young men, often shaped by online influencers who promote rigid gender roles and rejection of equality.[5]

4 Institute of Education, University College London (2021), *Addressing Extremism Through the Classroom: Final Report*. The study found that more than half of teachers surveyed had heard pupils express far-right extremist views in the classroom, while around three-quarters had encountered misogynistic or Islamophobic views.

5 BBC News (2025), *Influencers fuelling misogyny in schools, teachers say*. Reporting based on evidence raised at NASUWT Annual Conference highlights teachers' concerns about increasing misogynistic attitudes among pupils linked to online influencers and social media culture. NASUWT Representatives and members described instances of sexist language, challenges to female authority and wider behavioural issues affecting girls and female teachers in schools.

This misogyny frequently overlaps with racism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism, creating a wider culture of exclusion that affects learning environments and pupil wellbeing.

Racism and xenophobia continue to affect many schools. Pupils may repeat narratives about migration, asylum or national identity that reflect wider political discourse rather than lived experience. Antisemitism and Islamophobia are often expressed through insinuation or conspiracy-based language rather than overt slurs, making them more difficult to challenge and easier to deny. These forms of prejudice have a significant impact on pupils who are directly affected, undermining their sense of safety and belonging. They also create a broader harm to all pupils by creating a hostile learning environment within the school, to the detriment of all.

Ableism should also be recognised as a key feature of contemporary far-right and extremist narratives. Narratives that devalue disabled people, deny the legitimacy of reasonable adjustments, or frame inclusion as unfair advantage are increasingly normalised online and repeated in school settings. Online spaces often promote mockery of disability, hostility towards inclusive practice, or the dismissal of disabled people's rights. This language may not always appear overtly political, but its impact is exclusionary and harmful.

Teachers are also navigating a rise in conspiracy thinking among young people, particularly linked to online content that promotes distrust of institutions, expertise and democratic processes.[6] This can manifest as resistance to curriculum content (for example, climate science or equality issues), hostility towards safeguarding discussions, or rejection of factual information. Challenging disinformation and misinformation in this context is often complicated by accusations of bias or censorship.

Parental and external pressure has intensified these challenges. NASUWT members report an increase in complaints that challenge inclusive teaching, safeguarding practice or discussions of discrimination, often framed as concerns about political neutrality.

For individual teachers, these situations can be intimidating, particularly where complaints escalate online or are supported by organised external groups.

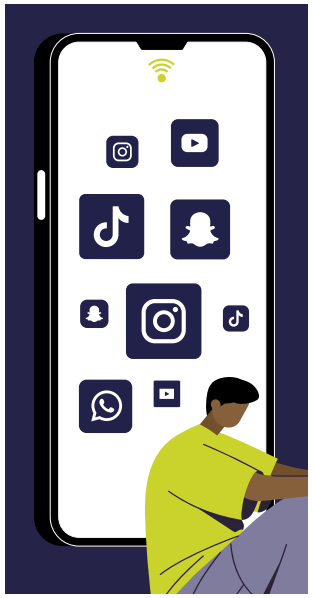
6 Public First and Pears Foundation (2025), *Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools*. The report highlights growing concern among teachers about the spread of conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation among young people, and the ways these ideas increasingly manifest in schools and classroom discussion.

School leaders are operating under significant constraints, including funding pressures, staff shortages and accountability demands. Where leadership support is clear and consistent, teachers feel more confident to intervene early. Where responses are risk-averse or inconsistent, harmful behaviour is more likely to persist. NASUWT has been clear that addressing extremism and hate cannot depend on individual teacher confidence alone.

The joint work with GEW reinforced that these challenges are not confined to particular communities or settings. Teachers in both England and Germany described similar pressures, particularly the role of online culture in shaping pupil attitudes and the emotional toll of managing repeated low-level incidents alongside heavy workloads.

This context underlines the need for clear frameworks, leadership backing and union support. Without these, teachers are left navigating complex and sometimes hostile situations with insufficient protection. Understanding the nature of these challenges is essential to developing responses that are proportionate, effective and supportive of both pupils and staff.

How young people are reached by far-right and extremist movements in the UK



Far-right and extremist ideas increasingly reach young people through everyday online environments rather than through direct contact with organised groups. Social media platforms, video-sharing sites and gaming communities are now the primary routes through which harmful narratives circulate.[7] These spaces are not inherently negative, but they are shaped by algorithms that prioritise engagement, often amplifying content that provokes anger, fear or resentment.

Young people may encounter extremist ideas gradually, through content framed as humour, lifestyle advice or 'common sense' commentary. This framing allows harmful views to circulate without being immediately recognised as extremist. Over time, repeated exposure can normalise discriminatory language and foster suspicion towards institutions, including schools and teachers.

Misogyny often functions as an entry point into broader extremist worldviews. Online figures who promote hostility to women and girls frequently position themselves as role models, offering simple explanations for complex personal and social challenges. It can be difficult to navigate the way misogynistic influencers often present themselves, with the darker side of their content frequently overlooked by followers as positive themes being placed front and centre.

Many package their message through the image of a mentor, combining advice on men's health, fitness, wealth, confidence and mental wellbeing with more harmful attitudes.

7 HOPE not hate (2024). *Plugged in but disconnected: Young People and Hateful Attitudes.* Survey research found that over half of young people reported encountering hateful content online, highlighting the role of social media and digital platforms in exposing young people to extremist narratives and discriminatory ideas.

This polished persona can seem credible and appealing, particularly to young men seeking guidance. Beneath the surface, some act as gatekeepers to more extreme ideologies, gradually introducing resentment towards women through a blend of self-help and toxic messaging. When challenged, young people will often downplay the darker side and champion the other messaging. For some young men, these narratives provide a sense of identity and belonging, which can later intersect with racism, homophobia or rejection of democratic values.

Some far-right actors, especially in online spaces, tailor content for younger audiences by avoiding explicit references to fascism or Nazism. This content may include conspiracy theories, selective or misleading information, and claims of censorship or victimhood. In some instances, these same actors also characterise efforts to challenge such content as biased or unfair. This can make discussions about misinformation more sensitive or contested in the classroom.

Gaming environments and online group chats present particular challenges. Harmful language can become normalised in these spaces and then repeated in school without always recognising its impact. Online harassment, or the sharing of extremist content outside school, often spills into classroom relationships, affecting behaviour and wellbeing.

Offline influences also matter. Peer dynamics, family attitudes and local community narratives can reinforce or challenge what young people encounter online. Some pupils adopt extremist language to gain status, provoke reactions or signal belonging, rather than through ideological commitment. Early intervention is therefore critical. NASUWT's position is that educational responses are often most effective at this stage, to prevent escalation and reduce harm.

The joint work between NASUWT and GEW highlighted striking similarities in how young people in different countries encounter far-right ideas, particularly online. Teachers in both England and Germany identified the same platforms, narrative strategies and challenges, reinforcing the need for responses grounded in an understanding of digital culture.

Recognising how far-right and extremist ideas reach young people does not excuse harmful behaviour. Rather, it provides the basis for informed, proportionate responses that safeguard pupils, support staff and uphold democratic values. The next section considers how these realities intersect with teachers' legal positions and professional responsibilities in the UK.

Do teachers have to be politically neutral?

The question of political neutrality is a significant source of anxiety for teachers, particularly where professional judgement is exercised in areas that intersect with public debate. Clarifying what it means to be 'politically neutral' is essential to safeguarding both pupils and teachers.

What 'political impartiality' is

In England, Department for Education (DfE) guidance is clear that 'political impartiality' should be the general principle governing how political issues are addressed in schools.[8] This includes avoiding the promotion of partisan political views and ensuring that, where political issues are taught, they are presented in a balanced and age-appropriate way. Making this explicit provides teachers with both protection and clear boundaries. Acting within official guidance helps ensure that interventions to challenge racism, misogyny or hate are defensible, consistent and professionally grounded.

In Wales, similar expectations are underpinned by statutory duties set out in the Education Act 1996, which require schools to avoid promoting partisan political views and to present balanced perspectives where political issues are taught. These duties sit alongside the Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises developing learners as ethical, informed citizens capable of engaging critically with contemporary issues. Together, this framework supports active discussion of political and social topics, while reinforcing the importance of balance and professional judgement.[9] The Education Workforce Council *Code of Professional Conduct and Practice* also directs the behaviour of teachers and other registrants in Wales on this issue.[10] The Code requires all registrants to uphold the standards set within – which includes professional integrity and responsibility, and acting in ways that maintain public trust. It also reinforces that decisions around classroom teaching must be ethical and honest.

In Scotland, there is no single national guidance equivalent to England's approach to political impartiality. Instead, expectations are embedded within the General Teaching Council for Scotland Professional Standards, which emphasise integrity, social justice, critical thinking and professional judgement.

8 Department for Education (2022), *Political impartiality in schools.*
9 Welsh Government (2021), *Teaching citizenship and politics education gives in-depth guidance on political impartiality for teachers in Wales.*
10 Wales Education Workforce Council (2025), *Code of Professional Conduct and Practice for Education Workforce Council registrants.*

Within this framework, teachers are expected to support learners to engage with complex and potentially controversial issues in a balanced and evidence-informed way, while avoiding the promotion of partisan views. This reflects a values-led approach that places greater emphasis on professional responsibility and judgement.

In Northern Ireland, expectations relating to political impartiality are shaped by a combination of statutory duties and curriculum aims. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 places a duty on schools to promote good relations and mutual understanding, reflecting the region's specific historical and social context. The Northern Ireland Curriculum further emphasises education for citizenship, including respect for diversity, critical thinking and engagement with social and political issues. Within this framework, teachers are expected to approach potentially sensitive or contested topics in a balanced and inclusive way, exercising professional judgement while avoiding the promotion of partisan views.

Teachers are entitled to hold and express personal political views as private individuals. However, within their professional role, the expectation set out in legislation and DfE guidance is one of political impartiality. This means that teachers should avoid expressing personal partisan views to pupils or presenting such views as fact. This caution is not a restriction on professional judgement but a safeguard, ensuring that teachers can challenge harmful views and uphold equality without exposing themselves to unnecessary professional or regulatory risk.

What 'political impartiality' is not

Teachers in the UK are not required to be neutral about values, equality or human rights. Teachers have clear legal and professional duties that require them to challenge discrimination and safeguard pupils. Challenging racism, misogyny and extremism is not political activism; it is a professional responsibility grounded in law, policy and educational purpose.

Schools have safeguarding responsibilities that include protecting pupils from being drawn into extremism. Challenging extremist narratives and supporting critical thinking are part of this role when done proportionately and without discrimination. NASUWT rejects the argument that discriminatory or extremist views must be tolerated in the name of free speech.

Freedom of expression does not extend to harassment, intimidation or the denial of others' rights. Schools are entitled to set boundaries that protect pupils and staff from harm. NASUWT is clear that political impartiality must never be used as a justification for failing to safeguard pupils or address discrimination.

Legal duties

Schools operate within a set of overlapping legal and regulatory duties. Under the Equality Act 2010, which applies in England, Scotland and Wales, schools must prevent harassment and discrimination, and this includes addressing racist, sexist or homophobic language in the learning environment.[11] In addition, schools in England have duties under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) to promote equality and tackle discrimination. They must give due regard to statutory requirements relating to political impartiality and promote fundamental British values. They also have duties under the Prevent framework, which applies to multiple forms of extremism, including far-right, Islamist and left-wing extremism. Schools are expected to discharge these duties within the context of their broader safeguarding responsibilities.'.[12] In Northern Ireland, equality and human rights protections are underpinned by Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, alongside commitments arising from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

These frameworks place positive duties on public bodies, including schools, to promote equality of opportunity and good relations. As in the rest of the UK, this means that challenging racism, sectarianism, misogyny and hate is not a matter of political opinion but a legal and professional responsibility.[13] Schools in England are also expected to promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect.[14] These cannot be upheld if discriminatory or anti-democratic ideas go unchallenged. Neutrality does not mean treating all views as equally valid when rights and dignity are at stake. The Teachers' Standards in England provide a further professional framework governing teachers' conduct.[15]

These standards require teachers to uphold public trust in the profession and to promote fundamental British values. In Scotland, the Professional Standards are clear in requiring teachers to understand and challenge discrimination in all its forms.[16]

11 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance
12 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance
13 https://www.equalityni.org/S75duties
14 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-fundamental-british-values-through-smsc
15 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards
16 https://www.gtcs.org.uk/knowledge-base/categories/professional-standards

Challenging racism, misogyny and hate is consistent with these obligations and should be understood as integral to professional practice rather than an optional or risky activity. To minimise legal and regulatory risk, schools in England are encouraged by the DfE to make use of government-endorsed resources, including those provided through the Educate Against Hate website.[17] In Scotland, professional learning resources addressing online extremism and harmful narratives are provided through initiatives such as the Digital Discourse Initiative developed with TIE.[18] Schools often rely on these resources because they are explicitly aligned with statutory expectations and provide a degree of institutional protection when addressing sensitive or contested issues.

NASUWT recognises that frameworks such as Prevent and fundamental British values are contested and that teachers' experiences of their implementation vary significantly. Some school communities have experienced these frameworks as supportive, while others have raised concerns about trust, disproportionate impact or misapplication. Acknowledging this complexity is important.

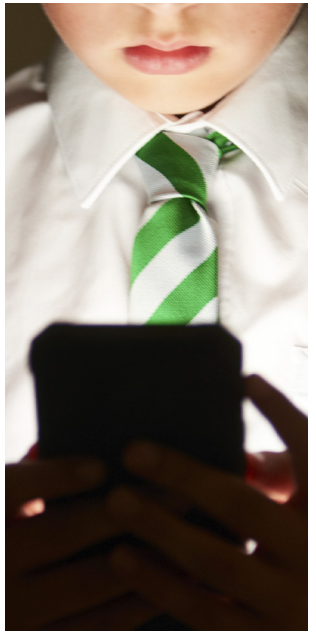
NASUWT recognises the importance of ensuring that Prevent-related interventions are grounded in evidence of harm, vulnerability or safeguarding risk, rather than political ideology alone. This principle is essential to protecting pupils and maintaining professional integrity and trust.However, teachers are required to navigate these frameworks professionally, proportionately and in line with safeguarding principles, while remaining alert to their potential impact on pupils and communities.

This uncertainty is not unique to the UK. The joint work between NASUWT and GEW demonstrated that confusion about neutrality occurs in schools in Germany as well. Teachers in both countries described being accused of bias simply for upholding equality or teaching about human rights. In both contexts, trade union guidance and leadership support were identified as critical in enabling teachers to act with confidence.

GEW is currently running a campaign, 'School takes a stand', saying 'Teachers must not be neutral' as they have a professional and ethical responsibility to take a stand for democratic principles and human rights in the classroom. Because neutrality is not impartiality – it becomes passive acceptance, even complicity, in the face of anti-democratic positions. The campaign aims to raise awareness, strengthen teachers' agency, and provide concrete support when they come under pressure.[19]

17 https://www.educateagainsthate.com/
18 https://tie.scot/professional-learning/teachers/digital-discourse-initiative-cpd/
19 To find out more about the GEW campaign, see www.gew.de/themen/schule-zeigt-haltung (in German)

Recognising far-right symbols, narratives and behaviours in schools



Recognising far-right extremism and hate in contemporary school settings is increasingly complex. Unlike in earlier periods, harmful ideas rarely present themselves through overt symbols or formal organisational affiliation. Instead, they surface through everyday language, attitudes and online behaviour, often in ways that are ambiguous or easily dismissed.[20] This makes early intervention more challenging and increases the risk of discriminatory or extremist behaviour becoming normalised.

In many UK schools, far-right influence surfaces through racist, sexist or homophobic remarks that are framed as humour, irony or personal opinion. Teachers report that pupils often draw on language encountered through social media, gaming platforms or online commentary, without acknowledging its origins or impact. While some pupils lack awareness of the harm caused, others use such language deliberately to provoke or test boundaries.

Coded language and memes further complicate recognition. Online far-right communities frequently adapt their language to avoid detection, using phrases or imagery that appear innocuous to outsiders.[21] Given the speed at which online culture evolves, NASUWT does not expect teachers to identify every symbol or reference. Instead, the focus should be on the effect of behaviour on others and on the learning environment.

As already noted, misogyny remains a key indicator of wider extremist influence. Hostility towards women and girls, often shaped by online influencers, is reported across many schools and frequently intersects with racism, homophobia and transphobia.

20 Jerome, L. et al. (2021), *Addressing extremism through the classroom: final report*, Institute of Education, University College London (2021). The study found that many teachers report encountering extremist views expressed informally through classroom discussion and everyday pupil interaction rather than through organised groups or overt symbols.

21 HOPE not hate (2024), *Plugged in but disconnected: Young People and Hateful Attitudes*. The report highlights how online communities circulate extremist narratives through memes, coded language and humour that can make hateful ideas appear normalised or difficult to recognise.

Addressing misogyny early is critical, both to protect those affected and to prevent escalation into broader extremist narratives. Racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia may be expressed indirectly, through stereotypes or conspiracy-based claims rather than explicit slurs.

These forms of prejudice can be particularly damaging because they are easier to deny and harder to challenge. Teachers need clarity and backing to address such behaviour consistently and confidently.

Online spaces linked to school life present additional challenges. Group chats, social media and gaming environments can be sites of harassment and the sharing of extremist content, with consequences that spill into classrooms and peer relationships. Schools therefore need clear expectations about behaviour that recognise the blurred boundary between online and offline life.

It is important to distinguish between curiosity, provocation and ideological commitment. Many pupils repeat language or ideas without fully understanding them. NASUWT's position is that this does not remove the need to intervene, but it does underline the importance of proportionate educational responses rather than assumptions about intent. Actively introducing preventative models, such as focusing on early intervention via curriculum, will also help mitigate against this.

Clear behaviour and safeguarding policies are essential in supporting recognition and response. When expectations are explicit and consistently applied, teachers are less likely to feel isolated or uncertain about intervening. Recognising far-right extremism in schools is not about labelling pupils; it's about identifying harm and acting early to protect pupils and staff.

Responding to incidents: principles and practice in schools



When far-right extremism, racism or hate occurs in a school setting, the response matters. How incidents are addressed sends a clear message about what behaviour is acceptable and whose safety is prioritised. For teachers, responding can be challenging, particularly where behaviour is ambiguous, emotionally charged or likely to lead to complaint.

NASUWT's position is that responses must be grounded in safeguarding, proportionality and consistency. Silence or avoidance risks normalising harm, while overreaction can escalate situations unnecessarily. Teachers should feel confident to challenge discriminatory language or behaviour calmly and clearly, setting boundaries that protect pupils and the learning environment. Immediate classroom responses often need to be brief and firm. Naming the behaviour and stating that it is unacceptable can prevent further harm without drawing additional attention to those affected. Follow-up discussion, where appropriate, can take place later in a more structured and supportive context.

Protecting those affected is essential. Pupils who experience racist, sexist or homophobic behaviour may feel unsafe or isolated if incidents are minimised. Schools should ensure that pastoral support is available and that concerns are taken seriously. NASUWT has consistently argued that safeguarding is undermined when discriminatory behaviour is treated as low-level disruption.

Recording and reporting incidents is a critical part of an effective response. Clear systems help schools identify patterns, assess risk and determine when escalation is needed.[22] They also protect staff by ensuring that decisions are transparent and supported. Teachers should not be discouraged from recording concerns, or made to feel that doing so creates unnecessary workload.

22 Working with education unions, including NASUWT, the Scottish Government has produced guidance around addressing racism and racist incidents in Schools in Scotland at https://www.gov.scot/publications/addressing-racism-racist-incidents-schools/ and https://www.gov.scot/publications/whole-school-approach-racism-racist-incidents/

Educational responses are often appropriate, particularly where pupils are exploring ideas without understanding their impact. Structured conversations and guided reflection can help challenge misinformation and encourage empathy. Where behaviour is repeated, targeted or severe, disciplinary action may be necessary and should be applied fairly and consistently.

Teachers should not be expected to manage serious or ongoing incidents alone. Escalation to senior leaders, safeguarding leads or specialist support is appropriate where risk increases.

The joint work with GEW reinforced the point that collective approaches, rather than individual action, are key to sustainable and effective responses.

Online incidents require particular attention. Harm that occurs outside school, including through group chats or social media, often affects school relationships and wellbeing. Clear policies and leadership support are essential in guiding responses and protecting staff from unreasonable expectations to monitor pupils' online activity.

Responding effectively to incidents requires time, confidence and institutional backing. Teachers who act in good faith to challenge racism, misogyny or extremism should be supported, not second-guessed. The next section considers how schools can support staff when dealing with parental challenge and external pressure.

Working with parents and managing external pressure

Teachers increasingly face challenges from parents and external actors when addressing far-right extremism, racism and hate in schools. Complaints and confrontations are often framed as concerns about political neutrality, parental rights or freedom of expression, but in practice they can reflect hostility to equality, inclusion or safeguarding work. For individual teachers, these situations can be intimidating and emotionally draining.

NASUWT has consistently raised concerns about the rise in vexatious or ideologically motivated complaints directed at education staff.[23] Teachers report feeling personally targeted when professional practice is questioned or misrepresented, particularly where complaints escalate through social media or attract attention from external groups. This pressure can have a chilling effect, discouraging staff from intervening even when harm is evident.

Schools have a responsibility to manage parental engagement in ways that protect staff. Clear communication about legal duties, curriculum requirements and safeguarding responsibilities helps establish boundaries and reduce individual exposure. Senior leaders should take responsibility for responding to complaints about policy or curriculum, rather than leaving classroom teachers to defend institutional decisions alone.

Governments and local authorities, as well as multi-academy trusts in England, also have a role in setting clear expectations, providing consistent guidance and ensuring that schools are supported in responding to contentious or high-profile issues. This includes backing schools where they are acting in line with legal duties and professional standards, and helping to ensure that staff are not left exposed to undue pressure. A whole-system approach helps ensure that teachers are supported to act confidently, consistently and in line with professional expectations.

Where concerns are raised in good faith, respectful dialogue can be constructive. Explaining the educational and legal basis for addressing discrimination and extremism can help de-escalate misunderstandings. However, NASUWT recognises that not all challenges are made in good faith. In cases involving harassment, intimidation or discriminatory language, firmer responses and formal procedures are necessary.

23 BBC News (2023), reporting on concerns raised by NASUWT Representatives and other teaching unions about rising hostility, hate incidents and community pressure affecting schools and teachers in Scotland.

Online abuse presents an additional risk. Teachers increasingly experience harassment or misrepresentation on social media following complaints or incidents. NASUWT has been clear that online abuse is a workplace safety issue and that employers have a duty to protect staff. Schools should have clear protocols for responding to online harassment and supporting affected staff.

The joint work with GEW highlighted similar experiences in Germany, where far-right networks have mobilised against schools and teachers. In both contexts, trade union support and collective responses were identified as critical in reducing isolation and protecting staff wellbeing.

Teachers should not attempt to manage hostile parental challenges alone. NASUWT advises members to seek union advice at an early stage where complaints involve discrimination, threats or sustained harassment. Managing external pressure is not simply about communication; it is about ensuring teachers are safe, supported and able to uphold their professional responsibilities without fear.

What schools and education systems need to do to tackle far-right extremism, racism and hate effectively

Tackling far-right extremism, racism and hate in schools cannot be achieved through isolated actions or individual resilience. It requires sustained, system-wide support that recognises both the complexity of the challenge and the pressures facing education staff. NASUWT has been clear that teachers cannot be expected to manage these issues without clear frameworks, adequate resources and institutional backing.

Leadership is central to this work. School leaders set the tone for how discrimination and extremism are addressed and whether staff feel confident to intervene. Where leadership support is explicit and consistent, teachers report greater confidence and earlier intervention. Where responses are risk-averse or focused on avoiding complaint, harmful behaviour is more likely to persist. Clear leadership backing is therefore essential.

Policies must be robust, explicit and well understood. Behaviour and safeguarding policies should clearly address racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, antisemitism and other forms of hate. Vague commitments to respect are insufficient. NASUWT has consistently argued that policies should be developed with staff input and reinforced through regular discussion and training.

Professional development is also critical. Teachers need access to professional learning and training that reflects current realities, including the role of online culture, contemporary forms of extremism and managing difficult conversations. Too often, this training is optional or inconsistent. NASUWT's wider campaigning on professional learning is directly relevant to building schools' capacity to respond effectively.

Workload and wellbeing cannot be separated from this issue. Challenging discrimination and supporting affected pupils requires time, emotional labour and reflective practice. Teachers who are overstretched or unsupported are less able to sustain this work. NASUWT's campaigns on workload reduction, mental health and retention are therefore integral to tackling extremism and hate in schools.

Access to specialist support remains uneven. Cuts to local authority services and youth provision have reduced early intervention capacity, leaving schools to manage complex issues alone. NASUWT continues to press for properly resourced safeguarding and support services so that schools are not isolated. The joint work with GEW reinforced the idea that these challenges are shared across education systems. Teachers in both England and Germany expressed frustration at being asked to address rising extremism without corresponding investment. International comparison highlighted the need for political commitment, not short-term initiatives.

Trade unions play a crucial role in this landscape. NASUWT provides advice, representation and a collective voice for teachers facing discrimination, abuse or intimidation. Through national campaigning and international collaboration, the Union works to ensure that teachers are supported to uphold equality and democratic values.

Addressing far-right extremism in schools requires more than individual courage; it demands leadership, resourcing, training and collective action. Without these, even the most committed staff will struggle to sustain effective responses.

Conclusion: collective responsibility, democratic education and the role of NASUWT

The presence of far-right extremism, racism and hate in schools reflects wider social, political and economic pressures that extend beyond the education system. Schools cannot resolve these forces alone, but they play a vital role in shaping how young people understand equality, democracy and respect. What happens in schools, therefore, has lasting consequences, not only for individual pupils, but for society as a whole.

Teachers are already undertaking this work every day. They challenge discriminatory language, support pupils who feel marginalised and address misinformation, often in difficult circumstances and under significant pressure. The challenge is not a lack of commitment, but a lack of consistent support. NASUWT has been clear that teachers must not be left isolated or exposed in fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

The joint work with GEW reinforced the point that these challenges are shared internationally. Teachers in England and Germany described similar experiences of far-right narratives entering classrooms through online culture, of being accused of political bias for upholding equality, and of managing emotional labour that is rarely recognised. This shared experience highlights the importance of trade union solidarity and collective learning.

A central message of this report is that neutrality must not be confused with silence. Upholding democratic values requires active challenge to racism, misogyny and hate. Teachers who do this are not engaging in political activism; they are acting in line with the law, professional standards and the purpose of education. Responsibility must be shared. School leaders must provide clear backing and consistent policies. Employers must ensure that safeguarding, training and wellbeing are properly resourced. The Government must recognise that tackling extremism in education requires sustained investment and policy support.

Trade unions have a critical role in this work. NASUWT provides protection, advice and a collective voice for teachers facing abuse or intimidation, and works nationally and internationally to challenge narratives that undermine public education. Through solidarity and campaigning, the Union supports teachers to uphold equality and democratic values. Schools remain one of the few spaces where young people can engage critically with difference and learn to live in a diverse society. Ensuring that these spaces are safe, inclusive and democratic requires collective effort. NASUWT will continue to stand with teachers in this work, defending their professionalism, wellbeing and right to act without fear.

Appendix: NASUWT-GEW joint learning project on responding to far-right and populist narratives in the classroom

This report is informed by a joint learning project undertaken by NASUWT and GEW in the federal state of Saxony, focused on understanding and responding to the growing influence of far-right and populist narratives within school environments. The project was developed in recognition that far-right extremism is a transnational challenge, with shared characteristics across countries, particularly in the ways online discourse and political rhetoric reach children and young people.



Members of the delegation accompanied by FES project manager James Hoctor

The project was established against a backdrop of rising concern in both the UK and Germany about the impact of far-right ideas on schools, pupils and teachers. Evidence from civil society organisations indicates that large numbers of young people are encountering hateful or extremist content online, with social media acting as a key route through which misogyny, conspiracy thinking and hostility towards democratic values are normalised. Teachers in both countries report that these influences are increasingly visible in classroom discussion, pupil behaviour and online interactions connected to school life.

The project was supported by experts from HOPE not hate (UK) and Kulturbüro Sachsen (Germany), who provided information and guidance to the delegates who attended the exchange, and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) who generously arranged translation and other provisions to enable the visits and discussions to happen so effectively.

This report has a companion piece developed by Kulturbüro Sachsen with the GEW for the German context and is available at https://kulturbuero-sachsen.de/broschuere-demokratie-schaffen-wir-handreichung-zum-umgang-mit-rechtsextremismus-an-schulen/ (in German: 'Democracy – Let's make it happen! Guidelines for dealing with right-wing extremism in schools')

The purpose of the joint project was threefold. First, it aimed to explore the political and social contexts in each country and how these shape the school environment. Second, it sought to understand how teachers experience and respond to far-right and populist narratives in their professional lives. Third, it examined how teacher trade unions can provide effective support, guidance and collective responses, both nationally and through international solidarity. Central to the project were reciprocal exchange visits involving practising teachers. In the first phase, five teachers from the West Midlands visited Leipzig and Dresden in the German state of Saxony. During this visit, the delegation spent time in primary and secondary schools, engaging with school leaders and staff about their approaches to inclusion, democracy education and responding to extremism. The programme also included expert presentations and a guided city tour of Dresden, examining the rise of the Pegida movement, widely recognised as a precursor to contemporary far-right mobilisation in Germany. The second phase involved a return visit by six teachers from Leipzig to the UK, where they visited schools in Birmingham and the Black Country.

These visits again included both primary and secondary settings, providing opportunities for in-depth discussion with teachers about safeguarding, inclusion and the challenges posed by social media. The programme was complemented by academic input, participation in a TUC course on tackling the far right, and engagement with local political representatives, reflecting the importance of linking school-level experience to wider policy and civic contexts.

A key outcome of the exchanges was the identification of shared challenges across both education systems. Teachers in Germany and England described the increasing presence of far-right and populist narratives in classroom spaces, often mediated through online culture rather than formal political affiliation. German colleagues highlighted strong initiatives such as the 'Schools without Racism' project, alongside frustration about limited external support and caution around teaching controversial issues. UK colleagues described a strong commitment to welcome and inclusion within schools, but significant concern about the scale and complexity of social media influence on pupils.

The project also reinforced the emotional and professional pressures faced by teachers. Participants in both countries spoke about the difficulty of challenging discriminatory or extremist views while managing workload, safeguarding responsibilities and the risk of parental or external challenge. These discussions underscored the importance of clear legal frameworks, leadership backing and trade union support in enabling teachers to act with confidence.

NASUWT is also contributing learning from the project to wider trade union initiatives, including work through the TUC in England and engagement at European level, while continuing to press for policy change that better supports teachers in responding to far-right extremism and hate in schools.