

The Difference



**IMPACT &
INSIGHTS
2023**

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The
Difference

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Cover image: A student in Alternative Provision working with Dami, a Difference Leader from our 2022 Cohort. All photos © The Difference. Design & layout: www.causeeffectdesign.co.uk

DIFFERENCE
IMPACT



re action



The Difference exists to change the story on school exclusion.

In 2017, Difference founder Kiran Gill published a groundbreaking report with think-tank IPPR. It revealed how England's most vulnerable children were disproportionately affected by exclusion from school, with potentially devastating effects on life outcomes.

Since then, over **400** school leaders have completed intensive leadership development through The Difference, learning about and implementing effective inclusion practice, and seeing incredible impact on young people.

One of these leaders is Yasmin, working in an Alternative Provision school and teaching science. Her students have been excluded from mainstream schools, putting them at real risk of falling out of education altogether. We asked some of Yasmin's students about the difference she has made.

"I have learnt more from Yasmin than I learnt in mainstream primary and secondary combined. I have learnt to not self-harm. I have learnt how to express myself."

Year 10 student

"Yasmin helped me understand Science more. It feels like the same work as mainstream but now I have a chance. I feel smart when Yasmin teaches."

Year 9 student



Post-pandemic – Back to Normal?

The Difference is not oblivious to the challenge ahead. The legacy of the pandemic, rising childhood poverty and increased pressure on mental health and social services, mean more children have been thrown into crisis. Without access to the right support, these crises threaten to define their future.

Latest school data shows that over a million days of learning were lost due to suspensions in 2021/22. This represents a 30% increase in lost learning compared to 2018/19.¹

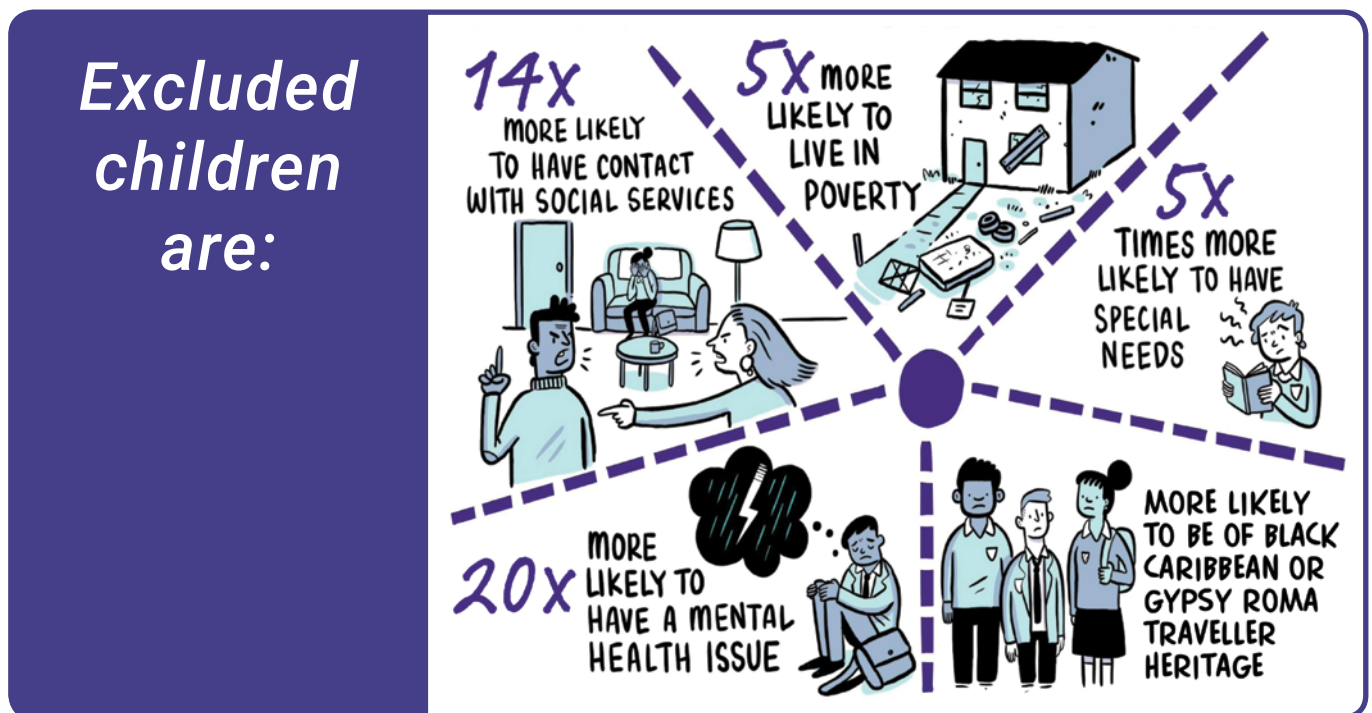
As suspensions continue to rise at a concerning rate, a rise in permanent exclusions is expected to follow. This will put even more pressure on England’s pupil referral units, where capacity is already struggling to cope with demand.²

What’s more, hundreds of thousands of students continue to experience less visible forms of exclusion, such as internal exclusions and persistent absence – all strongly associated with poorer learning and life outcomes for young people.³

Responding to the scale of the crisis at hand, we have updated our mission statement for 2023:

The Difference works to improve the safety, inclusion and success of young people in school, especially those experiencing exclusion, absence or marginalisation.

We want all schools to be able to identify vulnerable students earlier, provide the support required, and ultimately prevent issues spiralling to the point of suspension, exclusion, or severe absenteeism.



1. “School suspensions rise sharply among disadvantaged children in England”, The Guardian, 13 September 2023
2. Over a third of councils in England are already operating waiting lists for spaces in Pupil Referral Units – [Excluded Children with Nowhere to Go](#), Schools Week, September 2023
3. “Missing School, Missing Grades”, 2023, Children’s Commissioner

The Difference Levers of Change



PEOPLE are at the heart of meaningful change in schools.

The Difference supports people – particularly senior school leaders – to develop deep expertise and experience in effective inclusion. We are growing a community of leaders equipped and inspired to create schools that cater for all young people, especially those who might be vulnerable or disadvantaged. Leaders who develop their expertise with The Difference are measurably improving outcomes for students. They have seen increased attendance, happier and calmer classrooms, as well as reduced suspensions and exclusions.

PRACTICE means the effective tools used by schools and the skills developed by their staff to create safety and success for all students.

The Difference works to identify, evidence and spread good practice – allowing us to scale inclusive ideas much more rapidly than through our People work alone. We have already embarked on research into previously under-investigated topics, such as internal Alternative Provision. What's more, we are engaging a growing audience interested in our findings – from Ofsted to the Department for Education to an international community of educators.

POLICY can provide the right incentives and resources for schools to (further) focus on inclusion.

With a general election on the horizon, there is a huge opportunity to influence the direction of England's education system and ensure it works for every young person. The Difference draws on frontline expertise from our People and Practice work and pools our assets and knowledge through strong partnerships with charities, youth-action groups, funders, Multi-Academy Trusts and think-tanks. Together, we can make a powerful demand for change.





People

Since 2019, The Difference has developed **People** through two unique programmes:

The Difference Leadership Programme

For school leaders who aspire to be tomorrow's inclusive headteachers. Participants work as a senior leader in Alternative Provision (schools or units that serve excluded children) for two years. They receive 290 hours of professional development from The Difference, supporting them to become expert practitioners in school inclusion.


In our first year, we



Partnered with
9 schools



Trained **10**
school leaders

Reached
826
students 

Five years on, we've



Partnered with
57 schools



Trained **75**
school leaders

Reached
17,174
students 

The Inclusive Leadership Course

Targeted at existing senior leaders in mainstream, ranging from Executive Headteachers to Special Education Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs). It combines six intensive training days with practical assignments. Participants engage with new thinking and inclusive solutions to tackle common challenges such as student wellbeing, persistent absenteeism, and repeat exclusion.

In our first year, we



Partnered with
11 schools



Trained **12**
school leaders

Reached
13,510
students 


Five years on, we've



Partnered with
270 schools

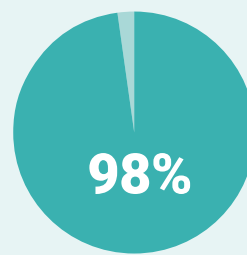


Trained **414**
school leaders

Reached
205,435
students 

100% of the 2023 graduates from the Difference Leadership programme have had an evidenced positive impact on their school, according to their headteachers. This includes improvements to curriculum, behaviour, mainstream reintegration, and attendance. 87% have progressed to more senior roles in schools since starting the programme two years ago.

98% of participants on this year's Inclusive Leadership Course reported a positive impact in their school as a result of implementing course learnings.



Taylor Bellamy

2023 Difference Leadership Programme graduate

During his two years as Assistant Headteacher for a Hampshire pupil referral unit, Taylor and his fantastic team developed a new behaviour policy which leaned heavily into the school's existing trauma-informed and relational approaches. This policy focused on understanding the origins of challenging behaviour and putting support in place rather than automatic sanctions. E.g. referring students with vaping problems to local health services or reacting to the use of inappropriate language through class discussion and education efforts.

From 2021/22 to 2023, the school saw a 50% reduction in suspensions term-on-term, and an 11% reduction in unauthorised absence. Taylor has taken this experience with whole-school inclusion impact onto a new role as Deputy Headteacher of Reach Academy – an influential, mainstream all-through school.



"Last year we had something in the region of 150 suspensions. After formally introducing the whole trauma-based

practice, our zones of regulation, our understanding and making teachers understand the importance of the restorative justice approach, we've got it down to four suspensions this year."

Habib Hussein Deputy Headteacher and 2022/23 ILC Participant

Where is The Difference going now?

After five years of delivery and piloting our programmes, we have seen amazing impact, a tiny portion of which is detailed above. We are now in the process of reviewing our learnings – with input from our youth action group, school leaders and investor coalition – to help us evolve our approach for our 2025-2030 Strategy. We will set out how our programmes will expand the number of Alternative Provision and mainstream schools we work with; deepen the impact of inclusion for those schools; and develop our impact capture so we can share learnings from our most successful school partners across the country. Watch this space!

Practice

The Difference identifies effective inclusion practice by tracking interventions that improve outcomes. We investigate impact within our own programmes and partner with other organisations to research practice more widely.

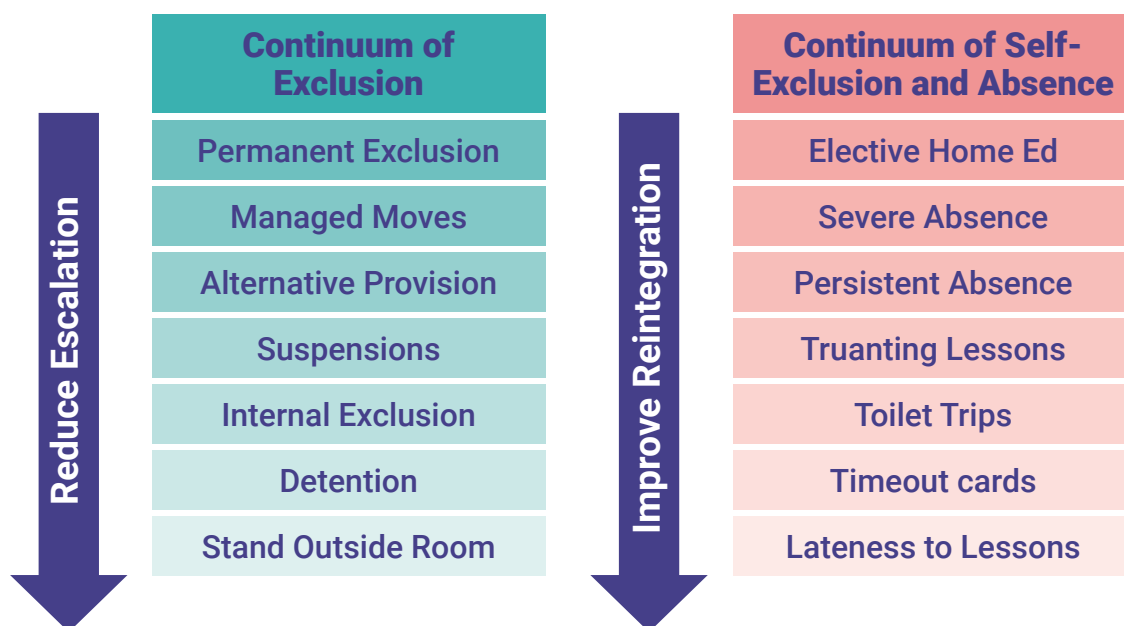
Case study: Practice through Programmes

A key concept discussed and developed within all Difference programmes is **Whole-School Inclusion**: the idea that all students have wellbeing and safeguarding needs and that all staff have a role to play in recognising and supporting these needs. Effective Whole-School Inclusion means improved outcomes for a much wider group, not just a minority known to be at significant risk. This was reflected in the impact reported by leaders on our 2022/23 **Inclusive Leadership Course** – demonstrating the power of inclusion to positively affect everyday occurrences in schools, as well as more serious incidents:

- **92%** saw improvement in the de-escalation of challenging behaviour
- **82%** reported improved outcomes for vulnerable students

- **74%** stated there's been a reduction in detentions and/or behaviour points
- **54%** are already seeing a reduction in suspensions and permanent exclusions

From this, The Difference has developed the **Exclusions Continuum**. This tool encourages all school leaders (and policymakers) to frame permanent school exclusion as the end point of a continuum that includes detentions, time outside of classrooms, and absenteeism. Attention to data across the continuum means schools are better equipped to identify vulnerable students earlier, provide targeted interventions, and ultimately reduce all forms of lost learning.





Spreading Effective Practice

In January 2023, The Difference welcomed over 500 educators, students, researchers, and education charities to **IncludEd**, our annual conference. The best minds working on inclusive education host workshops on the practice, systems and tools that can spread to more schools. This year, topics ranged from contextual safeguarding to social pedagogy to diversifying curriculums.

"Today's IncludEd was nothing short of brilliant. So many inspiring speakers and so so much to take away, think about, talk about, write about, read about and most importantly...do!"

Anthony Assistant Headteacher

Where is The Difference going now?

There's a huge appetite for actionable research and transferable practice in inclusion, as schools grapple with rising absenteeism and an Alternative Provision sector under strain. The Difference – and our school partners – are at the frontline of this work and have expanded our Research and Impact Directorate accordingly. Upcoming priorities include: the development of a safety and wellbeing measure to help schools track and respond to student need; and publication of ongoing research into the under-explored area of internal Alternative Provision (in partnership with National Foundation for Education Research).



Policy

With a general election coming up and many challenges in education reaching crisis levels, The Difference's policy work has taken on new urgency.

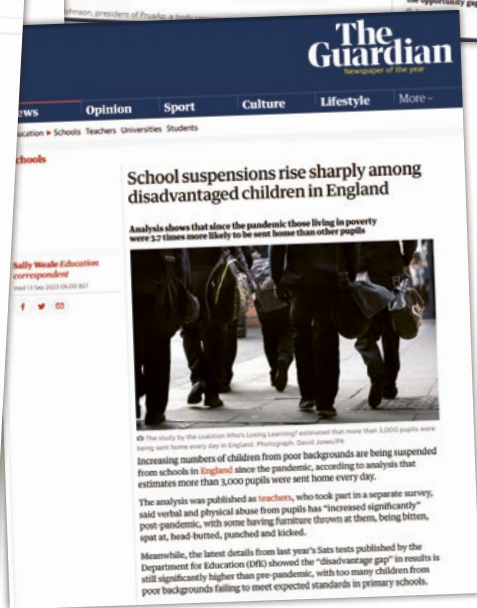
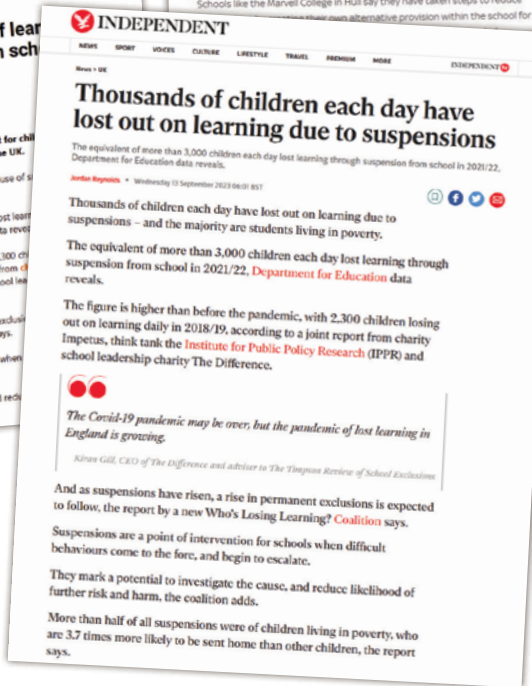
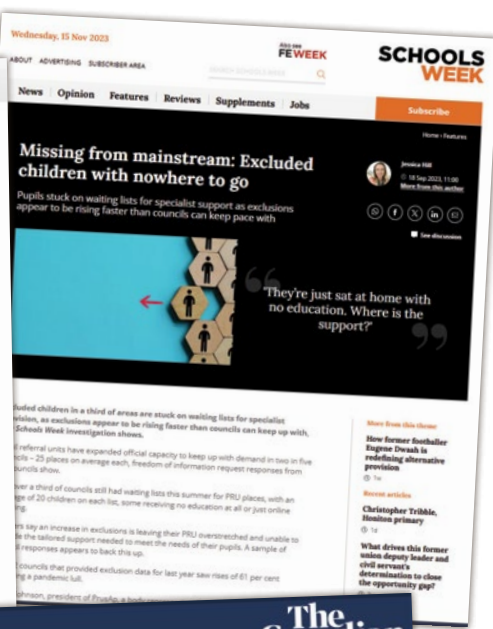
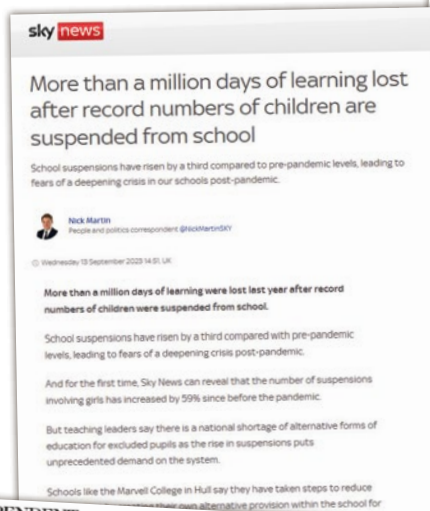
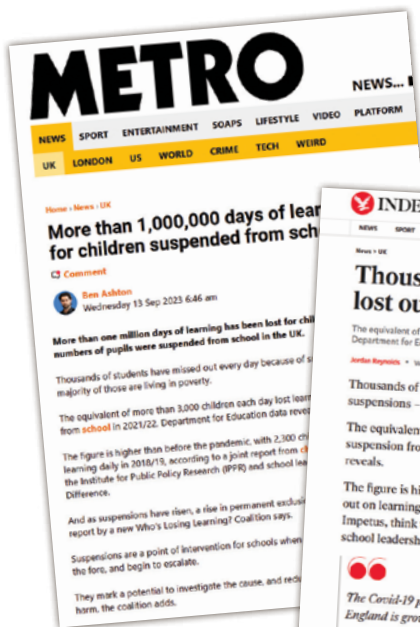
Influencing in Partnership

September 2023 saw the launch of the **Who's Losing Learning? Coalition** by founding partners, The Difference, Impetus, Mission 44 and the Institute for Public Policy Research, all bringing a range and depth of experience across the education sector.

The Coalition aims to reveal the extent to which children are currently missing out on learning, join the dots between different types of exclusion and absence, and champion the cause of the most vulnerable learners who

are disproportionately affected. There's been a 30% increase in suspensions post-pandemic and our analysis shows this rise has largely affected children living in poverty or who have special educational needs (respectively 3.7 times and 4 times as likely to be suspended as their peers). Racial inequity also persists. Dual heritage white and Black Caribbean children are suspended at nearly double the rate of white peers, while Gypsy Roma Traveller children are sent home 3.2 times as much.

The Who's Losing Learning? Coalition is already raising the alarm about lost learning as a social justice issue, securing press coverage including in The Guardian, Sky, ITV and The Independent.



Where is The Difference going now?

The Who's Losing Learning? Coalition will collect and analyse further data, draw on insights from young people and school leaders, and review good inclusion practice nationally. Next year will see the coalition publish two papers – one on problem diagnosis and another on policy recommendations. The ultimate aim is that recommendations are taken up by policymakers, leading to schools receiving incentives, resources and support to tackle lost learning at scale.

The Difference has appointed a new Education Policy Lead, Cristin O'Brien, who will play a key part in our influencing strategy – drawing on experience from her previous role at Ofsted and as a social worker serving Irish Traveller communities (one of the most excluded demographics in England). Cristin's work will ensure the insights of The Difference community – young people, school leaders, education experts, researchers – get in front of the right policy stakeholders to help us effectively scale expertise in inclusion.

Youth Action at The Difference

“If there’s something I want everyone to walk away with, it’s to continue to engage with students, learn about their experiences, and listen to them. Young people have a powerful voice that – if given the opportunity – will give you insight into exactly what we need to progress further in education.”

Mya-Chloé

Youth activist with London VRU Youth Action Group & 2023 IncludEd speaker

Responding to this call to action, The Difference has formed our first **Youth Advisory Board** whose insights and experience will be invaluable to the development of our strategy and programmes. This group is led by Michaela Rafferty, who previously guided Youth Campaigning at Just4KidsLaw. She’s joined by six amazing young people already doing incredible work on school exclusion. The Difference is actively fundraising to expand the membership, work and reach of this Youth Advisory Board.

Meet our Youth Activists

Jo



I’m an economics student and the founder of Legacy Youth CIC. I’m deeply passionate about the potential of policy to create positive impact. My ultimate goal is to leverage this passion to become a change-maker in education, working to eliminate barriers that hinder young people’s progress.

Sachet



Sensational, able, curious, honest, evolving, transparent. I use these words to describe myself and show how change will be achieved by voicing out and through the involvement of professionals and young people. We can alter the course for future generations, creating leeway for young people to succeed and feel included in society.

Stella



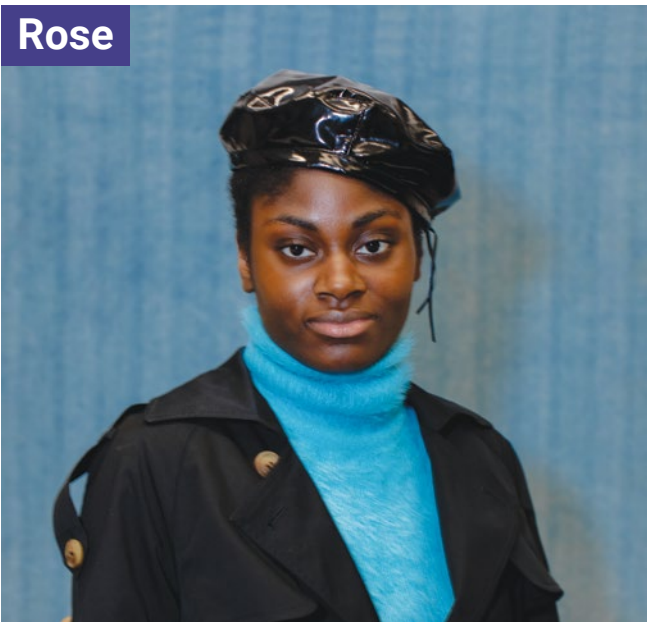
I'm a school exclusions campaigner and passionate about making sure children feel happy in school. I hope for a compassionate and empathetic education system that helps children rather than hurts them. I want to explore the various issues in schools and education today, and how we can make it better.

Johnathan



I'm a campaigner for the rights of the marginalised – passionate about upholding justice, social change and young people. I use my lived experience of school exclusion to advocate for an inclusive education system for all. I am a man of faith, and enjoy all things to do with law, literature and music.

Rose



I'm a youth campaigner and social activist. I grew up in foster care and this experience greatly impacted me and my decisions today. I strive to achieve my goals and support others, helping young people to be confident in who they are, not where they come from.

Roxanne



I'm a law graduate who experienced unlawful school exclusion at 13, leading to time in numerous pupil referral units. Currently, I work in immigration law. My vision for education is equal treatment for all. I believe the key lies in reforming behavioural policies to be fair, inclusive, and respectful of students' dignity.



Thank you!

The Difference's work so far would not have been possible without the generous support of the individuals, trusts, and businesses who invest in our work. The Difference benefits not only from financial aid but also from the expertise generously shared by our investors. Our board of trustees and the entire team extend a heartfelt thanks.





Could you be the next investor transforming school inclusion?

The Difference is currently raising £2 million across the next three years to radically expand the impact of our work and reach thousands more young people. We are looking for new investors and partners for our work. If this could be you, please reach out to development@the-difference.com

“School exclusion can have a huge and negative effect on a child and their future. The Difference is a young, dynamic charity, with big ambitions to reduce lost learning. Convinced their programmes are helping to tackle the issue, I’m delighted to be a supporter.”

Sir Anthony Salz Difference investor & trustee

The Difference

The Difference is an education charity that tackles the social justice issue of school exclusions.

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