

Beyond Manifestos

*What does education
need next?*



SSAT

We are **SSAT, the Schools, Students and Teachers network**.

We exist to help improve outcomes for all young people. As a membership organisation of schools and academies across the UK and internationally, we work with leaders, teachers and students to drive school improvement and innovation, and celebrate their successes. We believe in a **truly school-led system**, with schools working in partnership across and beyond the education sector.

At SSAT's heart are our **membership networks**, bringing together school leaders, teachers and students. We have been working with schools for over 30 years, and continue to offer **insight and understanding** into teaching, learning and system leadership. Our **professional development and school improvement programmes** help leaders and teachers to further outcomes for all young people, and develop leadership at all levels across the system.

We are SSAT and we provide fresh ideas for ambitious schools.

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SSAT has always sought to champion the wisdom within the education system. With a general election on the horizon, there will be interesting debates about what manifestos should prioritise. This is not a manifesto. Nor does it pretend to have all of the answers. Instead, it offers a range of informed opinions on what the system needs next.

We would like to thank all of the contributors for taking the time to share their thoughts. You will hear from headteachers, leading academics and other friends of SSAT. The views expressed are varied, insightful and thought-provoking. We hope you will enjoy reading them as much as we have.

SSAT has been at the forefront of school improvement since 1987 and our mission has always been:

“That all students, whatever their ability or context, leave school fully prepared to lead fulfilled and purposeful lives.”

SSAT is a membership organisation, bringing together schools and academies from across the UK and globally that are committed to achieving deep social justice.

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Introduction

What does education need next?

This publication has this single question at its heart. With a general election on the horizon, contributors were asked to share their thoughts on the priorities for the education system. However, what follows is not party political, nor does it seek to set out suggested actions for an incoming government. Instead, it offers a broader perspective on where we are and where change is needed. Education is, or should be, bigger than manifestos and policy cycles. As a profession, education is rich with principled, experienced and astute people who can offer informed views on what works. It is a privilege to share some of these views.

There is no doubt that the current challenges in education are significant. The impact of the pandemic on our young people has been profound and will be felt for years to come. The cost of living crisis, combined with desperately over-stretched public services means that schools are increasingly trying to support not only their pupils but their families and the wider community.

And this is happening at a time when schools are under-resourced, in every sense. Recruitment and retention is more challenging than it has ever been and school budgets are stretched to breaking point. Clearly, these factors are interconnected. The current situation is unsustainable – no matter what we might hope for education in the future, nothing will be possible without talented teachers and school leaders joining and remaining in the profession. No matter how skilled those working in schools are, meeting key goals will always be more challenging without adequate funding.

That said, what really comes through the articles shared is a sense of optimism. Several contributors refer to the importance of hope – and it shines through here. School leaders and teachers believe in the potential of young people, young people who deserve a society which enables each individual to succeed, no matter how challenging the wider circumstances may be.

There is a wealth of expertise in this publication – people with many years of experience in leading schools in all kinds of circumstances and leading academics who have been

key to shaping thinking in education over decades. In schools across our network, we see school leaders and teachers who are excited about the potential to improve what they do, as Professor Dylan Wiliam puts it “not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better.”

This is only a snapshot of the kind of wisdom that exists across the country – people with first-hand experience of successfully leading schools, meeting the needs of learners, delivering high quality learning experiences.

A fundamental issue with our education system is that this expertise is not fully utilised when it comes to shaping policy. Within existing structures, it can be difficult for a range of opinions to be heard. Sadly, in recent years, some politicians seem to have taken an adversarial approach to school leaders rather than showing a willingness to collaborate.

In practice, the absence of this dialogue often requires school leaders and teachers to make significant changes to the way they work as politicians and regulators change expectations. As new ministers are appointed or a new Ofsted inspection framework is published, school leaders wait to see whether aspects of their work have now become obsolete and whether there are new expectations which need to be met. Too often, teachers are required to take time away from teaching and learning to accommodate revised guidance. School leaders can find themselves navigating a policy which they know to

be misguided, treading a delicate path between the need for compliance and their determination to do what they know to be right for their pupils. There is no one-size-fits-all approach which works for all schools. However, across the system, there is a good degree of agreement about the components of effective learning and school leadership and a wealth of expertise around the different ways in which best practice can be achieved.

With the obvious exception of funding, the answers to the big questions facing education are there in the system. It is imperative that the extensive expertise available is harnessed to create longer term education policy that supports consistent, evidence-informed improvement. The Foundation for Education Development (FED) have rightly stressed the importance of bringing together all stakeholders to shape an ambitious long-term plan. This would support a consistent focus on agreed goals instead of short-term policy initiatives.

What follows are a number of insightful answers to the question of what education needs next. A very good start would be for policy makers to draw on the expertise of these people and those like them – listening to their experience, supporting collaboration within schools and moving beyond manifestos to a longer-term view of how we can best support our young people to succeed.

Professor Barry Carpenter CBE, OBE, PhD

Professor Barry Carpenter is the UK's first Professor of Mental Health in Education, a Chair created for him at Oxford Brookes University. He is honorary professor at universities in the UK, Ireland, Germany and Australia. He has been a fellow of the University of Oxford. In July 2020 he was awarded the Distinguished Fellowship of the Chartered College of Teaching, for his leadership of the education field during the pandemic.



Relationships and rebuilding; schools as congregations of compassion

For many years I have spoken about teaching as a relationship-based profession. I am unequivocally committed to this notion. Schools are places where people, children and adults gather. Education is fundamentally an interactive process between people – teacher and learner. Teachers are people who develop relationships with their pupils that encourage effective learning. So implicitly teaching is a relationship-based profession.

However, latterly, I have come to realise that post-pandemic this alone is not enough. Those relationships need a deeper context, which I believe is made up of kindness, hope and compassion. In the very style of teaching we adopt we can show kindness towards children through

our understanding of their needs. At a time when many children are in turmoil following the disruption of the pandemic, teachers need to be agents of hope, having aspirations for the achievement of all children. All of this needs to be informed by compassion. These are unscripted times, as was the pandemic itself. Kindness, hope and compassion can bind us together, making us stronger to face what lies ahead.

Many schools have intuitively tried to continue in the ways that existed before the pandemic; sadly, this is not the reality for many children. On that day in March 2020 when we had to tell children that schools were closing and we did not know when they would reopen, we broke the bonds of trust with our children. There is no blame in that statement; this was no one's fault, and decisions were made based on safety.

Did we assign time to restoring those broken bonds? Many primary age children left a class teacher in March

2020, and returned to a different class teacher in September of that year. I believe that for many children this has triggered what is known as a bereavement response; they mourn for the loss of their relationship with that teacher. Similarly, the isolation from their peer group has disorientated the social structure of friendship from many children, again leaving them with the sense of loss.

Our school communities were fractured. Currently many schools are reporting that the children they are teaching do not reflect the way the children were before the pandemic. We have increased levels of anxiety in children for whom school was a daily delight and who never had a problem attending. Attendance levels have declined in the majority of schools. Parents are seeking guidance on how to reduce anxiety as the children are refusing to go to school for fear of what will happen that day. Have we talked openly to children about their fears and anxieties? Have we put in place experiences that bring about healing, that limit the dysfunctionality many schools are reporting?

Our quest as schools must be to restore and rejuvenate the mental wellbeing of all our children.

No child can have escaped unscathed from the terror of this pandemic which stalked our communities, taking many, many lives. Therefore, our curriculum journey has to be one of re-building our children's emotional resilience through dynamic, innovative and creative learning experiences, starting

(as HMCI, Amanda Spielman says) 'where each child is at.' Translated into teacher practice, this would mean 'teaching in the moment.' Many children are angry at the world. They deserve an explanation of what coronavirus, pandemic and related terms mean. It is unthinkable that any child should be emotionally scarred for the remainder of their life by the events of the pandemic period.

We have seen a rapid deterioration in the mental health of our children and young people since the lockdown of March 2020. NHS monitoring is observing spikes in self-harm and eating disorders. These are occurring in children younger than previously known. The Children's Commissioner reports a 50 per cent rise in children's mental health needs since 2017, when the proportion was one in nine. It is now one in four.

Action, support and intervention are crucial. Recent research from Cardiff University (Moore and Morgan, 2021) has indicated that the impact of the pandemic will leave a 'lifelong footprint' on the mental health of this generation of children. The Government has recognised to some degree the seriousness of this tsunami of mental health need (DfE, 2022). Teachers are crucial to our country's future but the failure to put education at the heart of the levelling up agenda has left it further underfunded.

There is much adversity in our world resulting from the global pandemic, combined with the depressing accounts of war, arising from the

situation in the Ukraine. This adversity has permeated our children's lives and more than ever we, as teachers, need to have a clear grasp on the implications of adverse childhood experiences (ACE). In this respect a recent definition offered by MindEd (2020) is insightful:

'A child whose mind and body are overly stressed and in fight, flight or freeze mode is not open for learning... ACEs have short and long term negative life-changing consequences across education, health, care, criminal justice and later employment, and life expectancy outcomes.'

The curriculum currently needs to reflect the lived experience of the child. So, to reflect the MindEd statement in a child's words, when recently conducting some interviews in a primary school, one year 5 child described lockdown to me, as 'locked-in.' A slip of the tongue maybe, but not an inaccurate description. For many children the lockdown period, and periods of self-isolation, must have felt as if they were 'locked-in', deprived of their freedom to see friends, be outdoors, run and breathe fresh air. Lockdown is not a natural childhood state, and the constraint and restraint it has imposed on children has felt alien to them, generating feelings of frustration, anxiety, worry and more. As the lockdown progressed and the turmoil of the pandemic raged, many children and young

people felt that their hopes for the future were being dashed; and hope is the gift of childhood.

Modern life has been chipping away at children's happiness over time. A report by the Children's Society (2020) found that this toxic trend continues. They call on the Government to put children's wellbeing at the heart of the national recovery from coronavirus. The global pandemic has seriously affected children's happiness due to the lack of choice they experienced in life. Toxic stress causes negative neurobiological responses that hinder a child's development in all areas.

Relationships are at the heart of that process of recovery. Before we can hope to return to a full curriculum we must recalibrate children's learning, including the state of their mental health which, if poor, will ultimately undermine their potential attainment and achievement. We must marshal our creative thinking with a clear focus on mental wellbeing, and through innovative practice, design learning pathways which invite children to rejoin their school communities as active participants, reconnecting with friends and teachers.

Indeed, we need to give serious attention to the wellbeing of our teachers, and other workers in our schools. In a new article by Dr Jon Reid (2023) he discusses

the ‘emotional work of teachers’ and says “the extent and impact of teachers’ emotional work has been largely neglected and underestimated And is completely ignored in current policy,” (p23). A school can only be a thriving school if the wellbeing of all its staff is considered in its thinking around a whole school approach. Promoting positive mental health in the whole school community is vital; our school communities were fragmented and disorientated by the lockdowns, and the hypervigilance around personal safety we all experienced.

Compassionate leadership will be key to this process, and to re-establishing the wellbeing of the whole school community. Kindness matters too. At a time when the future is uncertain and we feel disconnected, our mental health and wellbeing frail and fragile, the smallest act of kindness can have the biggest effect.

The NHS has acknowledged that ‘having a nurturing and compassionate approach in schools that underpins learning, will be helpful in re-generating relationships’ (Chitsabesan, 2020). This is further echoed by the Times Education Commission (2023) in their 12-point plan for Education; one goal states “Wellbeing should be at the heart of education, with a counsellor in every school and an

annual wellbeing survey of pupils.”

How do we define childhood post-pandemic? What does the profile of childhood look like now?

All of the evidence presented above articulates the trauma the pandemic and its lockdowns brought to the doorstep of childhood. Reports and commentaries cited are noting the adverse trends emerging in childhood. Building on the values of the Recovery Curriculum, (Carpenter and Carpenter, 2020), we collaborated with SSAT to produce the SSAT Children’s Charter: A Pledge for Children, which articulates the principles which should underpin our response to a reshaped, redefined 21st century childhood (SSAT, 2023).

Schools are beginning to reflect deeply on what they want as learning communities. They can become congregations of compassion, enabling teachers to restore our children to their rightful state as successful learners, and supporting their emotional wellbeing to flourish, with education once more becoming a dignifying process for all children.

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Rob Carter

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It's on the horizon again ... we are already in the warm-up for an election that is widely predicted to be taking place in the autumn of 2024. So, brace yourselves ... we will be bombarded by photo opportunities, campaigning, and soundbites to grab headlines and attention.

It is no surprise that education is a high-profile topic, even if it does not feature highly in public concerns compared to the cost-of-living crisis and challenges faced by the NHS. Ultimately this gives us a clear message – teachers are trusted and there is not a feeling of crisis in education for the public. But let me write a short message to the future prime minister to sit on the desk of number 10 on their arrival.

Dear Prime Minister,

I write to welcome you to your new home and the opportunities this fresh chapter provides. I came into education in 1997 in the heyday of funding for schools, but the current world seems a lifetime away from that now. I simply ask you to consider five small steps to support the young people we serve.

- 1. We need to fund education better** – if we want to support and commit to be competitive in a global economy, we have to fund education properly to allow a dedicated profession to do their job properly. This ranges from looking after school buildings to providing the right staff to support and inspire students as we unlock their potential. The national funding formula needs to be introduced fully to avoid the inequalities between schools, some only miles apart. We also need to ensure pay in education can attract and retain high quality staff to serve the children in our care.

2. **We must commit to supporting a crisis in mental health for young people** – as a headteacher who has lost young people, especially young men, following a crisis in their mental health we must provide capacity and support in schools. Every secondary school needs a funded school counsellor and primary schools need further access to this care.
3. **Education cannot be a political football** – we need to establish or develop an organisation to evaluate, review and hold education to account that is not politically controlled. This is a feature of some of the highest performing jurisdictions worldwide and something we can learn from. Two organisations that can provide this strong independent voice are SSAT and the Chartered College of Teaching.
4. **We need to establish a curriculum and funding model that is settled and multi-year.** This allows schools to do what they do best and plan, evaluate and review the impact of working collaboratively and not simply respond reactively to challenges they face due to the political agenda.

5. **Appoint the best person you have to the role of Secretary of State for Education.** Since 2010 there have been ten people who have held this role. The school I lead has been open for 60 years and only had three headteachers during this time. The school has been outstanding for 16 of these years and consistently achieved great things due to the 'simplicity and consistency' of having a shared vision, direction, and a strong team – this is what we all need and deserve.

So, in essence we face a perfect storm.

We have a crisis in recruitment and retention, young people need support like never before and we have no money to invest in resolving it, pay people properly and invest in our school buildings.

Despite all this, great people do remarkable things every day and if you can put the five steps into action you can change the world one small step at a time and leave a real legacy to your time behind the black door you now inhabit.

Yours truly,

Rob Carter

Jay Davenport

Jay Davenport is the director of The Meraki Spark, which provides leadership, coaching and strategic development services to schools and businesses. Jay is an experienced senior leader and currently works as the director of inclusion and SEND at Northampton School for Girls.



If we can agree (which isn't always easy) that the purpose of education in schools is to prepare children and young people for the world in which they will live beyond school so they can engage personally, culturally, economically and socially; then as school leaders we can recognise that the issues that existed in the late-2010s have often morphed into something else entirely. The educational landscape, like the world around us, has changed.

So what next? The concerns around funding, recruitment and retention of staff, changing student needs, behaviour, parental engagement and how we judge schools are well-documented and need to be resolved. However, whilst it is important to understand the problems, this brings opportunities if we are willing to seek them out. In order to achieve both of these elements we need to view both the macro and micro simultaneously. At the macro level, to take advantage of the opportunities, we need to

move beyond education policy that is designed in isolation and on political cycles. The short-termism and lack of coordination with other areas like social care, business and health means that schools, unless they are particularly stable, are incentivised to sway to embrace the latest initiative whilst simultaneously being unable to access the support they require to meet the needs of the young people in their care.

We have a plethora of talent in schools, people who are horizon scanning, listening and identifying what high quality education looks like, however a lack of long-term investment in training, resourcing and funding means that educational responses are often too slow and lack the agility and flexibility to prepare our young people effectively for what they will encounter in the future. To explore these opportunities effectively, education (and society) needs to move away from the increasingly tribal perspective where you have to choose a camp and everyone else is wrong.

Too often this binary positioning causes conflict and the arguments themselves take over, forgetting the children that should be at the heart of what we do.

What education needs next is a kinder, collaborative, solution-focussed approach where we listen to alternative views, seek to understand, and see how application may benefit our context. I like to refer to this as Cakeism; as it is entirely possible to have our cake and eat it in an educational context. Through Cakeism we can create an educational dialogue that is positive and embraces opportunities.

- We can recognise differences between us *and* create a culture of belonging.
- We can achieve the highest standards *and* be kind to people.
- We can embrace curricula that are knowledge-engaged *and* still provide opportunities for our young people to think critically, understand their own learning and solve problems.
- We can develop teachers who are subject experts *and* make a significant contribution to the personal and social development of young people.
- We can value academia *and* provide vocational pathways for young people to ensure success for all.

This joined-up thinking at the macro level is required to provide a framework for school leaders to have the stability and associated confidence to make great decisions for their communities at the micro level. Ultimately, it is the culture that school leaders are able to create in their schools that enables children and their staff to feel safe, learn, grow and improve.

Having worked in and with a number of schools and leaders in a range of different circumstances in recent years I have been reminded that context is crucial. Trusting and supporting school leaders to work in the best interests of the children (and staff) in their care, taking into account and recognising the particular challenges of their context is key.

The current provision for special educational needs provides an excellent microcosm for education as a whole, in terms of the need for micro/macro thinking. Having had the privilege to work specifically in this area over the last 12 months, I have seen first-hand the expertise and quality of practitioners engaged in doing their best for young people with additional needs. However, I have also seen up close the impacts of a traditional system overwhelmed by the pace of change in needs and lack of sufficient ambition (and funding) to be agile and respond effectively to what is required.

At the micro (individual school/ local authority) level we must listen carefully to young people and their parents, many of whom are having to battle too hard, within and often against a system that is ill-prepared to meet their needs. We must be courageous as school leaders and teachers to strive to create the systems, processes and provision that enables inclusion and success in its broadest sense.

Their contexts will allow them to make good decisions about how they will achieve the correct balance for their students. These structures also need to support teachers to feel confident in recognising and meeting the needs of the children in their classes and having constructive conversations with parents, carers and supporting agencies to ensure that the child's best interests come first.

This is set against the need to approach our thinking at the macro level from what this could look like in the future. If we choose to, school buildings, curriculum and assessment can all be designed to embrace inclusion and create a sense of belonging and success. Similarly, at the macro level, we have seen there is huge potential in the development of assistive technology and AI to transform education, teaching and learning, especially for our most vulnerable learners. Like many other areas within education, this is an opportunity to embrace, however, the threat is also real, if we cannot get to a position where we are willing to have an open dialogue to seek to

understand the possibilities as well as the limitations and potential threats.

A micro/macro approach is required to recognise and solve the current problems and simultaneously future-proof our educational ecosystems. To do so, we have to become less binary and more ambitious in our thinking. The world and society in which our young people exist is going to be different. In fact it already is. This future is exciting if we are willing to embrace it; however, there are dangers in not engaging in this constructive conversation and dialogue to balance the needs of individuals in the context of providing high quality education for all.



Simon Eccles

Simon Eccles is the headteacher of St Mary's Catholic Academy, an 11-18 Catholic comprehensive in Blackpool.

A few years ago, around the 2015 general election, my headteacher, @leadinglearner Steven Tierney, chaired the SSAT Vision 2040 project. It came up with ten recommendations for consideration for a future vision for education. The original think piece was forward-thinking and made some clear challenges for prospective governments.

Nobody could have foreseen a global pandemic in the intervening time between 2015 and 2023. Its impact, particularly on the poorest families in the UK has been more keenly felt. For Blackpool, where my school is based, this has presented many challenges. Neither could we have predicted the political turmoil and nine (yes nine!) education secretaries in a space of eight years.

In the latest YouGov poll asking: "Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time? Please tick up to three." only 12% of respondents selected education.

Education falls a long way down a league of priorities behind the economy, health and immigration. This is in part due to a lack of coverage in the news or a narrative from politicians. None of the pledges made in the lead-up to the next election from the Conservative party or Labour mention education directly.

With this in mind I believe what education needs next is:

- 1. Bringing back to the heart of the national conversation.** There are many future challenges we face as a human race. The environment, AI, fair distribution of wealth to name a few. Education should help to prepare young people for these challenges. Schools should be highly valued institutions if this is going to work.
- 2. Fair funding for our educational institutions.** There shouldn't be large disparities between regions. Increases in funding need to improve education for students. Funding should not be used to fund much needed pay rises. These should be funded separately.
- 3. Continued support for our staff and children as they continue to recover from the effects of the pandemic.** This includes trauma-informed training for all education staff, effective mental health support for our students and staff and investment in social and emotional learning in our schools.
- 4. A clear strategy to address a growing recruitment and retention crisis.** With a positive national narrative, a good starting salary and bursaries or student loan exemptions for students entering teaching we can encourage more people to join the profession. We will keep them if we address workload and invest in professional development. Pay support staff a fairer wage and we will be able to recruit them effectively too.
- 5. A less judgement-based inspection system.** That doesn't necessarily mean changing the framework. A grade-free narrative report to help schools focus on how to improve would be far more helpful. Set up a separate safeguarding inspection, carried out regularly in all schools.
- 6. Continued investment in professional development for teachers.** Investment in evidence-informed approaches to teaching to fund the work of the EEF, Research schools, The Chartered College, Evidence Based Education and others have helped shift the focus here. A more streamlined ECT and NPQ programme has helped too. This now needs rationalising into a clear and straightforward package.
- 7. Confidence (and investment) to embrace new technologies** like Artificial Intelligence to help students learn and to ease workload issues.
- 8. A period of stability.** Let's decide on a key set of ideas and approaches and make them work really well, free from constant political interference and change.



Evelyn Forde MBE

Until recently, Evelyn Forde was the headteacher of Copthall Academy, an 11-18 girls' comprehensive school in London. Evelyn was the president of the Association of School and College Leaders (2022-23).

At a time when the profession is not seen as a priority, when teacher unions have been balloting members for strike action for better pay and conditions, when Ofsted has been in the press for all the wrong reasons, it feels like we are at a crossroads.

It feels like a once-in-a-lifetime moment for the next government to make education matter, to elevate the status of the profession and to remember that our nation's children will only get this one chance so they shouldn't take it away from them.

So, as we head into a general election and politicians will be playing political ping-pong, let's remind them to focus on:

Funding, pay and conditions

Teachers pay has been eroded over a significant period of time, any pay rise below inflation is just not good enough and any pay rise this year will be baked into school budgets so whilst some may be able to afford it this year, it is unlikely it will be sustainable. So a review of funding that sees schools funded properly is essential.

If schools are properly funded, the amazing staff that work within them will be able to receive the pay they deserve, pay that will reverse the need for some of them to rely on food banks. With appropriate pay, we will be able to attract people to join our profession and this will be part of the 'silver bullet' needed to reverse the chronic recruitment and retention crisis we are

all facing. In addition to this we have got to improve the conditions around workload. And I mean the 'hidden workload,' not that of marking and data drops which are mostly a thing of the past, I am talking about the work school staff are undertaking like being out-of-hours social workers, housing officers, mental health and wellbeing providers and much more. We have as a profession, become the fourth emergency service and this has got to change, it is not sustainable as it is one of the key factors impacting staff mental health and wellbeing.

Teacher wellbeing

A teacher wellbeing toolkit may be a good audit tool, but it will not help to retain and/or recruit the best staff into schools. There has to be a recognition and a will to change the fact that teachers and staff are struggling. They come into the profession to teach, to impart their knowledge and wisdom in the classroom; that is their passion. But with the additional work now being asked of them, focusing on the classroom can be difficult. So what we need is a review of workload, a review of the archaic 1265 which sees teachers working in excess of this but not getting paid. We need to review and consider how we can be more flexible in schools to accommodate the growing and different demands on teachers' time outside of school. We need a provision in every school that will do the 'heavy lifting' of pastoral care so that teachers are well and able to teach. We need to look after our staff.

To conclude...we need a bold and brave government, a government that is going to grasp the nettle as it were and stand shoulder to shoulder with the profession to recognise that "it takes a village to raise a child" but that village needs the funds and resources to do so. We need a bold and brave government who will unashamedly put children first and at the heart of policy and decision making so that every child regardless of their starting point will have rich opportunities to excel in their schools and become confident, ambitious, knowledgeable and compassionate young people, ready to take on the world.



Professor Alma Harris

Dr Alma Harris is an Emeritus Professor of Education at Swansea University and is Professor of Leadership in Education at the Cardiff School of Education and Social Policy, Cardiff Metropolitan University.

This is a question that is easy to answer simply by focusing upon what the education system no longer needs. In short, education no longer needs the same old tired, ineffectual strategies and approaches wrapped up in a rhetoric of accountability, competition and the marketisation of schooling. These levers are way past their global sell by date.

It remains a moot point whether any of these levers are actually working to improve the system and most importantly, are in the best interests of all children and all young people.

Imposed accountability, the DNA of competition, and the marketisation of schooling have simply had their day. The international evidence would suggest that these are the wrong system levers, creating division, inequity and a by-product of recruitment and retention difficulties.

So, what does education need next? In essence, it needs a departure from an over-reliance on the levers that are unlikely to generate long-term change or innovation.

Looking across the globe, some of the best education systems (measured by various international assessments) are focused on equity, inclusion, and diversity. These systems are embracing an educational future where every citizen matters and matters equally.

The youth of today are deeply concerned about climate change, human rights, and equity in its broadest economic, social, and deeply

human sense. Rightfully so. They need an educational experience that engages them legitimately, sensitively, and authentically with such issues. If not, they will disconnect, withdraw, and find alternative sources of information.

The influence of AI is already being felt in educational institutions. It is the educational challenge of the moment and will have profound and lasting consequences for the way learning is designed, organised, and experienced. Education systems must be alert and agile to the possibilities and opportunities of AI and need to be fully prepared for the changing digital educational world. Education systems cannot do this if they are locked into educational priorities, strategies, values, and approaches that belong to another era.

The education dial is shifting in dramatic ways. The international evidence has declared that there has been a tsunami in mental health issues for children and young people, globally. Yet, many education systems have not shifted their core priorities to address this issue in any serious or sustained way and seem wedded to being woefully stuck in a cycle that routinely fails many young people.

Covid-19 shone a spotlight on the deep educational inequities that exist in society. The digital divide was never starker nor more significant. Post-pandemic how far has equity been a central driving priority for education systems? Often equity is an add-on, something else to think about, a policy

afterthought not a central system mandate for change. Yet, without equity, excellence is compromised, talent is systematically discarded, and opportunities are lost before young people even reach school.

The education we have right now is no longer fit for purpose, it needs recalibrating. If you ask learners what they want from education they would prioritise fairness, equal opportunities, digital expertise, a more inclusive bandwidth for success, support for all learner needs and respect for their rights.

In terms of 'what education needs next':

the simple answer is not more of the same. Rather what is needed is bold action that overhauls the macho, instrumental, punitive, 'oven ready' solutions to education and replaces them with an education system that is responsive to all learners, equitable by design, rights-driven, professionally informed, and above all, profoundly compassionate and caring.

Janeen Hayat

Janeen Hayat is the Director of Collective Action at the Fair Education Alliance. The Fair Education Alliance is a cross-sector coalition of over 250 organisations who are committed to addressing educational inequality.



We have a big vision for change to build a fairer system that supports every child to thrive.

The Fair Education Alliance works towards a vision where a child's socio-economic background is not a barrier to opportunity, and this vision feels more daunting than ever.

It's been 12 years since the pupil premium was introduced to close the attainment gap between wealthier and poorer pupils, and in that time, there has been substantial resource and energy put into closing that gap by schools, government, charities, and private companies. And yet, the disadvantage gaps in primary attainment, secondary attainment, and progression to university are each at their highest point in a decade (FEA, 2022)¹, and 40% of the secondary attainment gap already exists at reception (EPI, 2018)². Further, there is a large and growing skills gap that is correlated with an employment gap (Skills Builder Partnership, 2023)³.

Schools also find themselves at an inflection point where inequalities stand to compound: teacher and

school leader recruitment are each at their lowest rate, and attrition at their highest rate, in a decade, owing to workload, stress and pay (NFER, 2023)⁴, and these issues are perceived to be more severe in schools serving the poorest communities (Sutton Trust, 2019)⁵. Attendance is also a growing concern, with one in five pupils persistently absent in the last school year (The Guardian, 2023)⁶ – the root causes of which are complex.

In the meanwhile, there are exacerbating issues outside the school gates: child poverty continues to rise, leaving more children with insecure housing, not enough food, and without the supplies and resources to fully participate in school (CPAG 2022)⁷; meanwhile, the services to support families in poverty lack investment and a holistic strategy. There's also a growing mental health crisis for children and young people, when the waiting list for Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is hopelessly long (The Independent, 2022)⁸.

The urgency to invest in an education system that gives today's young

people the best chance at a bright future is clear to most of us in the sector – but it is not yet a priority for voters and parliamentarians. Creating an education system – and a society – that is fairer and more inclusive is a long-term project that will need to continue far beyond this political cycle, but we must start by pushing education to the forefront of public consciousness. We must make it clear that education is fundamental to everything we want for our future, from employment to global security. And we must show the next government the great practice that is already happening in schools and communities to help them understand what is possible.

The society we want to see in ten years' time is one where every child has their basic needs met, where teachers – especially those working in the most challenging contexts – feel supported and recognised, and where every child has a rounded education that prepares them to thrive in work and in life – starting from the early years. And of course, as a result of this, we want to see the gaps in attainment and skills between wealthier and poorer pupils close.

How do we work toward this vision? Our [Fair Education Manifesto](#) sets out four areas where we call for attention from policymakers:

1. **Stabilise the school and college workforce.** This is foundational to any other solution and will need to be addressed not only through pay, but also through culture, conditions that are more

inclusive and competitive, and easing the negative impacts of the accountability system.

2. **Rebalance our systems to value skills and wellbeing alongside attainment.** Our current system isn't giving young people from all backgrounds the skills employers need, and it's not giving them a positive experience of school either. However, change will need to be thoughtful and long-term, avoiding unintentional increase of disadvantage gaps and teacher workload.
3. **Deliver a quality early years education for every child.** Poorer children are more likely to be behind expected language and development levels when they start school. We must make high-quality early years education and care accessible to every child, so that they are able to build relationships and skills they'll draw on for the rest of their lives. We need strategies for increasing supply to poorer communities and building a strong and sustained workforce.
4. **Better fund and join-up the local support for families.** Rising child poverty and a lack of investment in the services that support families have led to schools filling gaps left by others. This is not sustainable for schools or the families they serve. We need better funding for social care, mental health, and housing; we also need clearer

responsibilities, communication channels, and shared objectives between agencies. We also need funding restored to the streams intended to mitigate the impacts of poverty on education.

Some changes are needed immediately: we must ensure we have great staff in every school and college by addressing the issues of pay, workload and inclusion lying at the root of the present crisis. We must also remove the financial barriers to quality early childhood education and care for the poorest children. We must take these actions as soon as possible, even as we design a long-term strategy to reinforce the early years, school, and college workforces.

However, there are other more structural changes that will require considered strategic planning. For example, our current system leaves too many pupils without a sense of belonging or value (UCL, 2020)⁹. It's also failing to support young people to build the skills that we know employers want, like communication, teamwork, and problem solving (FEA, 2022). At the heart of these issues is our system of curriculum, assessment and accountability, which needs to be transformed into one that values wellbeing, skills and inclusion alongside academic attainment. But this must be done in a phased approach that doesn't immediately increase teacher workload or unintentionally widen inequalities.

We must also develop a long-term strategy for joining up and funding the services around families, so the education system isn't serving as a patch for gaps in other services without the resources to function properly. The various agencies supporting a family – from social care, to health – should be working in concert to secure better outcomes, rather than in silos and at odds with one another. Funding is a major issue, and as early-intervention services have been cut, those at the point of crisis have exploded (Pro Bono Economics, 2023)¹⁰. However, we also know that clearer roles, responsibilities, and communication channels between agencies can make a real difference in the outcomes of children (RSA, 2023)¹¹.

If we work together to get this right, what could the future hold? A society where every child has the support they need to thrive in school, and an education system that delivers the range of skills that they'll need to succeed in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world.

It isn't a fantasy. It will require unprecedented collaboration across schools, the third sector, business and government, as well as a long-term commitment to building a system that helps every child thrive. But how can we not? The future of our society depends on it.

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Victoria Hearn

Victoria Hearn is an executive headteacher in the Eastern Learning Alliance. She leads three schools in Cambridgeshire, covering primary, special and secondary education.



A broad and balanced curriculum: the role of the International Baccalaureate in 21st education.

A broad and balanced curriculum is essential to ensure that all children, especially those who are disadvantaged, have access to the learning and opportunities that will equip them with the skills they need to navigate the 21st century workplace. In an increasingly globalised world, it has never been more important for students to cultivate the knowledge and life skills required to succeed beyond the classroom – and their country’s borders.

The introduction of T Levels in 2020, without including mandatory language learning, was a missed opportunity to ensure that all students learn a second language to the age of 18. Not only does learning a foreign language ensure that our young people are equipped to meet the demands of the modern workplace, but it helps them to develop a respect for, and understanding of, different cultures and perspectives.

While Rishi Sunak’s recent focus on overhauling the teaching of mathematics is promising, and the debate on the introduction of a British Baccalaureate has been ongoing for some time, I can’t help but feel that time and money could be saved by utilising a tried and tested education framework that students are already benefitting from in the UK. It is clear that the UK curriculum and its regimented focus on specialisation over breadth is not preparing students for the interdisciplinary jobs of the future, and alternatives should be explored.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP) enables students to study mathematics and at least one foreign language until the age of 18, and offers a far more rewarding syllabus compared to that of the UK's national curriculum. However, the IB isn't only available to those in independent schools, if that was the case we risk a large proportion of the young population being left behind. It is no surprise that funding is a huge concern in the roll out of this new vision for a baccalaureate education; particularly for state-funded schools who are already stretched. In the UK, the IB is often seen as only accessible to independent schools, but with some creative budgeting and timetable management, a comprehensive IB programme can be delivered by state-funded schools too. We have been offering the IB at the state-funded Impington International College for over 30 years as we believe it places our students in the best position to succeed in later life.

Its focus on contextual learning, cultural understanding and interdisciplinary learning provides students with the communication, problem-solving and critical thinking skills that a lot of businesses have placed at the top of their list of requirements when recruiting.

While there can be timetable challenges, we manage to offer our students the choice of nine languages including Japanese, so providing state school students with access to multiple language choices is more than possible.

But it is also important for us to consider how and what students learn too; we must move away from content-centric syllabi and focus on context. IB students learn in the context of five themes: identities, experiences, sharing the planet, social organisation, and human ingenuity. This practical application of learning prepares them to live and work in another country far more effectively than conjugating tenses by rote.

Adapting the current curriculum framework would be a lengthy and costly process but there is no need to reinvent the education wheel. Replacing the national curriculum with the broader and more balanced IB frameworks will ensure that the British education system gives students the necessary skills for the interconnected job roles of the next decade to ensure that the UK remains competitive, globally.

While certain state schools such as ours do offer the IB to its students, it is largely only available to students able to afford private education. Replacing the national curriculum with the IB will ensure that the British education system gives all students, regardless of background, the best possible opportunity to succeed in the job roles of the future. I hope the government will seriously consider it as a means to improve students' prospects for the future.



Chris Holmwood

Chris Holmwood is the Chief Education Officer at 5 Dimensions Trust in Buckinghamshire.

Talk to any employer and they will say that schools aren't preparing young people for the world of work. Indeed, where schools are doing this, they are often doing it in spite of the curriculum rather than because of it.

The difference between the current and previous Ofsted frameworks is pretty indicative. Knowledge is referenced 66 more times in the current framework than in the previous one, yet skills are only mentioned nine more times. The frequency of the use of the word curriculum has grown from 50 to 177. Add to that an emphasis upon the EBacc and a focus on terminal exams rather than coursework and you might begin to see why so many employers feel as they do, and why Andy Burnham is setting up an alternative MBacc route in Manchester.

What's interesting about the MBacc isn't just the fact that it is an alternative route but also that it is tailored to the needs and opportunities of the local community. I will watch its implementation with interest and hope that local schools find enough flexibility to be preparing their students to engage productively with this opportunity. The other welcome aspect to this proposal is that it commences aged 14. Previously the DfE's focus on skills development has been explicitly post-16. This was launched in January 2021 as 'Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth.' I had to raise a smile that the lifelong opportunity begins at 16, as if skills only become important once the knowledge has been assessed.

My manifesto proposal would be that we move toward a National Baccalaureate model as proposed by the National Baccalaureate Trust. This would encourage and reward students for academic achievement, project work and personal development. It could be shaped to meet local need and opportunity yet assessed at a nationally agreed standard.

Ideally local employers would contribute to it and would grow in confidence that school leavers had the skills they required. This is highly relevant; a 2020 employers report said that 28% of vacancies were due to shortages in skills. The skills White Paper was passed into law in April 2022, although I have seen little impact so far... but then we have had quite the turnaround of education secretaries since that time!

It set a very realistic and challenging context in its case for change in the aftermath of the pandemic and Brexit and I think whoever is in government going forward should build upon its recommendations and apply them to younger year groups. I think that would have a much bigger impact than giving everyone two more years of maths lessons – we need to look through the other end of the telescope!

Danielle Lewis-Egonu

Danielle Lewis-Egonu is the CEO of Cygnus Academies Trust, which oversees eight primary schools in Kent and London. Danielle is also a member of SSAT's primary network steering group.



To anyone open to a conversation....

In today's rapidly evolving world, education plays a crucial role in preparing children for the unknown challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. To ensure the holistic development of young people, education must adapt and address the evolving needs of society. It is in its very nature to do so. I have seen this next evolution happening right before me, presenting me with three key areas that require attention for the future development of education: **community engagement and involvement, the continued fostering of ambition and achievement in children, and the promotion of collaboration among organisations.**

In the realm of education, the high-stakes accountability model has long been hailed as a beacon of progress by those who sit outside of our sector. Advocates argue that it ensures quality education by holding teachers, leaders and schools accountable for children's performance. However, upon closer examination, it is evident that this model needs greater conversation as too much has been lost to us through imposed fear and overzealous levels of scrutiny. I have seen the green shoots of change emerge from the burnt ground as we have come to discover the power of our voice within the educational landscape. It is a strong and mighty one.

Trust us.

None of us wants to see a school struggling or young people not meeting their full potential. We know all too well, the impact on a community and children's life chances when things go drastically wrong. So trust us to hold our colleagues accountable whilst supporting each other. We are extremely good at this, as it is what we do and have done time and time again with great success.

Talk to us.

We are modelling our expectations and approaches all the time to you because our aim is to foster genuine learning and not create a widespread culture of fear, stifled creativity, and a narrowed scope of education. As a collective, we constantly question the efficacy of our approaches and explore alternative methods. We are educators, after all, in a vocation deeply rooted in discourse and debate. As a collective, we challenge each other, we conduct research, and we take action when needed.

Let us teach.

We create curriculums, study childhood development, specialise in subjects, SEND and engage in ongoing professional development, to name just a few of our talents.

As a sector, we know how to tailor our approaches to address the diverse needs of our pupils, who are often your children too. We advocate for a more holistic education system that

promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. We are, of course, not completely averse to the use of standardised testing, when and where appropriate or Ofsted, when and where appropriate, but let us work with you on the how. Don't do to us, do with us.

What does education need next? Us.

The people within education, to drive the change by working together for the benefit of the sector and ultimately all of our children and young people.

Sean Maher

Sean Maher is the headteacher of Richard Challoner School, an 11-18 comprehensive school for boys in Surrey.



There can be no doubt that education has been through a challenging period over the last 15 years. Budgets squeezed by austerity, the challenges of the pandemic and the impact on young people and families, the cost of living crisis coupled with unfunded pay rises, a teacher recruitment and retention crisis and, finally, an inspection system that has lost its sense of purpose and the respect of the profession.

When you look at it like this, it is easy to think the future is bleak and education in dire straits. However, with a few structural and systemic changes, I think there is real hope for the future. I base this hope on a generation of younger teachers that I see as more engaged with the craft of teaching and more professional than at any time in history but also, when you are working with young people, there must always be hope.

Let's imagine for a moment that I was asked to be the new Secretary of State for Education and the new Prime Minister has given me a free hand to 'mend' our education system. The first five things on my to do list would look something like this:

1. **Sort out the funding situation in both mainstream and SEND.** If you want the best education system in the world it must be funded appropriately and this means a complete overhaul of funding to raise the salaries of teachers and support staff (this is crucial, our support staff are too often undervalued and underpaid) on a scale never seen before. Then give schools a five-year funding settlement so that budgets can be properly planned, and key objectives prioritised with a commitment to another five-year funding settlement by the end of the fourth year.
2. **Change the lens through which we view success for our schools.** Whilst outcomes will always be important, schools should focus on developing the whole person so that they can serve society. I would advocate an annual survey of all pupils and parents focusing on happiness and the impact the school is having on individual development.
3. **Ofsted must be reformed.** Get schools operating in groups where they drive school-to-school improvement and use the resources of Ofsted to really support schools that are struggling as well as those serving our most deprived communities.
4. **Remove school reform, curriculum and otherwise, from the political arena.** Set up an independent group of teachers, leaders, parents and pupils to advise on any reforms and commit to trialling any suggestions before implementing them. Once agreed, ensure a reasonable and sensible timeline for delivery in schools.
5. **Focus relentlessly on the wider curriculum** (sport, music, art, dance, etc...) and oracy so that we build young people's confidence, develop their character and ensure they are effective communicators.

So, these would be my five priorities as I came into office as secretary of state. Nothing too radical but I hope with a real focus on what is best for our children, our teachers and our schools (and not on winning elections)!

Zoe Morris

Zoe Morris is the headteacher of Chorlton High School, an 11-16 comprehensive school in Manchester.

The school playground is joyful; sunshine highlights children at play, sounds of their laughter fills the air, and teachers smile looking over the sight as they sip their coffee during the morning duty. In the centre a seesaw sits precariously balanced at its mid-point; half in the morning sun, half in shadow.

There is a real concern that it will tip one way, falling into shadow. Our children and young people are facing the most challenging of times. They have already lived through what we as adults would have dismissed as the plot of an unimaginative teenage dystopian novel. After this global life-changing event, they now live in a society that faces monumental challenges: a cost of living crisis, deteriorating public services, a mental health pandemic, the climate crisis. The adults around them are struggling and our children sense this.

But despite this, the sunshine still beckons. School staff have enabled halcyon moments on the darkest of days. They have consistently provided our children with high quality

teaching, catch-up tutoring, pastoral support, mental health support and enrichment. They have offered inspiration, guidance and hope. For our communities they have given emotional support, access to services and – all too regularly – food parcels.

If schools are to continue to provide this hope in the future, then we now need to offer them inspiration and the correct resources. Many of the services and aspects of support provided by schools are beyond their original educational purpose. We became teachers to teach children; we each now go to school to play many roles.

School leaders precariously try to tip this balance favourably. They are aware school staff have faced, and continue to face, the same personal challenges as the rest of society. Schools have worked with compassion and creativity to help push through those challenges. But now everyone is tired. On the seesaw feet skim the floor, conscious that at any point the seat may sink to a gravelly nadir.

What schools need to rise again is an investment in the teaching profession. All staff who work in school can and do make a difference on a daily basis. For this to continue our system needs:

- **To promote teaching and education as a worthwhile, attractive and rewarding profession.** Those outside of the sector need to recognise and value education's place in transforming the lives and long-term life chances of children.

- **To nurture and develop early careers teachers**, not just with some agreed IT package of training, but to give them the face-to-face coaching and the social support that they need to not only survive, but to flourish in a profession that is currently at breaking point.
- **To retain staff and to be able to reinvigorate and re-energise them.** There needs to be an investment in time for quality training and effective wellbeing support; ensuring that this is built into the school day and into the pinch points of the year when the workload buckles - not at the end of the school day when they are already exhausted.
- **To develop compassionate and creative school leaders with the moral purpose and energy to lift our schools from the ground.** Leaders need the time to think, to properly lead others as schools try to bounce back from the overwhelming challenges that we are facing. There is only so long that they can sustain crisis management; they are now passing that point and the dangerous potential 'burnout' zone looms like the shadow that is creeping over our playground.
- **To develop system leaders across education and children's services who work collaboratively**, without blame or competition, so that we can take collective action.

This is the way that we will enable the next generations of children to thrive.

And yes, the word that reoccurs here is 'investment'; investment in people, investment in staff, investment in resources, investment in training. This will need additional funding, but it isn't just money that our system needs.

Investment means a 'commitment of resources to achieve later benefits'. Long term benefits require investment in our schools. This investment isn't simply about providing better pay, it is about making a commitment to school staff that the trust, respect, time and resources that they need will be provided. This is what will ensure that our schools – and our children – do not fall into the shadows.

Trust our schools to lead the way. This is what the country needs to believe in, and what the government needs to invest in. We all need to make this commitment to ensure that the seesaw rises and that our children are able to thrive and play in the sunshine each day.

Stephen Munday CBE

Stephen Munday is the Chief Executive of the CAM Academy Trust, which currently oversees four secondary schools (two of which have sixth forms) and seven primary schools in Cambridgeshire. Stephen was also the President of the Chartered College of Teaching until 2023.



I think that it is an interesting question to ask what could be done that would make a real and positive difference but not require additional funding. Of course, we all recognise that additional funding is badly needed in the state school sector in our country. However, some things can make a substantial difference without additional funding.

It seems to be close to universally acknowledged that changing the way that Ofsted operates is one such example. Some simple but significant reforms, most notably the removal of an overall grade and the decoupling of safeguarding inspection from a quality of education inspection, will help schools to run better and improve school staff and leaders' welfare.

More generally, a changed and better, more appropriate relationship between the teaching profession and Government is badly needed and does not fundamentally rely on funding (certainly not exclusively). At its heart, this is about acknowledging the status and significance of the teaching

profession and its proper position in the school and education system. The profession, not the Government, should be expected to lead and oversee in the areas where it is the expert and the high-status professional and the Government is clearly not. This is the way that things tend to work in other professions.

For the teaching profession, the most obvious tangible symbol of this would be to ask the teachers' professional body, the Chartered College of Teaching, to write the Teachers' Standards.

These are probably ripe for appropriate review. Asking the Chartered College to re-write them and then to help to oversee them for the profession would be hugely significant. In a stroke, it would officially raise the status of the profession to a more appropriate level and re-set the relationship between the profession and Government. Numbers of other important things would then flow from this fundamental and symbolic development.

Erika Podmore

Erika Podmore is the headteacher of Eltham Hill School, an 11-18 community comprehensive school in South London.



The simple answer to this question is more great teachers and leaders of schools.

As we all know from our own experience as students, the quality of the teacher is key, and great teachers can go on to be highly effective leaders with the right training and development. Those great teachers build strong relationships with their students, they show commitment to their school community and go ‘the extra mile’ in providing support and enrichment for those they teach. As a headteacher the most important part of my role is making sure I can put those great teachers in front of my students and give them the quality of experience that they deserve.

The problem facing headteachers now is that there are simply not enough good graduates entering the profession and there are too many leaving, seemingly burnt out, after a relatively short career. I lead a popular, over-subscribed and successful school

where behaviour and attitudes are outstanding and students really want to learn. A few years ago, I would be looking through up to 20 applications for an English, history or geography teacher post. This year I have struggled to get more than two and often one of those is asking to be sponsored from overseas. Teaching is no longer seen as an attractive profession and vacancies in England have almost doubled since the pandemic. The outlook is not set to improve either as the TES reported in December 2022 that almost 40% of places on secondary teaching courses this academic year went unfilled.

So, what is causing this recruitment crisis and why isn't teaching seen as an attractive career option? Obviously pay is a factor and there is no doubt that teachers pay has fallen relative to graduate pay in the private sector. The cost of living crisis means that however much of a vocation a young person might feel, they may simply not be able to afford to be a teacher. For our staff it is almost impossible to afford to live close to our school, particularly if they want a home

large enough for a family. But it's not just pay; there have been well-publicised concerns about teacher workload, limited opportunities for flexible working, a lack of autonomy and excessive accountability in the classroom.

The solution to these problems is not easy but there is no doubt in my mind that what education needs next is a rethink about how we train, support and develop our teachers.

At our school we were lucky enough to be a part of one of the last Erasmus Projects involving an English school, the project involved visits for students and staff to Finland, Norway and Spain and we received visitors from those countries here too. Students from all four countries worked together to discuss and try to tackle the big social issues confronting us all. Meanwhile teachers and leaders from the four schools were able to gain an insight into each other's education systems and work. It was fascinating, and while we were able to share some of our best practice in pedagogy, safeguarding and inclusion, discussions relating to teaching as a career gave me some good pointers as to how we might improve things in terms of our training, support and development.

It is not about reducing workload in terms of cutting back on planning and marking, these are the things that great teachers need to do, it is about having the time to do them properly. This can be done by reducing teacher contact time.

If 25% of teacher time in the school day was allocated for this, we would have more teachers in school, which would mean fewer duties per person, and give teachers the opportunity to enjoy doing their job well. With more teachers in school, we could consider allowing teachers with caring responsibilities to have more flexible working patterns without impacting on supervision and safeguarding. We could build collaborative planning opportunities into the school day and even potentially move to all staff working at home sometimes or even working a four-day week!

If we want to retain and develop more great teachers, we need to give them the time to become real experts in pedagogy and in their subject. There is no doubt that investment now will pay dividends in the future by encouraging great graduates to both train to become teachers and then want to stay in a profession that values them and meets their needs.

Nic Ponsford FIESE FRSA

Nic Ponsford is the Founder and CEO of the GEC (Global Equality Collective), whose mission is to make ordinary classrooms extraordinarily inclusive. Previously an advanced skills teacher, award-winning teacher and Harvard author (“TechnoTeaching”), she is now a thought leader and doctorate researcher in education and technology.



Strength in numbers - an accessible education system that serves.

The education system is not fit for purpose at present. A system is defined as a series of working parts. It is safe to say, our sector is working hard – but it is broken.

As we move to the next one hundred years of formalised education, we need to lean into the purpose of education and schooling. A sharper focus on the humanity and socialisation that people need in order to learn, plus an acknowledgement that new technologies will help us scale innovation within the sector. These two elements will result in an education system that works – one that can truly meet the needs of all.

We need to meet our learners where they are in order to increase their opportunities and standards of living. This is how we better serve our communities in the state school system.

Why? In today's educational landscape, we know that the barriers faced by those from under-represented backgrounds have had far-reaching consequences, perpetuating inequalities and limiting their academic and personal growth. There is a transformative power in fostering inclusivity within our classrooms.

By creating environments where all are listened to, where students, families and staff are all better served and protected – all feel valued and supported – educational institutions can break down these barriers and provide opportunities for growth and learning.

Improving staff workplace culture is one way of doing this, a confident approach to accessible edtech and more diverse leadership teams can also help to ensure an authentic sense of belonging and decisions that include rather than exclude.

Right now, we're facing a multitude of challenges that make the need for inclusive classrooms even more pressing. One significant factor is the ongoing staff recruitment crisis in the UK state school sector, which leads 2023-24 into a year of staff shortages. This shortage will place additional strain on existing staff members – but further highlights the importance of

creating an inclusive environment that supports both students and educators in terms of recruitment and retention.

Furthermore, there is a growing global awareness of systemic racism within educational institutions. It is essential to address this issue head-on and work towards dismantling barriers and biases that hinder the progress and success of students from marginalised backgrounds. Empowering diverse voices to better understand phobic beliefs and obstacles for inclusion help to flip challenges and risks into solutions and opportunities. Collective action is needed now.

The post-pandemic context has also brought to light various challenges that impact the wellbeing and educational experiences of students. There has been an increase in poverty, exacerbating existing socio-economic disparities and creating additional barriers to learning. Additionally, the pandemic has amplified mental health challenges among students, highlighting the need for inclusive environments that support their emotional well-being. And moreover, neurodivergent and SEND students are facing significant challenges, with growing waiting lists for support services. It is crucial to create inclusive classrooms that embrace and accommodate the diverse needs of these students, ensuring they receive the necessary resources and support for their educational journey.

How? Like any whole organisation issue we have – we go to the data.

Accurate data is necessary to measure and audit where we are, lead intervention and create change. We are already seeing the impact that AI and assistive technology are having to decrease workload and increase productivity. Likewise, traditional approaches to DEI in schools have been labour-intensive and time-consuming, often involving coaches working directly with different groups for up to two years. This approach often fails to capture the vital perspectives of quieter voices, those hesitant to speak out in group settings.

Using technology to better understand the experiences of the many at scale is another way schools, trusts and regional teams are able to use, equip, and educate staff teams saving them time, money and resources but supercharging the results.

I believe that inclusive classrooms are not only beneficial for students but also for staff members. Creating a sense of belonging and inclusivity among the teaching staff is essential for fostering a positive and supportive work environment. When teachers feel valued and included, they can better support the diverse needs of their students and contribute to an overall culture of inclusivity and acceptance.

If we truly want an education system that serves all, we will need to focus on the strength in numbers and how we use a sense of belonging and digital innovation to create a series of working parts that serve our communities – then the system will work for us all.

David Potter

David Potter is the headteacher of Churchdown School, an 11-18 mixed comprehensive school in Gloucestershire.



Since the introduction of the 1914 White Paper that saw the inception of three educational systems under one regulator, education has continued to be a segmented entity that has aimed to serve all children within it. This segmentation grew under the Labour government in 2000 with the introduction of academies and then even more in 2010 under a Conservative government with free schools being added to the patchwork landscape of the educational offer.

No matter what additions have been made by previous governments, there are three consistent actors within the educational system. They are the school improvers (school leaders and practitioners); the inspectors (Ofsted) and the regulators (DfE and the local authority). Each actor has a very specific role. Put simply, they are to improve the standards of education, inspect the quality of education and ensure it is done so in the remits of the rules and regulations from central government.

However, the problem with the three actors within the educational system is that they are not aligned and indeed often don't even speak with each other.

Imagine them if you will as three neighbours in the same street who never speak with each other and in fact have a very high fence between their properties – this is what our educational system looks like now. If they were to talk and above all, really understand their role within the educational system, then we would have a high performing system for all of the children and adults within it. Sadly, they do not, which is why within this disjointed and confused system we have recruitment concerns, underfunded schools being asked to do more with less and an inspectorate body that illustrates just how incredibly low the aspirations for the system it is inspecting are. Take a moment to think about the quick, highly resourced response a school placed into RI receives in comparison to a school who receives ‘good’. A school who receives RI quickly receives brokered, funded support. A school who receives a ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ receives two bullet points as part of a summary report – two bullet points that are way out of date when Ofsted next return to that school. This leaves us with the question: ‘what are the aspirations of our proud educational system?’ To get to ‘good’ and no further?

Sometimes the actors get confused about their role within the system. For example, sometimes the regulators, the DfE, think they are the school improvers and deploy radical thinking and strategy that they believe will improve the educational system. In the past this has looked like the introduction of the EBacc – a strategy

that aimed to raise the aspirations of all students. This resulted in some school leaders responding to this regulatory advice and forcing some children to take an additional language at GCSE as each school went in pursuit of a 75% headline figure. Fast forward to today, after so many children used up one of their valuable GCSE options on a language, regardless of whether it was right for them and their future goals, and EBacc looks to be forgotten and left to slowly drift into the night. Most recently the regulatory space looks to be confused about its purpose once more with the potential introduction of maths until each and every child in the system is 18. So many questions about that one!

But, there is cause for much hope as the system, even though currently broken, does have all the right parts. Here we go beyond the manifesto and answer the question; what does education need next?

If Ofsted can become as agile as the schools it is inspecting and use professional dialogue to do this vital role, then inspectors wouldn’t be asked to use a rigid framework that frames what the inspector is expecting to see, instead allowing them to discuss the effectiveness of what they are seeing, within different contexts. There are many reports of excellent inspections where the lead inspector has worked with and listened to the school leaders about their challenges and the strategic impact of their work. There needs to be more of this and so, I suggest, a move away from a rigid framework that does not acknowledge

the challenges of today. I also would ask that the one-word inspection outcome also be removed and replaced with a narrative about the school's impact on the children it serves.

The most optimism lies with the school improvers, as it is with this body of leaders that the educational system will truly improve, if given resources, space and trust to do so.

If you were to visit the school where I am headteacher, Churchdown School in Gloucester, you would see some excellent practice. The practice has come from visiting, talking with and learning from other great school leaders and practitioners.

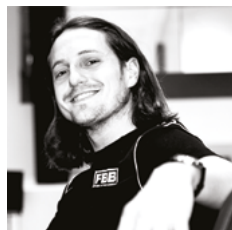
As a result of working within the SSAT Leading Edge group, Churchdown has elements of all schools we have worked with in this incredibly strong network of school improvers. Indeed, we have shared our high-performance strategies with others and so, just like there are elements of other schools in Churchdown, there are elements of Churchdown in many other schools. Such shared, great practice has gone on to have direct impact on thousands of children nationally.

If given the resource by the DfE and the understanding by Ofsted, the school improvers will continue to share and develop a high-performance educational system for all of the children in it. Ofsted reports won't do this and nor will regulatory frameworks – school leaders will.

So, what does education need next? For the three actors to listen to each other, understand their role within the system and serve that purpose expertly. Then, collectively, we will be on the right path for all the young people as they are the future of our country.

James Reeves

James Reeves is the senior press and advocacy manager at Football Beyond Borders (FBB). FBB works with young people from areas of socio-economic disadvantage who are passionate about football but disengaged at school, to help them finish school with the skills and grades to make a successful transition into adulthood.



Like most challenges in education, we thought it made sense to start Football Beyond Borders' response to this question by asking our young people. Knowing where to start first with education reform is a tricky task. Point one of the SSAT Children's Charter sets out the right approach:

“Children and young people should be central in developing a shared understanding of what they need at any point in time”

Mahnoor, a 16 year-old FBB participant from Brierfield in Lancashire said there were two key things education needed next:

- 1. Reformation of exams:** “The working world is more modern and advanced than the skills exams are testing for. They’ve arguably become an outdated way of measuring progress/ability. For example, we now have access to calculators, mobile phones and the internet which makes complete memorisation of whole subjects less necessary. They also disregard people with performance anxiety around exams, disabilities and those whose skills can’t be shown through a piece of paper. I am definitely not saying that exams should be abolished, just that they should be reformed for a more modern society.”
- 2. More diversity in the curriculum:** “I learnt in sociology that children feel excluded and distant from education because they don’t see themselves (their ethnic/religious groups) represented by the people they’re learning about. So for instance in English, children mainly study White authors/writers which could make some children of ethnic minorities feel unable to aspire to become writers. Also, lots of texts in English are outdated and don’t touch on ongoing social issues, which is a missed opportunity for modern-day social awareness through literature.”

Anaiya, a 17 year-old FBB graduate from London, felt that education needed teachers to build relationships with their students, for these relationships to continue uninterrupted during the vital years of KS3/4 and for teachers to take the time to understand young people and their context.

What does education need next?

- Teachers ^{would benefit} need to Build relationships with students.
- consistent Teachers - No disruption in the vital years
(Yr 10 - 13)
- understanding why a child are the way they are.

Anaiya, a 17-year-old FBB graduate

As demonstrated by just two responses, there are several areas to reform and improve. In the two examples we have shared, Anaiya and Mahnoor reference curriculum, skills, assessment, and contextual safeguarding. These are four areas of focus where we might find some of our best bets.

Unfortunately, we know our system isn't working for a large number of vulnerable young people. Given the public focus on teacher retention (and its compound effects on pupil relationships with teachers), we have honed in on the challenges in the system caused by persistent disruptive behaviour:

- In 2021/22, the most common reason across all permanent exclusions was persistent disruptive behaviour, recorded 3,050 times (against 47% of permanent exclusions). The same reason was also the most common across all suspensions, recorded 289,600 times (against 50% of suspensions). Persistent disruptive behaviour has been the most common reason for all exclusions every year that data has been available on the DfE website.
- The new national survey of behaviour commissioned by the DfE also found that 60% of school leaders and teachers said pupil misbehaviour had had a negative impact on their health.

A shift in our approach to regulating behaviour is now a national necessity for both students and teachers. The shift must be towards a relational approach that sees behaviour as communication and where the effects of trauma are recognised, with an ambition to heal within the context of trusted relationships between staff and students.

Without empathy, understanding and a workforce which is given adequate support to assist the most vulnerable, these issues will persist.

To do this effectively, teachers must be given the requisite pay, training and guidance. Labour's intention within their Opportunities Mission to deliver a 'Teacher Training Entitlement' and ensure early intervention is available for all through recruiting thousands more mental health professionals and providing an open access hub for young people in every community is encouraging.

FBB practitioners are enrolled in an intensive weekly training programme to develop expertise in SEND support, counselling, teaching and learning and systemic practice to support over 2,000 participants across the country. This pilot – which centres on interactions – could be rolled out nationally tomorrow. Behaviour change begins with political leadership, and whoever is next in government must be brave in their behaviour strategy.

There is one word in Anaiya's response to this question which underpins everything FBB's methodology is based on, and it is where we see the silver bullet for disruptive behaviour. A radical shift back to the root of a healthy and thriving society – positive relationships.

Through FBB's four-year programme, our staff and young people share invaluable emotional experiences on and off the pitch. We combine this with reflections inside the classroom on our social and emotional learning

(SEL) and wellbeing. Therapeutic mentoring support is offered to the most vulnerable to build engagement at school where previously there was resistance. Memories are made together on exceptional trips and experiences. And the results are clear:

- 95% of our students who were at risk of exclusion at the start of the year finished the year in school without being excluded or receiving a managed move.
- FBB students were 11 times more likely to get their GCSE English and maths compared to our national comparison groups.

Our approach is centred on prioritising building healthy trusted relationships between students and their teachers and peers above everything else. Football Beyond Borders works directly with young people and their teachers to enable this to happen. The sense of belonging that comes with healthy school communities provides the fertile ground for young people to learn about themselves, the people around them and their societal context. To develop a lifelong passion for learning, you must find joy where learning is located.

That is what education needs next. The joy of relationships, shaped by the voices of our young people, parents and teachers together.



Gerry Robinson

Gerry Robinson is the executive headteacher of Haringey Learning Partnership. She leads all of the alternative provision schools in Haringey, North London.

With just 18 months until the upcoming general election, the pivotal role of education in shaping our society looms larger than ever. As a passionate advocate for social justice, I firmly believe that addressing racism, inequity, poverty, and provision for students with special educational needs must stand at the forefront of our educational agenda. This juncture presents a critical moment for change, demanding that school leaders and academics unite to ensure the voices of marginalised communities are not only heard but actively amplified.

Education, often hailed as the great equaliser, possesses the potential to bridge the chasm between privilege and disadvantage. However, our education system remains stained with systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalised groups.

As we navigate the pathway towards the future of education, it becomes evident that the conventional paradigm of learning falls short in accommodating the diverse needs of our students. It's time to wholeheartedly embrace a comprehensive approach that transcends standardised testing, and emphasises not only knowledge acquisition, but also critical thinking, empathy, and personal development.

At the heart of the transformation we seek lies the imperative to confront the deeply ingrained racism entrenched within our educational institutions. Acknowledgement alone is insufficient; proactive dismantling is required. This imperative involves a rigorous re-evaluation of curricula, ensuring their inclusivity and fidelity to the experiences of all students. Historical narratives should be presented truthfully, encompassing the experiences of marginalised communities and celebrating their contributions to our collective history. Through such measures, an environment can be cultivated that validates the identities of students historically excluded, empowering them to embrace their heritage with pride.

However, equity isn't confined solely to representation; it must extend to resources and opportunities, including investment in teacher recruitment, retention and training. The dire need for adequate funding in areas of socio-economic deprivation cannot be overstated.

It is through such funding that students gain access to a level playing field.

In envisioning the future of education, we must transcend the classroom walls. The curriculum we design should empower students to engage with the broader world, interrogate prevailing norms, and actively participate in moulding a just society. This necessitates the creation of safe spaces for dialogues surrounding pertinent social issues. Within these spaces, students can explore subjects such as systemic racism, gender inequality, environmental justice, and beyond.

Education ought to nurture students into confident individuals who can think critically about the world and know that their voices carry weight when it comes to making change.

In parallel, we must also prioritise the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our students. The modern world's pressures can exact a toll on students' mental health, and our schools should serve as sanctuaries of support and empathy. Integrating emotional intelligence into the curriculum, combined with accessible mental health resources, fortifies students' resilience and empathy, equipping them to navigate a life characterised by meaningful interactions and contributions.

A crucial facet of this transformation is moving away from high-stakes accountability measures and assessments. Standardised testing has its place; however, over-reliance on it narrows the curriculum, inhibits creativity, and exacerbates inequalities. Additionally, re-evaluating the role of institutions like Ofsted, which can perpetuate a culture of conformity and put undue pressure on teachers and leaders, is essential. Rather than focusing solely on exam grades, let's embrace a holistic assessment framework that acknowledges the diverse talents, skills, and potentials of all students.

As we look ahead to the future of education, it's crucial to pay attention to the perspectives of the people most affected by our education system: the students. Their views, experiences, and ambitions can guide us, as they are the ones who will inherit the world we leave behind. By supporting student-led initiatives, seeking their input in decision-making, and fostering their sense of empowerment, we can create an educational environment that truly represents the hopes and needs of everyone. The looming general election presents an unparalleled opportunity to reshape the trajectory of our education system.

Let us seize this moment to ardently champion equity, justice, and inclusion in education.

By amplifying the experiences of marginalised communities, addressing the concerns of those in poverty, and catering to the unique needs of students with special educational needs, we can forge a holistic, inclusive system. Through the active confrontation of racism, the commitment to resource investment, the fostering of emotional wellbeing, and the empowerment of students as catalysts for change, we can inaugurate an educational era that not only transforms lives but becomes a driving force for societal progress. Let's rally our voices for an education system that stands as a resolute movement for social justice.

Dr Elizabeth Smith

Dr Elizabeth Smith is the headteacher of Marlborough School, an 11-19 school for pupils with severe and complex learning difficulties in London. Elizabeth is also an Affiliate Researcher with The Open University.



My hope for special education in the next few years is that special schools are acknowledged and validated as a unique sector for students who all have individual strengths and needs. Students with learning difficulties often have spiky cognitive profiles and do not learn in a linear manner, therefore personalised and individual provision is essential. Furthermore, whilst our challenges are similar to mainstream schools, these challenges can present themselves in different ways, and I will explore examples of these with regards to budgets, recruitment, assessment and research.

School budgets continue to be a concern, an issue I sincerely hope will be addressed imminently. Due to the high levels of staffing needed to support our students, many special schools spend over 95% of their budget on staffing. We are constantly trying to balance everything ensuring the best possible provision for our students. We are hampered by budget constraints such as not having the teacher pay rises fully funded, with 3.5% coming out of our school budget, which will have a considerable knock-on effect. Furthermore, we need consistency with student banding allocations for top-up funding, to ensure the appropriate provision can be provided for all students.

Recruitment and retention are key issues for many sectors at the moment, but for special needs schools this is particularly challenging due to the sheer volume of staff including teaching assistants who are vital in their support for students. Further consideration needs to be given to initial teacher training to encourage more teachers into SEND, and creating practical routes to qualified teacher status in secondary special schools that can develop the excellent staff that we already have.

It is not just the recruitment challenge that schools face for their staff, but recruitment issues within social care and multidisciplinary teams. For example, the shortage of speech and language therapists (SaLTs) and occupational therapists needs to be urgently addressed and rectified.

Furthermore, the thresholds for support seem to have become higher, leaving schools to assume additional roles and responsibilities, or buy in their own private SaLTs and therapy assistants. This places additional burdens on special school budgets. Greater consistency across school, home and the community is needed - when this works at its best, a young person's life is truly transformed. However, if all agencies are not in place and the support is not consistent throughout the student's life, things do not go so well. In addition to therapy support, respite care and transport provision, an understanding of learning difficulties from all those in the community such as the police, health care professionals and community venues is necessary.

A school can often be the nucleus for a young person with learning difficulties, and the consistent entity in their life, therefore we often take on more than just an educating role, and continue to plug the gaps of social care, family support and therapy provision. I hope for all our students that they can be seen, heard and integrated and accepted more consistently into society. Schools cannot do this alone.

Another example of how special schools are not treated as a unique sector is through our assessment systems. Following the Rochford Review (2016), P Levels were disappled in 2018 by the DfE, however there has been a lack of guidance

as to what assessment methods to use. Therefore, many secondary special schools have created their own individual assessment systems to measure progress, which could be subjective in nature. An individual and personalised holistic approach to assessment is needed to meet the needs of our students that includes the voice of the student. We need a means to benchmark progress and to be held accountable in a meaningful and objective manner that does not include any measure for 'greater depth' as generalising skills and being able to transfer knowledge within areas such as life skills is far more important for our students.

Finally, I hope that there will be better connectivity between policy makers and special schools and believe there should be more practitioner-led research in the area of SEND, including the voice of the student too. We are intuitive action researchers, even if we do not always recognise this. We work on a day-to-day basis with fantastic young people and have much knowledge and experience to share. We constantly reflect and seek to improve our practice, reviewing our teaching strategies to benefit our students. Being a reflective, evidence-based practitioner is particularly relevant to students with SEND who require personalised approaches – what works for one student will not necessarily work for another. Policy change should not sit separately from schools, it needs to happen in conjunction with school educators though a collaborative approach, and done with, not done to.

Tracy Smith

Tracy Smith is an assistant exams officer at Royal Latin School, an 11-18 selective school in Buckinghamshire.



Working in an exams office and having seen the growth of access arrangements year-on-year, plus the increased pressure that teachers are under, it is clear that the education system needs to be overhauled.

Education is of course beneficial in so many ways, it stretches the mind, teaches basic skills, diversity and works towards getting good qualifications to enable better jobs and futures, but the academic stress, pressures and endless testing that is placed on students of all ages is contributing to poor physical and mental health in many cases. The drive for schools to achieve a good Ofsted score makes it more difficult for teachers to focus on educating students of all academic abilities appropriately, therefore it's no wonder that the anxiety levels in students are high and teachers are leaving the profession.

Go back to basics, let schools be an educational establishment and not be run as businesses with a competitive environment.

Let teachers teach, trust their professionalism and make them feel worthwhile.

Reduce testing (including SATs) therefore relieving anxiety in students and the time that was spent testing can be used to teach, engage with students and build confidence.

The government seems to have forgotten that that people are 'people' and not just numbers. Wellbeing of students and staff is being neglected. Despite more counsellors being employed in schools, CAMHS is overstretched. School staff are breaking down in tears with unrealistic pressure. This is having an impact on NHS services and therefore the economy.

Stephen Tierney

Stephen Tierney is the director of Leading Learner Ltd. Prior to this, Stephen was a headteacher for fourteen years and then the CEO of The Blessed Edward Bamber Catholic Multi-Academy Trust until 2019. He chaired the Headteachers Roundtable group from 2014 – 2021. He is the author of three books on leadership.



Hope was the word that leapt into my mind. There is a real danger when dealing with what feel like insurmountable challenges – the aftermath of Covid; families stressed and struggling with a cost-of-living crisis; insufficient funding; grinding accountability; gaps in staffing and crumbling buildings – that the situation feels hopeless. If this sense of hopelessness leads to a further exodus from the profession, then children and young people will suffer.

Retaining teachers and school leaders has never mattered more (Coe et al., [2022], School Environment & Leadership: Evidence Review, Evidence Based Education). The good education that our children and young people deserve is predicated on having sufficient high-quality teachers and school leaders.

The incoming government will face a severe shortage of teachers, school leaders and support staff. However, it will also be presented with an opportunity: a downturn in pupil numbers during the next Parliament will see demand for teachers begin to fall.

The truth is, we cannot recruit our way out of the crisis. It is simply not possible to train sufficient teachers and school leaders quickly enough to fill the ever-increasing staffing gaps. We must engineer a significant and substantial improvement in retention.

Poor retention is particularly true for teachers in the early part of their career and for school leaders working in schools in the most challenging socio-economic areas. We need a policy focus on things that will improve teacher, school leader and support staff retention. If any policy proposal does not directly achieve or contribute to retention it can simply be filed under “maybe later / maybe never”.

A fully funded pay increase is a starting point. Accepting the recommendations of the School Teachers' Review Body is politically easy. Whilst this does not begin to address the loss in real terms earnings over the past decade, at least it is a start. But pay is an issue like it has never been before. Recruiting and retaining school staff has new financial challenges.

In previous economic downturns, there has been an upturn in recruitment to our profession; during the current cost of living crisis, no such thing has happened. Furthermore, teachers can suddenly earn more outside the classroom and work from home. Sky-high childcare costs are less of a problem than before.

Indeed, the flexible working conditions enjoyed by so many sectors post-pandemic are making it more difficult to recruit and retain teachers. A school is an inherently inflexible place to work because classes cannot sit there waiting for a teacher.

That said, the system needs to maximise the flexibilities which are possible within our schools.

Staff will need to be able to be off-site during PPA time, to be able to start late and go home early, to have all their PPA time on a single day which they can spend working at home. We need to trust our colleagues and treat them like adults.

Whilst improving pay and working conditions is crucially important, it will be insufficient to retain great teachers. A whole system “upstream review” of workload needs to be undertaken to ensure that teaching a full timetable or leading a school may be done within a reasonable number of hours. It is crucial that teachers, leaders and support staff can enjoy time away from work without being exhausted.

The key driver of workload within our system is the unintelligent, high stakes, cliff-edged, just in case, consequence-based accountability system. It is driving teachers and leaders out of our schools, particularly those serving our most disadvantaged communities.

No ifs, no buts – Ofsted needs a root and branch reform. Ofsted does not help keep great teachers in our classrooms and highly effective leaders in our schools. Any good the inspectorate may claim to do is far outweighed by its negative impact upon retention.

As school leaders we cannot, however, place all the blame on the external accountability system. We help maintain the madness by creating unrealistic improvement plans, focused on doing everything – which, in reality, means spreading ourselves and staff so thinly across improvement “priorities” that nothing is done well.

Instead of implementing anachronistic and blunt internal accountability and monitoring tools, we must focus our efforts on designing intelligent, low stakes, timely, improvement-focused systems which relentlessly help our teachers to get better at their jobs. Our internal school systems need to be more humane and must ultimately benefit the children, young people and communities we serve.

Improving staff retention is a simple lens through which to view the inevitable avalanche of poorly thought through policies leading up to the

next general election. If an initiative does not retain great teachers in our classrooms and highly effective leaders in our schools, then it is a “no” from me.

All other school improvement ideas and strategies are predicated on the simple truth – school teachers, leaders and support staff are the sine qua non of effective education.

Whilst I have hope for the future, hope is not a plan: there are things we can do to improve staff retention in our schools, and we must do them now!

Carl Ward

Carl Ward is Chief Executive of the City Learning Trust; a 3 to 19 MAT in Stoke on Trent, Staffordshire and Chair of the Foundation for Education Development.



The strength of a new idea may best be judged by how many people independently come up with it at the same time. That so many are now talking about the need for taking a less partisan, longer-term approach to education policy making is a strong indicator that now is the time for a new method of setting and implementing education policy.

Since the Foundation for Education Development (FED) formally launched in 2019, we have been gathering research and opinion on what is needed to create a long-term approach to strategic education policy and planning in England. Like many stakeholders, including a significant number of politicians, we recognise that political ideologies alone will not solve the deep-seated issues we face as a country. Long term problems require long term solutions. Through face-to-face debate and discussion over three years, published in three separate yearly reports that build on one another, FED has conducted

what may fairly be described as the largest qualitative consultation on education policy this century. Along the way we have asked if this is the end of the era of 'ERA', and if so, how we rebuild the trust, wisdom and humility that is required for intelligent policy making and co-constructed evolution in our education system. Our research has helped build a consensus of opinion that a long-term plan for our education system is urgently needed. Politicians of all persuasions now regularly reference this in their speeches. At this crucial juncture in time, ahead of what is likely to be a period-defining general election, helping politicians solve this complex equation – 'just how do you enable our education system to evolve to better solve long term problems?' – is uppermost in the FED's work.

Our national consultation research has shown that the architecture of our education system must evolve if we are to unlock the promise of a brighter future. Firstly, we need a long-term plan for our education

system, with clear goals and processes for setting and delivering short and long term aims. Secondly, in building this approach, we need an independent strategic governance system for a long-term plan that will oversee the development and implementation of such a plan. Our third ask is for a voice and office, a Chris Whitty for education if you will, a Chief Education Officer who can offer independent expert advice and support in the same way as does the Chief Medical Officer or Chief Scientific Adviser. Democratically elected governments will always of course be free to reject expert advice, but it seems a tad ironic that a profession built on transferring knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next has no formal mechanism to impart wisdom to politicians in the same way that science and medicine has. Finally, we recognise that education is a broad eco-system and so we are calling for a stakeholder forum, akin to the NHS Assembly, to help drive ongoing dialogue about the education system and how to improve it.

There is a line of thought that everything is broken, so everything must change now, and that we need radically to rethink the what, how and why of the system. What our consultation has told us, is that replacing a system beset by constant change with an even greater sudden change is not the way forward. We need ideas that are workable and sensible, that restore trust, that help the system learn to manage innovation and not be constantly

drained by it. We need an approach that encourages and offers politicians the time and partnerships to build what they also really want, a world-leading education system that works for everyone. To do this we need to provide new solutions and different system architecture to implement them in a way that is simple, easy, and offers evolution not revolution. It is this task that the FED is now focused upon with many partners across our education system. We hope you will join us.

Mark Wignall

Mark Wignall is the headteacher of Downlands Community School, an 11-16 comprehensive school in Sussex.



Education professionals are all too aware of the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people. There is a growing body of research highlighting the key areas of concern – a profound impact on mental health, significantly reduced attendance, gaps in learning, social isolation, physical health and economic hardship.

School funding, recruitment and retention, energy costs, Ofsted and now ‘dodgy’ concrete are important issues but so is the need for a much more coherent response to ‘recovery’, a recovery that will enable our young people to thrive in the post-Covid era.

The last time students in the UK experienced long-term disruption to their education was World War II. At the end of the war, the government introduced a range of measures designed to support young people following the gaps in education and traumatic experiences they had endured.

Plans for post war education in the UK were aimed at removing existing inequalities, promising ‘secondary education for all’. Our response included introducing universal free access to education, free school meals for the lowest income families and free milk every day. We ensured that nutritionally designed school dinners were subsidised for all students.

We funded and encouraged growth in opportunities for extracurricular activities including sports, music, drama and debating societies and we improved infrastructure and resources, including new sports facilities, music rooms, and drama studios.

In addition, the youth service was set up in 1948 to provide young people with opportunities for social, educational and cultural development.

What was the response this time? Intervention following the Covid-19 pandemic has been short-lived and had little long term impact. It has largely centred on providing funding to minimise disruption to learning including tutoring and other measures to 'fill the gaps'. There has not been a joined up, thoughtful response to the important issues detailed at the start of this piece nor any thought given to the wider implications of Covid. Schools currently have limited resources of their own to tackle issues that are beginning to have a profound impact on young people and their ability to access, and thrive in education.

Qualifications continue to be the currency young people need to make their next steps. In order for these to be successful and to overcome the issues created by the pandemic, we need to prioritise a new, holistic approach to recovery focused on 'character education' – an approach designed to improve the wider, personal development of young people to complement the academic education they receive. It will be of benefit to them for the rest of their lives.

At Downlands, we carried out a number of wellbeing surveys both during and at the end of the pandemic. They all mirrored national concerns around self-confidence, resilience, socialisation, mental health and physical health. We soon realised that a huge part of our pandemic recovery plans needed to be around resolving these issues.

We carried out extensive research on how to tackle these issues and as a result developed and implemented a character education strategy we have called the Downlands 'ROCKS'.

The language of the ROCKS is embedded in all aspects of school life. It started with a very positive focus on achievement points linked to positive ROCKS characteristics – there is now an enhanced culture of celebration in our community. The ROCKS are our shared language and are embedded in our new teaching and learning policy, they are at the centre of our behaviour policy and are the bedrock of everything we are doing in school. Data shows this is beginning to have an impact with our students in terms of attitudes to learning, mental health, self-efficacy, wellbeing and attendance – ultimately it will improve achievement. The ROCKS approach supports equity, strategies have proved to have a significant positive effect in supporting the engagement, attendance and therefore achievement of disadvantaged students.

An important aspect is developing social capital – creating a powerful sense of belonging to tackle the dislocation caused by the pandemic. The ROCKS programme has empowered us to focus even more strongly on community in all senses and in my view this has been a powerful lever in fostering a sense of normality post-pandemic. The experiences on offer give students a reason to attend school and contribute to the crucial work of improving attendance.

ROCKS	Cultural activities
RESILIENT	Outdoor education residential trip Competitive sporting event Leadership roles
OPTIMISTIC	Museum visit Learn a musical instrument University visit
COMMUNITY	Theatre visit Participate in Shakespeare production Work experience
KIND	Charity events Community events
SELF-AWARE	Day trip to France Trip to House of Commons Business enterprise

We resolved to further increase the number of opportunities for all students, with a focus on equity. Surveys showed that after the pandemic only 53% of students engaged in extracurricular activity; this percentage was much lower for SEND and disadvantaged students and mirrors national figures.

We began to include more and more students in these opportunities – encouraging students to attend existing clubs, interviewing students to find out their interests and introducing new clubs like dungeons and dragons, capture the flag and Kin-Ball. This approach has led to an increase in the number of students engaging in extracurricular

activity and a significant increase in engagement for SEND and disadvantaged students (participation rates have doubled for these groups).

Analysis of attendance figures shows that engagement in the new clubs and activities is starting to make a positive difference to attendance, particularly amongst disadvantaged students. This strategy complements other approaches to improving attendance which can concentrate on the ‘stick’ rather than the ‘carrot’.

We have recently revisited our wellbeing surveys and we are seeing improvements in pandemic-related issues. We are continuing to expand our character programme and

launching a character passport – a range of experiences which every student will be entitled and supported to complete over their five years at the school. This will increase engagement and cultural capital, there is a focus on equity, and funding has been sourced to support disadvantaged students.

We continue to strive for the best academic outcomes possible, but just as important is a holistic view that develops successful learners who can thrive when they leave full time education.

There is a further spin off in that this project and the opportunities linked with it have reconnected colleagues with the reasons they came into our wonderful profession in the first place. It is therefore also a recruitment and retention tool – it is so refreshing for me, and them when the first question asked of our new teachers is ‘what clubs, trips and activities can you run for us?’

A ROCKS type approach rolled out nationally can have a real and lasting impact on young people post-pandemic, but would need to be part of an ambitious, coherent solution including:

- a real investment in wellbeing and tackling mental health
- a national programme of wellbeing measurement for young people
- support for EBSA and related attendance issues

- raising the FSM threshold so families affected by the cost of living crisis can access nutritional meals and pupil premium support
- investing in therapeutic and health services to support vulnerable young people
- plugging the ‘gaps’ caused by the pandemic
- investing in communities so there is support for young families and young people to make a positive change to their lives. Community centres, youth clubs, volunteering organisations, grants to support existing clubs are all avenues that encourage young people into healthy community activity.

Let us not leave recovery from the pandemic to chance, we have an opportunity to develop an exciting, coherent and impactful national strategy for our young people so they can look forward to the future with confidence.

Professor Dylan Wiliam PhD

Professor Dylan Wiliam is emeritus professor of educational assessment at the UCL Institute of Education. He is known around the world for his work on formative assessment and educational leadership.



The passing of the Education Reform Act in 1988 marked a significant change in education policy in England. Up until that point, providing education to pupils of compulsory school age (and further education) had been mainly regarded as a matter for local authorities – a principle that was formally laid down in the 1944 Education Act. Between 1944 and 1988, additional national legislation made provisions regarding the education of pupils with special educational needs, and school governance, but in the main, central government was seen as having only a minor role.

The 35 years since 1988 have seen a bewildering range of national initiatives regarding what pupils should learn, how they should be assessed, how schools should be governed, organized, run, and inspected, and how teachers

should be trained. And while there have been some notable successes, such as the teaching of reading in primary schools, the overall picture is of a system where improvements in some areas are offset by stagnation and setbacks elsewhere. The performance of 11-year-olds on national tests has improved, but their performance as measured by other assessments has been flat. The proportion of secondary school pupils gaining good grades at GCSE has gone up, but the performance of pupils in England on international tests such as those administered by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is below where it was when PISA was first introduced in 2000. Most worryingly, the most recent PISA results (from 2018) show that approximately 20% of 15-year-olds lack the level of competence in reading and mathematics required to participate effectively in society – about the same as it was in 2006.

There are, of course, many reasons why the policies of successive governments have failed to have much of an impact on pupil achievement, but it seems to me that the over-riding issue is a failure to understand the idea that any change in how we educate young people will almost certainly involve trade-offs; some things will be better, and some things will be worse.

Those who propose ways of improving education are usually very clear about what will be better if the changes they are proposing are made, but they are usually silent about what will be worse. Sometimes this is because they naively assume that there will be no trade-offs, and sometimes it is because they are aware that there may be trade-offs but believe that acknowledging their existence will somehow weaken the argument for change.

The result of this failure to consider trade-offs is generally a series of what are sometimes called “unintended consequences”. In some, rare, cases, these are consequences that were genuinely impossible to foresee, but much more often they are simply a result of the failure to ask the simple question, “And then what?”

A good example is the decision to publish in school “league tables” the proportion of students reaching a particular threshold of achievement, such as five good GCSE grades including English and mathematics. In many schools, this resulted in a focus on year 11 students who were likely to achieve results falling just below the threshold, with those clearly above,

and those falling too far short, given less attention.

Another example concerns the suspension of students. There is little doubt that suspending a pupil from school often has a serious impact on that pupil’s education, and as a result, many have advocated an end to all suspensions. Not suspending a pupil is almost certainly better for the pupil than suspension, but we also have to consider the trade-off – the impact of that pupil’s continued presence on the education of the other pupils in the class. This does not mean that pupils should, or should not be suspended, but rather that the presence of disruptive pupils creates a situation in which there is no good outcome. What we can do is acknowledge that something will be worse no matter what we do, and weigh the positives and the negatives of different courses of action.

One particularly powerful tool for thinking about trade-offs in education is to decide what we would do if the earth’s rotation on its axis slowed down so that there were one more hour in the day. We then consider what we would do less of if the earth’s rotation speeded up, and there were now only 23 hours in each day. If this is not the same as we would do with one more hour, there is nothing to stop us from making the switch now. For example, if someone with one more hour in the day would spend more time with their family, and would, with one less hour, spend less time at work, there is nothing to stop that person from taking that hour from

work, and giving it to their family immediately. The same idea can be used for curriculum prioritization. If, in a secondary school, a subject is allocated an extra 20 minutes each week, what would be added? If time available was cut by 20 minutes, what would be taken away? If these things aren't the same, the change can be made immediately.

So, what does education need next? Quite simply an agreement that any time a change is proposed, the proposer should answer two questions:

- 1. What will be better if the changes are made?***
- 2. What will be worse if the changes are made?***

Any proposals for which the answer to the second question is “nothing” should immediately be rejected as unserious. There will always be trade-offs. We can't avoid that. What we can do is make sure that the trade-offs are the result of careful planning and discussion so that the consequences are anticipated, and intended.

Sue Williamson

Sue Williamson is Director and Chief Executive of SSAT (The Schools, Students and Teachers Network). She has worked in education for over 30 years.



I hope you enjoyed reading this pamphlet as much as I did. We all recognise the challenges that we are facing in education, and these sit in the wider context of the issues we face as a nation. I believe that we are at a significant moment in our history – this is our 1945 moment. We have the global challenges of climate change, poverty, and war. For some, there is the realisation that we cannot escape the consequences of events that occur thousands of miles away. A new government will have to deal with an economy that is barely growing; a cost-of-living crisis; crumbling public services, and a loss of confidence in the political class. **Radical action is required.**

The radical reforms of 1945 came after a period of coalition/national governments from 1931 onwards. Churchill led a coalition government during the Second World War – politicians worked together to win a war and to rebuild the country after the war. There was consensus as to what was required. Politicians of this time understood service – many had served during the First World War, some heroically. They were prepared to listen to a diverse range of groups and to experts. Sir William Beveridge was a radio broadcaster, academic, public servant, and newspaper columnist. He argued that policy should be based on exhaustive research and detailed analysis. The Beveridge Report was published on 1st December 1942 and was the basis of the five giant programmes that formed the core of the post-war welfare state: social security, health, education, housing, and a policy of full employment.

Beveridge wrote: "...a revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not patching."

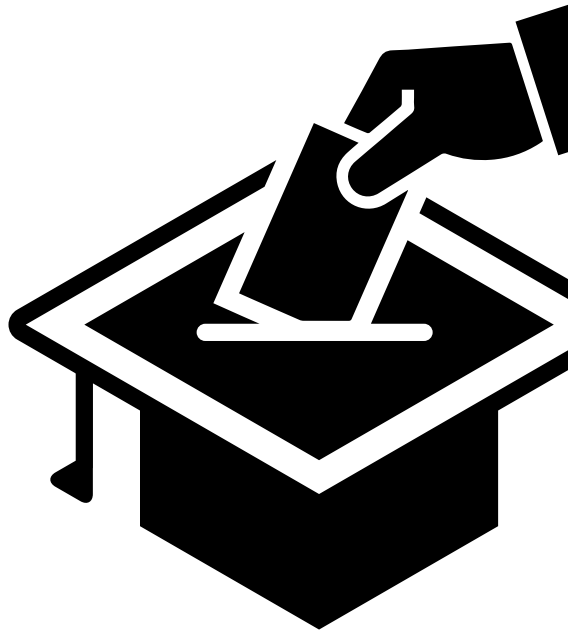
I would recommend Hilary Cottam's book – *Radical Help: How We Can Remake the Relationships Between Us and Revolutionise the Welfare State*. Through real-life stories, she highlights what is going wrong in so much of our society and how it can be put right. It is her manifesto for change with new solutions to social and political problems. Like *Beyond Manifestos* it highlights the work of real people, who are deeply immersed in the system.

My hope is that politicians across the political spectrum can come together to find policy solutions that remove the barriers to learning; inspire young people to engage in their learning and the political system; recognise the value of a highly trained workforce in schools; and empower school leaders to lead the system in partnership with key stakeholders.

In 1990, Nelson Mandela said:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

I believed it then and I still believe it, but it is now time to prove it.



SSAT's work on fighting for deep social justice is critical.

We must all commit to ensuring that all students, whatever their ability or context, leave school fully prepared to lead fulfilled and purposeful lives.

To achieve this, we need school leaders dedicated to raising the aspirations and achievements of the young people in their care, as well as working within their community. We must improve the recruitment and retention of teachers – it is a wonderful profession. SSAT is committed to the training and development of teachers – quality training will mean better outcomes for students.

SSAT will help schools engage with stakeholders, including parents, and will develop the leadership skills of young people. We provide the support networks that leaders and teachers need so that they are competent, confident, and happy.

Don't forget to follow us on our socials using
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