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Better Schools The Future of the Country

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About the author

Tim Clark was a secondary teacher for 32 years and a Head for eighteen years, firstly at a selective grammar school which he led from “good” to “outstanding” and latterly at a difficult comprehensive academy, sited on one of the largest and most deprived council estates in east London, which he “transformed” (Ofsted 2017).



In 2019 he moved into education consultancy and professional development training, specialising in school improvement and leadership development.

He has supported schools in all sectors, primary and secondary, state and independent, both in this country and abroad, most recently in Spain and Nigeria. In 2020 he co-authored an influential report on Ofsted.

Rationale

More than one million people work in schools in England, either as teachers or in non-teaching roles. The purpose of this report is not to see how politicians can actively win electoral support from the profession, it is rather to show that by adopting common sense policies, often at very little cost to the Exchequer, based on limited state intervention, the freedom of the individual, value for money and the creation on an environment in which all can flourish, we can improve all our schools, significantly raise standards and make a genuine contribution to “levelling up”.

This report does not try to cover all aspects of schooling; there are many areas, such as mental health, T Levels, SEND, EYFS where excellent work is being undertaken. It simply focuses on ten key issues which will have an immediate impact on mainstream primary and secondary schools. For clarity, throughout this report, the term “school” also refers to all mainstream academies, free schools, CTC’s, UTC’s and community colleges.

Introduction

Education is a devolved topic. This report will, therefore, look solely at education in England, although many of the issues will apply equally to all parts of the UK.

Headline figures for state-funded schools in England [School Workforce in England 2021, Gov.uk]:

- The full-time equivalent of the school workforce is 968,079 (5 in 10 teachers, 465,526, [actual headcount = 512,000] 3 in 10 teaching assistants and 2 in 10 other non-teaching staff).
- The mean average salary of teachers: is £42,358
- The workforce was getting younger until the trend peaked in 2017-18. Since then, older age groups are increasing in proportion. (This may be the result of changing retirement policy.)
- Roughly 20% of the workforce is aged 50 and over. (2021/22 = 16.5% 50 to 59; 2.6% 60 and over)
- There are 54,000 teachers in Scotland [gov.scot], almost 24,000 in Wales [gov.wales] and nearly 21,000 in NI [ni.gov.uk]

Whatever one thinks of the recent Hancock/Oakeshott headlines, there is no doubt that the publication of comments saying that teachers and their unions just want “an excuse to avoid having to teach”, “I know, they really really do just hate work”, will have further damaged relations between Westminster and the teaching profession.

The contemptuous tone appears even more offensive to teachers when one considers that these were probably the same people responsible for recommending the use of algorithms to decide students’ examination grades. The leaked suggestion that face masks were only introduced in schools to keep up with Nicola Sturgeon also does little to inspire confidence. Education is too critical to be used for political ends.

In January/February’s edition of “Educate”, Mary Bousted, General Secretary of the NEU, called for members to stand up and be counted in “the *pay* ballot”. [Only 53% of members voted.] Most teachers would, no doubt, like a significant pay rise, but the low turnout suggests that the majority recognise the difficulty of funding pay rises in the

current financial climate and/or have concerns other than pay. These are most commonly, depending on the school, poor pupil behaviour, weak and unsupportive leadership, a lack of resources, changing goalposts, workload, teaching to the test, the lack of appropriate vocational courses, not being valued as professionals, Ofsted and continual change (the latter, sometimes contradictory, but often introduced with the conviction of the zealot).

Such an assessment was reinforced in 2021 by the report, “Understanding Teacher Retention”, produced for the UK Office of Manpower Economics (OME). It concluded that whilst pay and rewards are important retention factors, they are not the only factors that shape teachers’ retention choices.

Workplace characteristics (workload, school culture and teaching environment) are highly valued by teachers and most teachers (but with the caveat, not all teachers) would be willing, “to trade-off higher pay/rewards to work in supportive environments with fewer challenges from pupil behaviour”.

It is on these wider issues that this report focuses on.

1. Recruitment and retention

In 2018, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) reported that England’s schools were facing a “severe shortage” of teachers, and the then Education Secretary, Damian Hinds, announced that staff recruitment would be a top priority. Since then, things have got worse.

Initial Teacher Training Census 2022/23 [gov.uk], published 1st December 2022:

- Percentage of ITT recruitment target reached for secondary subjects - 59% (down from 79% in 2021/22)
- Percentage of ITT recruitment target reached for primary subjects - 93% (down from 131% in 2021/22)

Percentage of total ITT recruitment target reached:

2015/16	2016/7	2017/8	2018/9	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/3
93%	92%	88%	91%	87%	111%	97%	71%

The census attributes the isolated “unprecedented increase” in recruitment in 202/21 to the impact of COVID-19. (COVID-19 also led to increases in teacher retention, with the number of leavers in 2020/21 being the lowest since the Census began in 2010.)

Critically, the targets for recruitment have had to be raised in 2022/23 owing to “an increase in the number of teachers forecast to leave the workforce in future years”.

Targets were exceeded in a few secondary subjects (history, PE, drama) but the take-up of places in others is frightening:

- Mathematics 90%
- Chemistry 86%
- Biology 85%
- Physics 17%
- English 84%
- Computing 30% (66% in 2021/22)
- MFL 34% (69% in 2021/22)

Interestingly, numbers were up in design technology and geography, for which both subjects a bursary had been reintroduced for the 2022/23 training year.

“The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2018) stated that the number of secondary school teachers has been falling since 2010 and the number of teachers *leaving for reasons other than retirement* has been increasing since 2012.”

See “Understanding Teacher Retention”, the OME, 2021

To add to the problem, retention figures for new and younger teachers are worryingly poor. Almost a quarter of newly qualified teachers leave the profession within three years (23%) and almost one-third within five years (31.2%).

Recommendations:

- To accept that there is an emerging national recruitment and retention crisis and to act effectively and immediately. No school can be better than its teachers.
- To ensure salaries are as generous as is practicably possible, but to also understand that pay is not the only or, for many teachers, even the most important issue.
- To implement this report as most recommendations will significantly contribute to recruitment and retention by improving morale, raising the status of teachers and empowering teachers to do their jobs well - our priority must be to enable “teachers to teach and pupils to learn”.
- To publish a new DfE recruitment and retention strategy. This will include a national recruitment campaign but it must be understood that this will only succeed if there is systemic change that will encourage teachers to stay in the profession. The DfE must, therefore, consider all relevant issues, many set out in this report, such as workload, protecting teachers, behaviour management, professional development and, above all, enabling “teachers to teach”.
- To require every school to devise a recruitment and retention policy which should be available to all existing staff and to all who apply for work at the school.
- To develop a national strategy for ongoing professional training to enable staff, teaching and non-teaching, to develop all aspects of their careers including subject knowledge, pedagogy and pastoral work. This could include attending training courses, school-based training and sharing good practice but without increasing teacher workload.
- To introduce a standardised national job application form. Currently, all schools ask for the same basic information but in different formats (qualifications, experience, NI number etc); a standardised pro forma, with the option of asking for additional, school-specific information, would simplify and speed up the application process.

2. Workload

Teaching is demanding, not least in terms of the time commitment required. For the conscientious teacher, standing in front of the class for five hours a day is the easy (and most enjoyable) part of the job; it is everything else, including the preparation before and the marking/assessments after lessons, that takes time. A recently leaked DfE report [schoolsweek, March 2023] has revealed that 2 in 5 teachers work “unacceptable” 12-hour days.

In 1991, the introduction of School Teachers Pay and Conditions sought to clearly define the specific number of hours and days that teachers should be directed to work – 1,265 over 195 days, including five non-teaching days (i.e. roughly 6.5 hours per day). Staff are entitled to a minimum of 10% timetabled PPA [planning, preparation and assessment] time. This does not, however, include the number of hours spent preparing and marking at home in the evenings, at weekends or during holidays, nor extracurricular activities outside of school hours. It has been said many times that teachers complete the highest number of unpaid overtime hours of any profession.

The concept of *directed time* is now probably accepted by most teachers, but one immediate consequence of its introduction was a significant decline in the number of extracurricular activities, trips and visits, from which some of our schools have hardly recovered, despite the importance of such activities for young people. If teachers were required to work for 1,265 hours, some decided to do precisely that and subsequently stopped running many out-of-hours activities.

Fortunately, many willingly chose not to take such a rigid stance. It is not always possible to quantify precisely what teachers do, and trying to do so can be counterproductive.

Encouragingly, the latest Ofsted Frameworks have required schools to consider staff workload and work/life balance under the inspection of Leadership and Management; Ofsted also now clearly values the importance of a good extracurricular offer.

Controversially, however, the most recent Ofsted Framework advocates a school week of 32.5 hours. This, multiplied by 39 weeks, creates a total commitment of 1,267.5

hours, leaving no directed time for parents' evenings, staff meetings or departmental meetings, without even considering marking and preparation, let alone out-of-hours extracurricular activities. Of course, after-school clubs and activities could become part of the 32.5-hour week, but unless this is the case, many teachers will see these demands as a massive imposition or a forced change in contract.

This is not sensible, especially at a time of a recruitment and retention crisis, and could easily lead to pupils losing many extracurricular opportunities if teachers choose not to volunteer to do extra.

A view from Down Under: A recent report (January 2022) by the Grattan Institute, an Australian public policy think tank, found that 92% of Australian teachers said they did not have enough time to prepare effectively for classroom teaching – the core of their job, and that teachers felt overwhelmed by everything they are expected to achieve. The Institute states bluntly that, “if governments don’t hear this cry and act on it, they will be letting down our children”. Their recommendations included that “they should let teachers teach”, reduce “unnecessary tasks.... Reduce the need for teachers to ‘reinvent the wheel’ in curriculum and lesson planning.”

[One of the biggest complaints about Ofsted since 2019 has been its demands for curriculum-related paperwork.]

Recommendations:

- To undergo an attitudinal change – the recognition that teaching is demanding and that the vast majority of teachers go above and beyond basic contractual requirements.
- To require schools to agree with staff clear marking expectations in terms of frequency, quantity and depth. [Marking is “a key driver of large teacher workloads”, Workload Challenge survey, 2014.]
- To require schools to consider ways of supporting workload and work/life balance as a part of their recruitment and retention strategy. This should include reducing all bureaucracy to a minimum, making reporting and assessment as manageable and efficient (but also, as effective) as possible, and supporting staff with an effective behaviour policy. Best practice would be to produce the policy in consultation with staff.
- To develop AI to support marking, planning and bureaucratic necessities, but accepting that it cannot, “teach, up close and personal” [Gillian Keegan, May 2023]
- To understand that most teachers give extra, e.g. in terms of extracurricular activities, because they see it as part of their vocation and valuable to pupils – this must be recognised and respected by schools (but not necessarily financially rewarded).
- To not attempt to change contracts and working hours without the agreement of staff.

3. OFSTED

Rigorous, robust and objective external validation and accountability are essential for schools, pupils, and parents. Ofsted's aim, ever since the 1990s, is, "to improve the overall quality of education and training". It has certainly contributed to this development, but it could be both far more effective and ambitious. Is, "Banging on the chicken shed" [a nerve-wracking, two-day visit every four years, often followed by a fairly bland and anodyne report] the best way of improving our schools? School improvement is a serious and crucial subject, but Ofsted keeps changing the goalposts – the 2022 Framework is the seventh Framework in ten years (with two in 2012). Hence, schools are continually forced to *chop and change* and "to play the game" rather than concentrate on substantive, long-term development.

We should also remember that many of the things that Ofsted currently criticises [off rolling, teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, qualification gaming etc] are caused by the "culture of fear" of Ofsted (acknowledged by Amanda Spielman, Sunday with Laura Kuennsberg, 23rd April 2023).

One should not underestimate the pressure that inspections put on teachers - they are public and can be highly personal - a point made obvious following the tragic suicide of Headteacher Ruth Perry, whose primary school was graded "inadequate".

Notwithstanding this terrible chain of events, action must be taken where schools are underperforming, especially where schools are deemed to be unsafe. Now is surely the time for dialogue about the best way to inspect schools; we need a system which is both developmental and effective but also practicable for teachers and Heads.

To be clear, this is not a call for a decline in standards or rigour, but quite the opposite: it is a call for professional dialogue and genuine support to enable all schools to improve.

During Lockdown, inspections were suspended and there was a change of emphasis to supporting and working with schools:

“In the autumn term, Ofsted will be carrying out ‘visits’ to schools and colleges, not inspections.... we will help them through collaborative conversations, without passing judgement – this isn’t inspection by stealth. We’ll use our visits to listen to school leaders’.....and to provide constructive challenge.....The visits will not be graded.....

this is about a constructive conversation – we’re not trying to catch schools out. After all, we share the same aim: helping this generation of children and young people make up for lost time and get the high-quality education they deserve.”

Ofsted reported that “school leaders found these visits supportive and helped them to reflect on their priorities during this difficult time”. [www.gov.uk]

One improved approach would be for inspectors to identify clear areas for development, with accompanying specific, practical advice and then revisit the Head one or two years later to discuss progress. Whether or not Ofsted possesses the capacity and personnel to offer this level of practical support and real improvement, however, is another question.

Recommendations:

- To undertake immediate discussions with the profession to create an inspection system that is both effective and manageable. A robust and objective external monitoring system is essential but it must be fit for purpose, practical and beneficial for all stakeholders. There should be an attitudinal shift from “name and shame” to ongoing development.
- To review the effectiveness of the current single overall grade and the four specific grades; increasing the number of specific grades could allow for more precise and accurate reporting
- To require all judgements and outcomes to be substantiated with more specific, detailed evidence. This may result in longer reports but should encourage greater consistency between inspections and also facilitate both challenges to and defence of inspectors’ judgements.
- To ensure that inspections result in specific and meaningful areas for development, with precise and practical advice on how to improve; these should form the basis of ongoing dialogue with each individual school.

4. Pupil behaviour

Poor pupil behaviour is one of the most frequently quoted reasons for teachers quitting the profession early, along with weak and ineffective leadership which fails to tackle (or even to admit) bad behaviour. Post-COVID-19, many schools have reported an increase in low-level disruption in class, whilst teachers are still sometimes subject to insults, rudeness, defiance and even physical assault. (See Geoff Barton's blog, 28/04/2023: "Since the pandemic behaviour is unrecognisable".) Nothing could be more obvious: if pupils do not behave, they will not learn; if teachers cannot do their job, they will leave the profession. The blame here largely lies with the leadership of individual schools. The law on the management of behaviour – detentions, suspensions, permanent exclusions, searching pupils – is clear, so it is, therefore, up to schools to use the sanctions and strategies open to them. The most recent Ofsted Frameworks have referred to suspension/exclusion as a "vital tool" in maintaining good behaviour, so Heads should not be afraid to resort to it whenever necessary.

That said, certain obstacles remain. Should a school suspend a pupil for more than five days, the school has to make arrangements for the child to be educated elsewhere. The 70-page statutory guidance on exclusion is all about the law, appeals and pupils' and parents' rights; nowhere, not even in DfE model letters for permanent exclusion, does it refer to appalling or unacceptable behaviour. We want young people to be in school, but those who cannot and will not behave must be removed. Our basic mantras must be that no pupil has the right to disrupt the learning of others and that teachers must be able to teach and pupils to learn. Anyone who repeatedly disrupts this must be prevented from doing so.

Those schools and LA's that opt for a "no exclusion policy" are simply making life harder for teachers and preventing other youngsters from learning. Hackney, one of the most deprived Boroughs in London, has historically been a high-excluding Borough but has also become one of the highest-performing. There is surely a link here. [See School exclusion rate in Hackney is worst in inner London – Eastlondonlines] At the same time, schools must also have the support they need in dealing with pastoral and mental health issues, which have grown exponentially post-COVID-19, be it by offering in-school

professional counselling (at a financial cost) or by involving external agencies such as CAMHS but which are currently massively overstretched.

Likewise, for parents/carers who abuse or threaten staff, procedures do exist for imposing bans from the site (schools are, after all, private property) but these must be simplified and strengthened. Schools must be able to ban parents from the site until further notice following any verbal/physical assault on a member of staff or pupil and any ban must be easily enforceable.

One of the key issues is what to do with excluded pupils; if suspension and exclusion are made easier, numbers will rise. With a short suspension, it may suffice for the pupil to stay at home and become the responsibility of the parents/carers, but longer suspensions and permanent exclusions require specialist provision. Passing badly behaved pupils from one school to another is not the answer, it simply gives the problem to someone else without tackling the problem – i.e. the pupil's unacceptable behaviour. (This is not to argue that managed moves – the voluntary swapping of pupils – are not sometimes positive and successful.) Urgent work is needed on providing far more effective placements for those removed from mainstream education. The absence of such provision is not, however, an argument for not suspending/excluding – the safety and education of other members of the school must always come first.

Individual pupils will have specific behavioural needs, which fully deserve appropriate and effective support, but the needs of a minority cannot be permitted to negatively impact the education of others. It should also be noted that good behaviour is definitely not solely dependent on the range of punitive sanctions that a school uses. The schools with the best behaviour and ethos also have dynamic and engaging teaching, a flourishing extracurricular programme, a genuine and effective pastoral care system and place great importance on the mental health of both pupils and staff. At the same time, however, these schools also have clear, non-negotiable rules and boundaries which are, when necessary, enforced with appropriate sanctions.

Recommendations:

- To simplify the rules and procedures on suspension and permanent exclusion, with the safety and education of others being paramount. Schools should feel supported in using “assertive discipline” approaches. Behaviour policies should state clearly that the decision to sanction a pupil lies with the school and not the parent. It is, for obvious reasons, always better to work with parents, but if there cannot be agreement, the school’s decision is final.
- To urgently provide many more places in good quality alternative provision and at effective Pupil Referral Units.
- To support schools with the unequivocal right to ban parents/carers from the site, and for such bans to be legally enforceable. The policy is to be clearly stated in each school’s prospectus and on its website.
- To require all schools to include a statement in their Behaviour Policy confirming that any false or malicious accusation/allegation against a member of staff, however minor, will lead to serious sanctions, up to and including permanent exclusion. It should also state that any such actions by a parent/carer may have formal legal consequences. The safety and protection of staff and pupils is paramount.
- To permit schools to exclude pupils for persistent truancy. At the moment schools cannot take effective disciplinary action – they are not permitted to exclude for truancy, but if the truant refuses to attend detentions or to accept other help or sanctions, the school is impotent.
- To establish a specialist unit for parents within the DfE dedicated to all aspects of parenting including child behaviour, cognitive development, the role of play, healthy relationships, safety, health and wellbeing. This is long overdue, especially considering that even school-aged youngsters only spend on average about 17.5% of their time in school - 82.5% of their time is beyond the school gates.

5. Vocational and technical education

For far too long, successive UK governments have failed to recognise the importance of vocational and technical education, despite it being highly valued in countries such as Germany. There have recently been some very positive developments in these areas, but these have largely been at post 16 level. The government has an *ambition* (Ofsted Handbook, S207) that by 2025, 90% of Year 10 pupils will be studying the Ebacc [English Baccalaureate – English Language and Literature, maths, at least two GCSEs in science, humanity and an MFL]. Nowhere, however, is there a similar ambition for practical, technical or vocational outcomes, even though, after eleven years of compulsory schooling, between one-third and one-quarter of pupils fail to attain even a basic pass (grade 4) in each subject. [Average number of GCSEs taken by 16-year-olds has remained fairly constant over the past few years at 7.78 (2022)] One is reminded of Sir Anthony Seldon’s comment that we should be considering not, “*how intelligent you are....but how are you intelligent?*” It is essential to not only ask of the curriculum, “Are we doing things right”, but, more importantly, “Are we doing the right things” and how do we know?

GCSE outcomes across all subjects at grade 4/low C (England only) – the spike in 2020 and 2021 was due to the absence of summer exams (teacher assessments) [GCSE results 2022, www.gov.uk]:-

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
66.6%	66.1%	66.6%	67%	75.9%	76.9%	73%

The National Curriculum continues to be the basic diet for most pupils, again emphasising traditional academic subjects. Academies, supposedly “free” from the National Curriculum, are expected to offer all pupils a *broad curriculum* that should be similar in breadth and ambition to the NC; it remains, therefore, the *Gold Standard*. This is probably appropriate for most, if not all, youngsters up to the end of Key Stage 3 (11-14) but not beyond it. Crucially, the current curriculum also appears not to support the economic needs of the country in the 21st century.

“EngineeringUK has been tracking the annual demand for engineers and technicians needed to just keep pace with infrastructure and other engineering projects. They estimate 203,000 roles are required annually, made up of 124,000 engineers and technicians with core engineering skills, plus 79,000 related roles requiring a mix of engineering knowledge and other skill sets like project management.” “The lack of young people entering the sector is an area where something can and (in some cases) is being done.” Despite the prioritising of STEM in many schools, and 2018 being denoted the “Year of Engineering” in the UK, almost half of those between 11 and 19 said they “know little or nothing about what engineers do”.

See “Overcoming the Shortage of Engineers”, Riad Mannan, 2021, NewEngineer

At the time of the Brexit debate, one senior NHS figure said that leaving the EU would leave the UK short of both nurses and doctors. If we, as a country, produced enough academic doctors but not enough vocational nurses, or vice versa, enough nurses but not enough doctors, one would feel our education system was skewed but successful; not to produce enough of either, however, leaves us with the question, precisely what does our education system produce? [2 in 5 GPs are born outside the UK, as are 47.5% of specialist doctors. Richard Meddings, Chairman of NHS England, quoted in the Daily Telegraph, March 2023.]

It is essential that all youngsters are literate, numerate and have a sound, knowledge-rich understanding of the country and world in which they live. The consequences of the current system, however, are that teachers are faced with trying to motivate youngsters who see little point in preparing for exams which they will fail, and know they will fail. This is not a call for “prizes for all”, but a recognition of the need to prepare all young people for a successful future and active participation in society.

Recommendations:

- To introduce additional worthwhile, meaningful and high-quality technical, professional and vocational courses, which are fully validated and have *parity of esteem*, at Key Stage 4 (14 to 16 years of age).
- These courses should be delivered on-site at school so that any absence of local relevant work placements does not prevent the courses from running successfully. Additional literacy and numeracy should be key components, as should, wherever possible, meaningful work experience (which should be a part of the experience of all pupils, regardless of their curriculum route).

6. Teaching professionals

Teaching is a profession but, unlike most other professions, has seen various specific professional strategies dictated from on high by politicians, Ofsted, civil servants and policy advisors. Nothing angers teachers more than being told how to do their jobs by people who, very often, have never stood in front of thirty difficult teenagers on a wet Friday afternoon.

This is not to argue that politicians – not least because of the significant spending of taxpayers' money on education [£72,981 million in 2021/22, second only to Health and Social Care] - and people in other walks of life (from business, industry, health etc) should not contribute to education policy, but no Minister or civil servant would tell a doctor what medicine to prescribe nor a dentist how best to extract a tooth.

How to teach requires specific knowledge, skills and experience which grow over time. Methodologies must be continuously reviewed to develop the best approaches, but the great teacher is the one who has the ability to adapt what is taught and how it is taught to each pupil in each class.

Over the past thirty years, thinking on pedagogy has changed – child-centred learning was all the rage, only to be replaced by more traditional, teacher-led techniques; group work and cooperative learning were popular, only for more didactic methods to become the norm, again; “differentiation” was previously expected by Ofsted, only now to be criticised and to be superseded by “adaptive” teaching.

Similarly, at primary level, teachers have been encouraged to use phonics in the teaching of reading; most would agree that phonics is, very often, highly effective, but it does not work in all situations or with all pupils. [The latest Progress International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) placed England a very impressive fourth in the world, although this was primarily because of the relative drop in standards in competitor countries; most worryingly, the study also revealed that there has been a significant decline in the number of English pupils who enjoy reading. May 2023]

The mark of a good teacher is the ability to adapt what you do depending on individual pupils, classes, topics, time of day and whether it is raining or snowing – one size does not and cannot fit all. Ofsted has at least accepted this and since 2017 has stated it, *“does not advocate any particular approach to planning, teaching, or assessment”*.

Recommendations:

- To support continued research into the most effective pedagogical styles and approaches
- To accept that politicians and Ofsted should concentrate on standards and outcomes rather than on specific classroom practices.
- To develop a national DfE strategy for high-quality continuing professional development for all school staff.
- To establish a new professional body to bring together the teaching profession with politicians and civil servants. It should be government funded, but not an instrument of the government. Nor should it be overly bureaucratic such as the earlier NCSL and NCTL: it should be an effective and respected professional forum whereby teachers, politicians and civil servants can engage in positive and regular dialogue. This *National Schools' Council* would comprise ministers and civil servants as well as elected representatives from all areas of the school system (including Heads, classroom teachers and representatives from recognised bodies such as the National Institute of Teaching, The Chartered College of Teaching, The Education Endowment Foundation) and would have the remit to discuss pedagogy, workload, discipline, curriculum, inspection, recruitment and retention and all other aspects of schooling. It is not a trade union and, therefore, should not be responsible for dispute resolution or pay bargaining, although a healthy relationship between all parties may help to prevent issues from arising. The ultimate aim is for all parties to work together for the benefit of our schools by enabling policymakers and practitioners to work together in a formal, professional and non-confrontational setting.

7. LEAs, MATS and standalone academies

The 2022 Schools White Paper, which has been subsequently dropped by Gillian Keegan, called for “the move to a fully trust-led system by 2030”, meaning that there would be no Local Authority schools and all schools would be a part of a MAT, or in the process of joining one. [Approximately 40% of primary schools and 80% of secondaries are academies.] This would result in changes to some high-performing schools which are currently either LA schools or standalone academies.

Where schools are failing, forcing them to join a MAT and receive additional support makes sense, but why change those schools that are performing well, just to have a more unified system? Is it, not, the whole rationale of the original academy philosophy, to encourage independence and originality? The White Paper suggested that where trusts run more than ten schools, they develop economies of scale and greater opportunities for sharing good practices and for staff development. This is all to be applauded, but what of those schools which are performing successfully partly because they concentrate on just one school and do not want to dilute what they do well?

Sharing good practice is essential, as are economies of scale – so much money has been spent since academisation on each individual school employing a Finance Manager and HR staff, jobs that were previously undertaken by County or City Hall. But why change what is working? By forcing all schools into MATS there was a real danger of “reorganisation masquerading as improvement”. The move to a complete trust-led system would also involve further bureaucratic reorganisation: the plan was for the appointment of nine Regional Directors supported by eight-member Advisory Boards, plus the resulting costs - £86 million in the Trust Capacity Fund to support the expansion of Trusts.

Recommendations:

- To only force schools that are underperforming to join a MAT. Where LEA schools or standalone academies are performing well, they should be celebrated and supported.
- To encourage successful stand-alone academies to work together in loose partnerships/federations, to disseminate good practice and to economise by sharing backroom costs but without being forced to lose their identity or autonomy.

8. Maths for all post-16s

The Prime Minister's call for all to study maths until 18 has caused much debate. There is no doubt that mathematical literacy is of crucial importance, especially if Britain wants to be a leader in engineering, science, technology, electronics and AI etc. The proposal, however, raises several key issues, not least, who is going to teach the additional maths lessons? In 2018, David Laws, Chairman of EPI, stated that "as little as half GCSE maths teachers have a maths or sciences degree" and since then, the recruitment of maths teachers has declined.

We must also be clear about what we want to achieve, not least since about one-quarter of 16-year-olds currently fail to "pass" GCSE maths. The fundamental question is what is meant by "maths": is it arithmetic and numeracy, which we all use in our everyday lives, or is it academic mathematics above and beyond GCSE level (e.g. calculus or kinematics), which, while further developing mathematical skill and understanding, is something very few of us will ever actually use? Furthermore, if students spend more time studying maths, will this impact negatively on other crucial subjects?

What we should also consider, at the same time, is raising the profile of problem-solving, enterprise and entrepreneurship across the curriculum. The Entrepreneurs Network (TEN) recently (7 July 2022) wrote an open letter calling for entrepreneurship to be, "Integrated into existing subjects such as maths, English, and design" because "Young people are entering a world of work that is changing at breakneck speed. Many of the jobs that school-leavers expect to do today didn't exist 15 years ago, and the same is likely to be true in the next 15 years." These approaches, however, can be adopted in almost every subject, by requiring students to analyse problems, apply knowledge and supply reasoned and evidence-based answers. For most teachers, this is simply good teaching – encouraging students to apply knowledge, think critically and for themselves. Although not specifically mathematical, the ability to critically analyse, reason and come to logical conclusions, supported by relevant and objective knowledge/evidence, is surely a prime aim of education in a liberal democracy, as well as being crucial in all aspects of national life and employment.

Recommendations:

- To produce a precise definition of what is meant by “maths for all” post 16. The DfE must decide if it means numeracy or more academic maths; if it is to be aimed primarily at those who fail GCSE maths; if it is ultimately leading to a broader-based baccalaureat at post-16 and away from the traditional three A Levels.
- To successfully recruit more qualified and well-trained maths teachers. This may require the offer of specific financial incentives and bursaries although this could be counterproductive in terms of wider recruitment bearing in mind the shortages in most subject areas; it must also be remembered that retention is equally as important as recruitment.
- To increase the requirements for critical thinking and problem-solving in the National Curriculum and examination specifications.
- To undertake a detailed national skills audit amongst employers, businesses and industry to identify precisely what skills they require and expect from young people.

9. Trans, LGBTQIA and gender issues: legal protection

In March 2023, calls for an enquiry into the teaching of Relationships, Sex and Health Education (compulsory since 2020) were raised at PMQs following allegations that some schools were teaching about anal sex, masturbation and the existence of more than one hundred genders. Union leaders immediately replied that only a tiny minority of schools were not following current guidelines and that the issue was being used for political purposes.

Despite this criticism of schools, politicians should remember that current statutory guidance instructs schools that, “all pupils understand the importance of equality”, that “sexual orientation and gender reassignment are amongst the protected characteristics [of the Equality Act 2010]” and that “we expect all pupils to have been taught LGBTQIA content at a timely point”. [Sections 36 and 37, Statutory Guidance] The Guidance recognises that we live in an, “Increasingly complex world”. Schools are also required by the Ofsted Framework to prepare pupils for, “Life in 21st century Britain”, but what precisely does that mean? Are young people to be prepared for life in a gender-neutral society? This is certainly not a decision to be taken by individual schools, but a decision for our elected representatives and society as a whole.

Is this representative of 21st-century Britain?

In 2021, a non-binary passenger on an LNER train complained to the company because a conductor had welcomed passengers on board with the greeting, “Ladies and gentlemen”. LNER apologised to the complainant, stating that its staff, “Should not be using language like this”. TfL staff were told to stop using “ladies and gentlemen” in favour of, “Good morning everyone”, as early as 2017.

So where do schools stand? Is it only a matter of time before a teacher is prosecuted on the grounds of discrimination for saying “boys and girls”?

The Statutory Guidance on RSHE is quite good, although it is, perhaps unsurprisingly, rather loose and permissive. Although I should always argue for the professionalism of teachers to be respected, if clearer guidance is needed on the teaching of RSHE, then so be it. It is essential that teachers have clarity on such controversial topics and feel legally and professionally protected. Schools require immediate support with catering for Trans pupils.

Advice on issues such as uniforms, pronouns and toilets was promised in the spring of 2022 by the then Secretary of State, but it is still to be published. And this is important – it is precisely this sort of issue, in the hands of a litigious parent, that could land a school in court as the Head is still awaiting the relevant guidance.

Some schools have argued that since young people cannot legally change sex until they are 18, pupils should be treated as girls or boys, according to what is on their birth certificate. Is this a sensible and workable approach or does it show a lack of compassion and is it legally discriminatory, contrary to the Equality Act and the Human Rights Act? These are immediate decisions for politicians, not teachers.

Recommendations:

- To provide immediate advice to schools on catering for Trans pupils, including on uniforms, names, toilets and pronouns.
- To provide absolute clarity on the terms “sex” and “gender” and on the precise legal requirements by which schools must abide.
- To give greater clarity as to what is expected in the RSHE curriculum. [On the issue of informing parents about issues of sex, gender, contraception etc, schools must always put the safety and welfare of the pupil first, especially when the child is deemed *Gillick Competent*. Legislation must not be so prescriptive as to restrict this essential freedom of professional judgement.]
- To urgently agree on a definition of what is meant by “Britain in the 21st century” – is it non-binary? – and the role schools should play in preparing young people for living in it.

10. A school certificate at 16

As previously mentioned, a large number of 16-year-olds leave school having “failed” their GCSEs. What is there to encourage these youngsters to stay in education, to behave well, or to even attend school? Failure is a great demotivator. A broader curriculum will, hopefully, engage more youngsters, but what of those who work hard, behave well, contribute to the school community and then achieve very little in terms of academic results? These youngsters, pleasant, hard-working and trustworthy, can still play a positive role in the community and hold down a good job yet in school terms, they are “failures”.

A non-academic school certificate should state factual information about the pupil – attendance, punctuality, attitude and behaviour. These are attributes which interest employers. During the 1990s and early 2000s, pupils had a Record of Achievement, a portfolio of documentation about academic and non-academic successes. Very few employers and practically no universities, however, took any notice of them, primarily because they contained no objective and quantifiable information. It is important to know if a youngster played in the football team or undertook the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, but it is also important to know whether the pupil was rude, defiant, continually late or frequently absent; such information was missing from the RoA.

In the past, many school reports have also been almost worthless because of the requirement to be “positive”. A national, standardised certificate could be easily completed by schools and could then be used for job/apprenticeship applications or admission to colleges and school sixth forms. (Currently, admissions law prevents schools from refusing to admit pupils into their sixth forms on any grounds other than failing to fulfil academic requirements, e.g. attaining a set number of GCSEs at certain grades. The fact a pupil has been continually absent or disruptive for the previous five years cannot be held against the pupil, who has a ‘right’ of passage into the sixth form.) The idea of a non-academic certificate is nothing new and was recommended by the Newsom Report of 1963 which called for pupils’ wider qualities to be recognised including their, “patience and persistence....general attitudes to learning....honesty, cheerfulness, pleasant manners...and an ability to get on with people”. [S258]

Above all, this certificate could be a tremendous motivator: the pupils who are predicted to achieve little academically currently have little to encourage them, but knowing that their behaviour, attitude, attendance and work ethic will be recorded and presented to future employers, could be a major incentive for many.

The suggestion is that data should only refer to pupils' performance in Years 10 and 11 (i.e. it gives pupils time to develop and mature, not holding childish behaviour when younger against them) and should be compared against the individual school and national data. The document would also be an opportunity to explain any extenuating circumstances that may explain poor attendance.

Education and successful schooling are about so much more than exam results, so let us reflect and celebrate achievement in all its forms, including reliability, perseverance, determination and punctuality.

Recommendations:

- To introduce a national, standardised non-academic certificate at 16, recording individual attendance, punctuality and behaviour data against national and school averages, as well as all other non-classroom achievements (e.g. sport, music, drama, charity work).
- To design a programme of study requiring pupils, as part of the Certificate, to undertake courses in careers and “life skills”, covering basic topics such as personal finance [including taxation - this could also be a vehicle for improving pupils’ practical application of maths], how to apply for jobs/further/higher education and interview practice. Pupils should also complete a period of meaningful work experience to attain the Certificate.
- To provide additional support and where necessary, direct, ring-fenced funding, to enable all schools to run vibrant extra/co-curricular programmes, including sport, music, drama, debating, trips and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. Currently, the quality and range of out-of-hours activities vary enormously.

Conclusion

Over the past 40 years, practically every aspect of schooling in England has changed - curriculum, examinations, inspections, funding, teaching methodology, governance, the organisation and legal status of schools and the role of local government - with one fundamental exception: the continued critical importance of the inspirational classroom teacher.

As much as ever, the influence of the great teacher remains transformative. Yet, in recent years, we have seen more and more experienced teachers leave the profession early and fewer and fewer people join. The purpose of this report is to offer practical, cost-effective solutions that will help to raise standards, encourage talented teachers to stay in teaching and attract more new entrants to a career that will change young lives for the better and contribute to the very future of this country.



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