



EDUCATION REPORT

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ROUNDUP OF POLICIES, TRENDS AND PRIORITIES

It's easy to become immersed in our market niche or specialism, and lose sight of the 'big issues' shaping the education sector right now. Some are obvious; others more subtle and pervasive. Many are interlinked: for example, one of the 'unintended consequences' of England's school accountability regime has been a rise in teacher workload and greater evidence of stress amongst staff and students. This will be exacerbated by the funding crisis in schools, and the choices senior leaders have to make to maintain education standards.

So here we go: a roundup of eight big issues faced by schools in England, along with some of the policies which aim to address them.

HARD TIMES

School funding continues to decline in real terms, and there is no end in sight to austerity for schools. According to research carried out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies¹, overall spending in England has fallen by 8% per pupil in real terms over the past eight years, and it's a similar picture in Wales². School leaders are facing tough choices about where to make savings: according to Sutton Trust's annual teacher polling, 69% say they have made budget-driven cuts to secondary teaching staff, while 72% of primary heads have lost teaching assistants. Other budgetary casualties include IT equipment, school outings, sports, and subject choices³.

Heads are simultaneously losing staff, while also having to reduce teacher workload, and maintain education provision in their schools. The Government insists that schools are better off than ever before, as set out in this House of Commons briefing paper⁴. According to forecasts⁵ carried out by the ASCL, schools in England need an extra £5.7 billion in 2019-20 to 'give every child the education that society expects and children deserve'.

THE FUNDING CRISIS FOR STUDENTS WITH HIGH NEEDS (SEND) IS ACUTE

According to analysis by the EPI, this is due to a range of issues, including a rise in the number of children and young people with SEND and Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs) , an increase in more complex needs, changes to the way funding is calculated and allocated, and a gap between the funding schools receive, and the real cost of supporting SEND students⁶. In December 2018, Damian Hinds announced that an additional £250m would be released for SEND; a figure which he reiterated in his May speech at the annual NAHT conference, along with the acknowledgement that this ‘may not be enough’. According to the EPI, it’s unlikely to plug the gap.

SOCIAL MOBILITY

Data gathered by the EPI⁷ shows that the rate at which the disadvantage gap is closing has slowed, and if this trend continues, the attainment gap in GCSE English and Maths will take well over 100 years to close. Is education as a social lever failing in England? The annual Sutton Trust teacher polls show that just over half of school leaders feel that pupil premium funding is helping to close the attainment gap at their school, but a quarter says that the additional funding is being used to plug holes in their budget. A report⁸ by the Education Select Committee published in February 2019 accuses the Government of ‘little strategic direction’ around early years, widely acknowledged as a key influencer of life chances.

TEACHER RECRUITMENT CRISIS

In short, not enough new teachers are coming into the profession, and too many are leaving. The thinktank LKMco⁹ reveals figures showing that for every 28,000 new teachers coming into schools, 43,000 leave, with around 20% doing so two years after they qualify, and a third after five years. The DfE's recently launched recruitment strategy¹⁰ hopes to address the problem by reducing teachers' workload, providing more support for teachers at the start of their careers, encouraging schools to offer more flexible working arrangements, and simplifying the routes into teaching. The NFER's Report on Teacher Workforce Dynamics in England¹¹ provides a detailed analysis of the challenges facing the profession, and how to address them.

ICT PROVISION IN SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND IS IN DECLINE

The Roehampton Annual Computing Education Report reveals that the number of hours of computing/ ICT taught in schools has dropped significantly, while 61% of secondary leaders who responded to the Sutton Trust polls have cut spending on IT equipment. This is the backdrop for the announcement of the new EdTech strategy¹², announced by Damian Hinds in April, which sets out five key areas where technology could transform teaching and learning. This includes reducing teacher workload, supporting improved outcomes for all, and helping to deliver CPD. The key word is the provision of products or services which have an 'impact' (it appears 23 times in the document). The EEF has produced a digital technology guidance report¹³ advising schools on impact-driven procurement.

THERE'S A MENTAL HEALTH EPIDEMIC AMONGST STUDENTS AND STAFF

The past 18 months have seen an explosion of reports from charities, research institutions and the health & social care sector about the growing incidence of mental health and wellbeing issues amongst young people and teachers, and the lack of resources and expertise to deal with them. The annual Teacher Wellbeing Index¹⁴ highlights a 'stress epidemic' across the UK education workforce which is particularly acute amongst senior leaders, while the NHS Digital Survey¹⁵ shows that one in eight under-19s have a mental health disorder. In November 2018, the DfE published 'Mental health and behaviour in schools' setting out schools' responsibilities and providing advice and guidance on supporting pupils' mental health. In December, Damian Hinds pledged to train 200 new EdPsychs a year¹⁶.

A NEW OFSTED FRAMEWORK COMES INTO PLAY FROM SEPTEMBER

The feedback is broadly positive with the education community welcoming the renewed emphasis on 'quality of education'. It's hoped that with inspectors taking a step back from data scrutiny, teachers will benefit from a reduction in workload, although this may be offset by the prompt for schools to review their curricula. One of the 'unintended outcomes' of the accountability regime has been a rise in 'off-rolling' of high-needs pupils; something inspectors will be monitoring¹⁷. The separate 'behaviour and attitudes' judgement reinforces the importance of developing 'soft skills' such as resilience: essential for good mental wellbeing.

EARLY YEARS SHAKE-UP

This education phase is undergoing considerable change, much of it controversial. Bold Beginnings, Ofsted's report containing recommendations over the Reception curriculum, has seen a revised set of Early Learning Goals (ELGs) ¹⁸ being piloted by 25 schools this year, and we're promised a public consultation.

Hoping to be 'third time lucky', the Government will be (re) introducing mandatory baseline assessment for children in Reception from September 2020, despite strong opposition¹⁹ from lobbying groups such as 'More than a score'. In practice, most schools carry out some form of baseline assessment, but the introduction of a new accountability measure seems out of step with the pushback from the education community, concerned over the unintended consequences of testing for the purposes of monitoring schools' performance.

Early Years deserves its own 'big issues' roundup, but other 'pain points' for this sector are: an underskilled and underpaid workforce (see research carried out by the EPI) ; lack of funding for preschool provision; the vocabulary gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children; and the challenge of boosting the quality of adult-child conversations at home.

CONCLUSION

Finally, it's worth emphasising that this roundup is by no means exhaustive. Notable omissions include the Government's MAT agenda, the rise of specialist school 'Hubs' (most recently, 32 primary English Hubs) with associated funding, and the allocation of a £2.4m curriculum grant to 11 academies. Is this the start of Trusts becoming competitors to the education industry as they develop and deliver not just services, but products too, for their own and other schools?

Increasingly, decision-makers and practitioners are looking for evidence of impact before adopting new products or services: with budgets under pressure, they can't afford to make the wrong purchasing decisions.

If these, or other issues, policies or initiatives have implications for your products or services, or you would like to gather evidence of impact on key priority areas for schools, teachers or students, do get in touch.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

Compiled by Melissa Mackinlay, an independent strategy consultant with eighteen years' experience of working in the educational publishing sector, this draws on materials in the public domain, in an attempt to make sense of key issues shaping the education landscape.

I'd love to hear your feedback. Please email melissamackinlay@btinternet.com or call me on **07426 709505**.

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