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# Building Tomorrow's Healthy, Confident and Productive Citizens

An Education for our Children

December 2023

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# FOREWORD

**By Sir David Carter**

*Former National Schools Commissioner*

Education is and has always been a key battleground in the national policy debate on public services. As we approach a likely general election in 2024, this is becoming even more sharply focused.

Over the past two decades, standards in our schools have risen faster than at any time in my 40-year career in schools. Academic outcomes are better, inspection outcomes have improved, and the vision of a good school for every child is closer to reality now than at any time in the recent past.

This report is important because it sets out a vision for some of the next steps in this journey.

As both a former music teacher and a longstanding advocate of the arts in the curriculum, I have seen a decline in the place of creative subjects in the curriculum. The consequence of this has been an impact on wider learning opportunities, with subjects such as music being relegated to the enrichment space. If we are serious about creating the citizens of tomorrow who will make their mark locally, nationally and internationally, we need to expose them to a curriculum that addresses tolerance, understanding, and an appreciation of the very best that has been written, painted and composed.

**“ This report shows that there is a groundswell of support for a broader focus across our education system.**

**“ The attainment gap has never been wider and this alone should give education policy makers a wake-up call.**

This report, an excellent addition to the current lexicon of future education thinking, shows that there is a groundswell of support for a broader focus across our education system. The report is not yet another generic report on ‘21st century skills’ or the ‘future of education’ – it represents the views of parents and carers and the type of experiences that they want their children to have in school.

Parents want their children to have the opportunity to develop the skills that they will need to thrive. Parents also spoke about their desire for children to have their wellbeing valued above all else. Teachers in this research also voiced an appetite for change and highlighted gaps in the curriculum. They could see the deficit for children who were not being exposed to the same breadth of learning that they themselves enjoyed when they were in school. These are not voices we can ignore.

This is not a report, however, that suggests the diminution of the focus on knowledge as a driving force, far from it. And that is a good thing. My own experience has enabled me to see the value and benefit of knowledge-rich learning allied to breadth and skill development. For example, you cannot compose without understanding the principles of melody or harmony. You cannot paint without understanding how to use different brush strokes and textures. The point that this report makes is that by focusing on one curriculum principle over another, we are missing crucial

“ This is an exciting vision for a future education system. If we get this right, we can further reinforce the role of schools and multi-academy trusts as civic anchors and build a new model of system-led autonomy.

opportunities for young people to thrive in ways that will open different pathways for their futures.

We also know only too well that the children who often miss out on these opportunities – and others – are those who are the most disadvantaged. The attainment gap has never been wider; this alone should give education policy makers a wake-up call to assess whether what we have done in the recent past is what will make the difference in the future for this specific cohort of young people.

Many of these children as they become young adults will experience greater challenges than many who have gone before. We have a responsibility to equip them with the personal resources and resilience to help them navigate their changing futures. Whether the solution to this rests within a more creative curriculum, a better understanding of how to live a healthy and mentally secure lifestyle, or exposure to cultural capital that is often taken for granted by their more advantaged peers, the responsibility of a state funded, school led system should be to

equalise this for every child irrespective of where they live, what type of school they go to and what aspirations they have for their futures.

The educational landscape today is fraught with challenge and this call for reform is not something that the report makes lightly. Changes such as those advocated here have to be undertaken ‘with’ the sector, rather than ‘to’ the sector. We cannot and should not undertake this kind of reform without significant extra funding, more teachers, the support of civic society groups as delivery partners, and a workload test for teachers and leaders.

But this is an exciting vision for a future education system. If we get this right, we can further reinforce the role of schools and multi-academy trusts as civic anchors and build a new model of system-led autonomy.

# About Sir David Carter

Sir David was the product of a comprehensive school in South Wales and was the first member of his family to go to university where he studied for a Music degree at Royal Holloway College, London. Making a difference to the lives of children has been a huge motivation to him throughout his career. He began his career as a Music teacher in 1983 and went on to become a Local Authority Music Advisor, a Headteacher, an Executive Head and, between 2007 and 2014, the CEO of the Cabot Learning Federation, a multi-academy trust in Bristol.

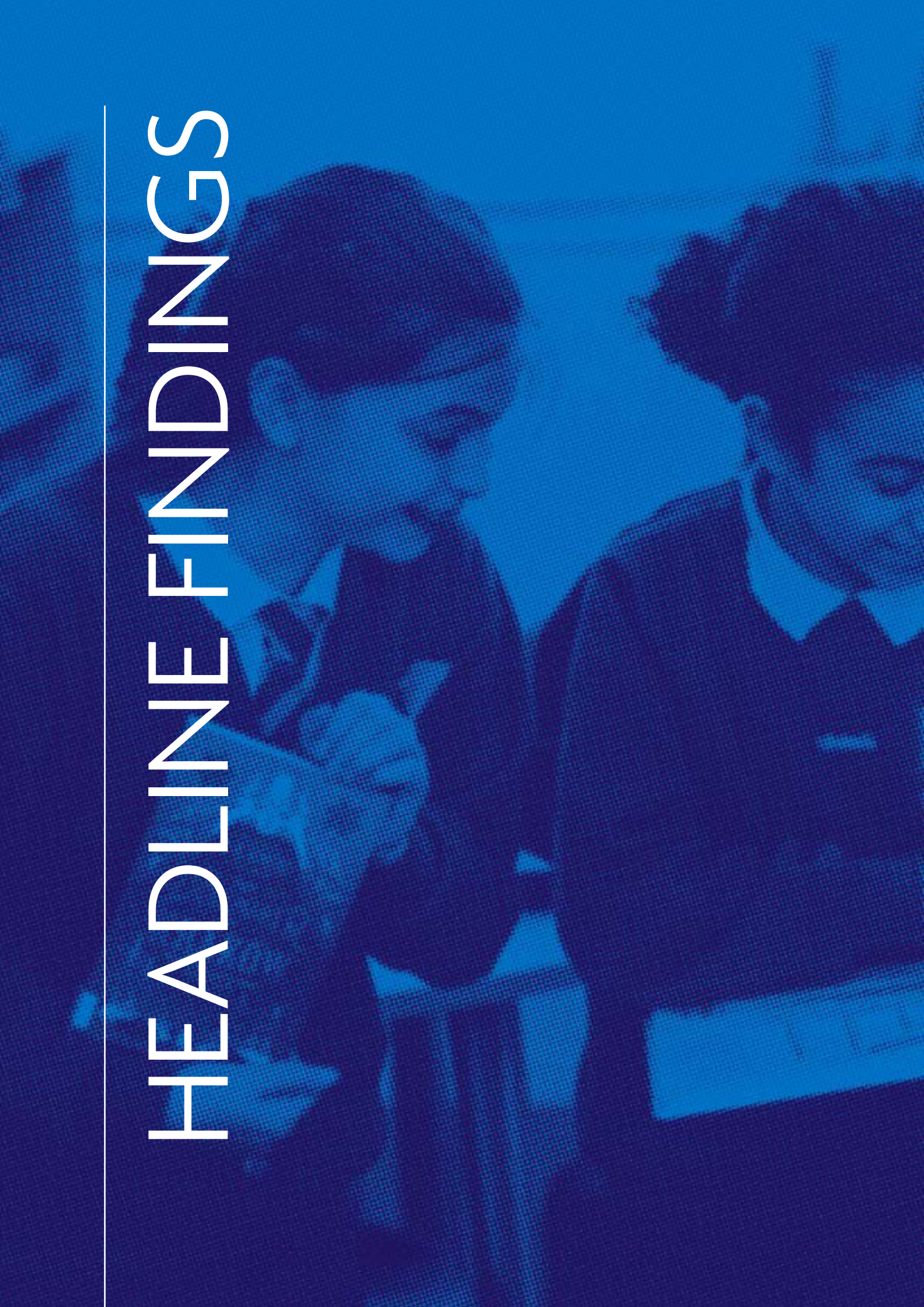
In 2014, Sir David was appointed to be the first Regional Schools Commissioner in the South West and took up the position of National Schools Commissioner (NSC) in December 2015. As NSC, his focus was firmly on building capacity so that the trusts that run our most challenging schools can sustain improvement over time.

From 2018 to 2021, Sir David was the Director of System Leadership at the Ambition Institute and now works with a number of schools and trusts advising them on their strategy. In August 2020, Sir David published his book “Leading Academy Trusts: Why Some Fail, but Most Don’t”.

Sir David is a trustee at several charities including Centrepoint, which aims to eradicate youth homelessness. He is also a trustee at the Laidlaw Foundation. Sir David continues to place family, music, golf and Cardiff City FC at the heart of his relaxation time and continues to be very proud of being awarded a knighthood for his services to education in 2013.

# HEADLINE FINDINGS

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1

Exams continue to be seen as a cause of **needless stress** by teachers and parents alike.

2

Parents are more open to wide-ranging exam **reform** than teachers or multi-academy trust (MAT) trustees.

3

Senior leaders, teachers and parents agree that exams and testing **dominate** school priorities excessively.

4

There is strong appetite among parents and teachers for greater emphasis on education in **'life skills'** and building character at school...

5

...but **limited clarity** over what this looks like. More work needs to be done.

6

Parents, teachers, trustees and professionals are all supportive of the expansion of **extra-curricular and enrichment activity**.

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7

Despite this, all stakeholders, particularly those responsible for the administration of schools, are aware of the need to **fund enrichment** and extracurriculars more substantially.

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8

Everyone agrees that it is important for schools to continue to be held **accountable**.

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9

Parents from higher social groups are more invested in Ofsted grades, but parents across all social groups agree that **Ofsted accurately reflects** their child's experiences of school. But they are very open to reform.

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10

Teachers, parents and trustees all want the accountability system to be more **transparent, well-rounded and less high stakes**.

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11

Only 6% of parents *disagree* with the idea of a **report card-style judgement** as a way of achieving it.

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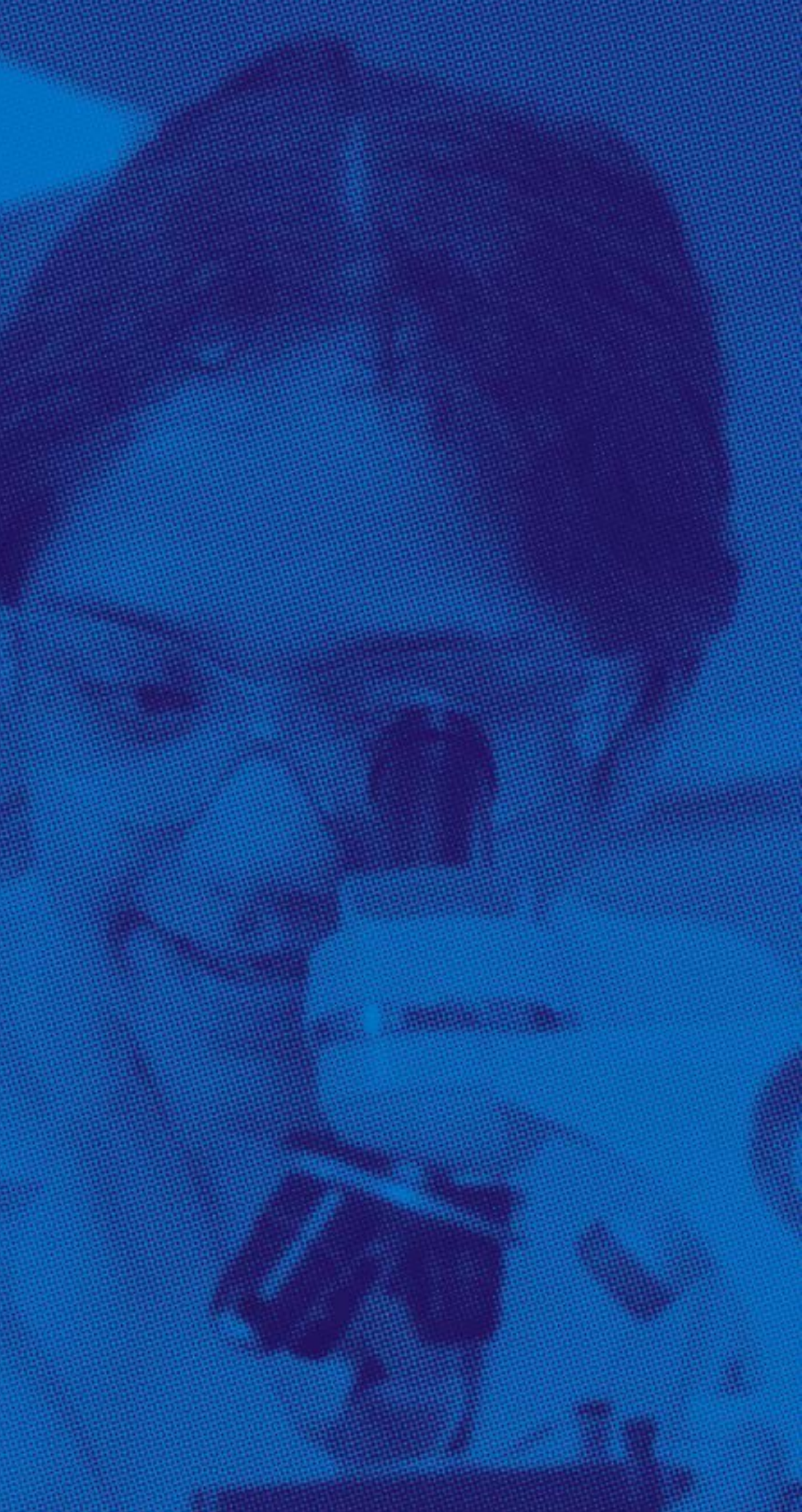
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A report card – and its categories – is a **blank canvas**.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Over the last decade and more, there has been a significant and important focus on academic outcomes throughout compulsory education. This has been a valuable focus; academic outcomes are hugely important for the life chances of pupils, and this drive has ensured a more rigorous education for our children.

But there is more to do. There remains a significant number of pupils who leave our education system without key qualifications; in 2023, one in every three children<sup>1</sup> did not pass Maths and English GCSE, a figure which rose to almost half of children on Free School Meals (FSM). Indeed, academic outcomes have flatlined since 2017.

Critically, other things that matter have been sidelined over this period and more. This research suggests that the focus on academic outcomes has come at the expense of other important elements of education, including life skills, creative subjects and the wellbeing of young people. These are highly valued by parents, teachers and pupils, and are also important, under-recognised drivers of social mobility.

Indeed, our research shows that there is clear appetite from parents, teachers and school leaders to rebalance our education system by incorporating wider 'life skills' for every pupil. More research is needed to bring these views into sharper focus, but we found strong interest for increased provision in areas such as digital and financial literacy. Such an offer could be made in the form of a newly rebooted PSHE curriculum alongside a significantly increased suite of co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

Developing this offer will require significant funding and support for schools, and a recalibration of accountability measures, but it is

“ This would represent an investment in the citizens of tomorrow – a prevention rather than a cure to many of society’s ills.

clear from our research that there is widespread support from both the teaching profession and the public for such reforms. This would represent an investment in the citizens of tomorrow – a prevention rather than a cure to many of society’s ills. Labour’s proposal to introduce a ‘Report Card’ could and should be the way in which this holistic curriculum is measured, but it is only one tool in creating systematic change – and while the headline idea proved welcome in this research, it’s still very much just an idea and more detailed thinking will be needed. It must sit alongside much wider reform to our education system; what is included and how it is delivered. This report marks a significant step forward in thinking about how this change can be made.

Throughout our research, we sought to find out where the public and expert opinion was on the key issues surrounding accountability and the curriculum. We have spoken to parents, teachers, school leaders and sector experts to consider not just what should be done, but how this might be possible from our current starting point. It is the beginning of an exciting and timely conversation about the way in which our schools can best serve our children and communities.

# CONTEXT

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# A MOMENT IN TIME

Next year there will be a General Election and a new Chief Inspector of Ofsted at a time that our school system is facing many challenges:

- The growing attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers, hugely exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, is now wider than it has been since 2011, with disadvantaged pupils 1.34 grades behind their peers in English and Maths (Tuckett et al., 2022, p. 8.).
- The attendance crisis, fuelled by parents who no longer believe it is their responsibility to ensure their children attend school each day (Burtonshaw and Dorrell, 2023), is reflected in stubbornly high absence rates of 7.5%, up from 4.7% in 2018-2019 and 22.3% of pupils classified as 'persistently absent' from school in the 2022-2023 academic year.
- Challenges in hugely under-resourced special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) provision are both growing, intractable problems; young people are facing increasing wait times to access services and frequently report they are unable to meet their needs.
- The school workforce is in dire straits, with severe teacher recruitment and retention challenges ongoing and the last academic year beset by teacher strikes (Worth, 2023). Recruitment into the profession in 2022/23 was 20 per cent lower than in the year before the pandemic and more than 1 in 5 secondary school teachers have said they are unlikely to be in the profession in

five years' time, rising to 24% of teachers working in challenging educational contexts (Education Support, 2023).

- A cost-of-living crisis that has exacerbated the pressures on families, compounding these existing problems.

## OFSTED

Since 2005, Ofsted's school accountability work has taken the form of inspections followed by public reports and single-word judgements. Under New Labour, the inspection body was credited with drastically reducing the number of what they termed 'failing schools' in the English system (Barber, 2008; Freedman, 2023).

During that time, Ofsted has (broadly) inspected with the consent and support of the sector: the majority of teachers who have been inspected agree with the outcomes of inspections (Jones and Jones, 2022), including in schools that are

“ Impact of the accountability system has become increasingly onerous over the last few years, with adverse consequences for teachers, parents and school leaders alike.

graded 'Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement' (ibid.). Ofsted's own surveys of parents find that more than four out of five parents find Ofsted reports useful (Ofsted, 2020), with two-thirds agreeing that Ofsted's work contributes to improvement in the standard of education (ibid.).

However, teachers report that the impact of the accountability system has become increasingly onerous over the last few years, with adverse consequences for teachers, parents and school leaders alike (Fazackerley, 2023). There is also a correlation between school level deprivation and Ofsted judgements: the proportion of schools consistently rated 'Good' or better is negatively correlated with the proportion of students eligible for free school meals (Thomson, 2022).

## “ These factors make reform of Ofsted's role an inevitable political priority.

In the past, primacy of exam results imposed an onerous workload on teachers and warped teaching incentives, a process that Ofsted deemed regrettable (Spielman, 2018). Ofsted's updated Education Inspection Framework (EIF) attempts to address the perceived high stakes of exam results by placing renewed emphasis on the curriculum, which must be 'broad and balanced' (Ofsted, 2021). As well as this, the stresses that teachers and parents feel regarding external exams can be 'passed down' to the pupils taking them (Menzies and Millard, 2017; Weale, 2022).

Ofsted – and, as importantly or more so, the actions that the government takes as a result of

Ofsted's judgements – have undeniably become a source of immense pressure on teachers. This has led to demand from some quarters for a more holistic vision of educational priorities, such as the 'head, hands, heart' model (Islam et al., 2022) espoused by the Laidlaw Foundation, among others.

These factors make reform of Ofsted's role an inevitable political priority. How Ofsted works, who it serves, what it produces and why it does so are all questions ripe for debate at this moment in time. Labour has recognised the urgency of the situation by suggesting report-card judgements for schools in its fifth 'opportunity mission' (The Labour Party, 2023), but change must be politically pragmatic and mindful of how inspections can create perverse incentives.

# ASSESSMENT

The focus on exams as a result of accountability in all its forms has, together with funding cuts, undoubtedly left schools focussing on an increasingly small suite of traditional academic subjects. There is concern within the sector regarding the volume of curricular content (NFER and Wellcome Trust, 2016; Spielman, 2017), and the emphasis on a narrow range of subjects in accountability measures crowding out other subjects (Hutchings, 2015; Andrade and Worth, 2017). Britain's 16-19 academic curriculum is one of the narrowest in the developed world (Robinson and Bunting, 2021), and a post-16

“ This report’s research and recommendations are not about tinkering around the edges of the current education system; it is about enacting significant reform.

‘British Baccalaureate’ has long been mooted as a potential solution (Richmond and Regan, 2021; Tuckett, 2022), most recently as part of Conservative proposals for wider reform to post-16 education (Foster et al., 2023).

The discussion over what is taught, when it is taught and how it is reflected in our accountability system is therefore a very live debate.

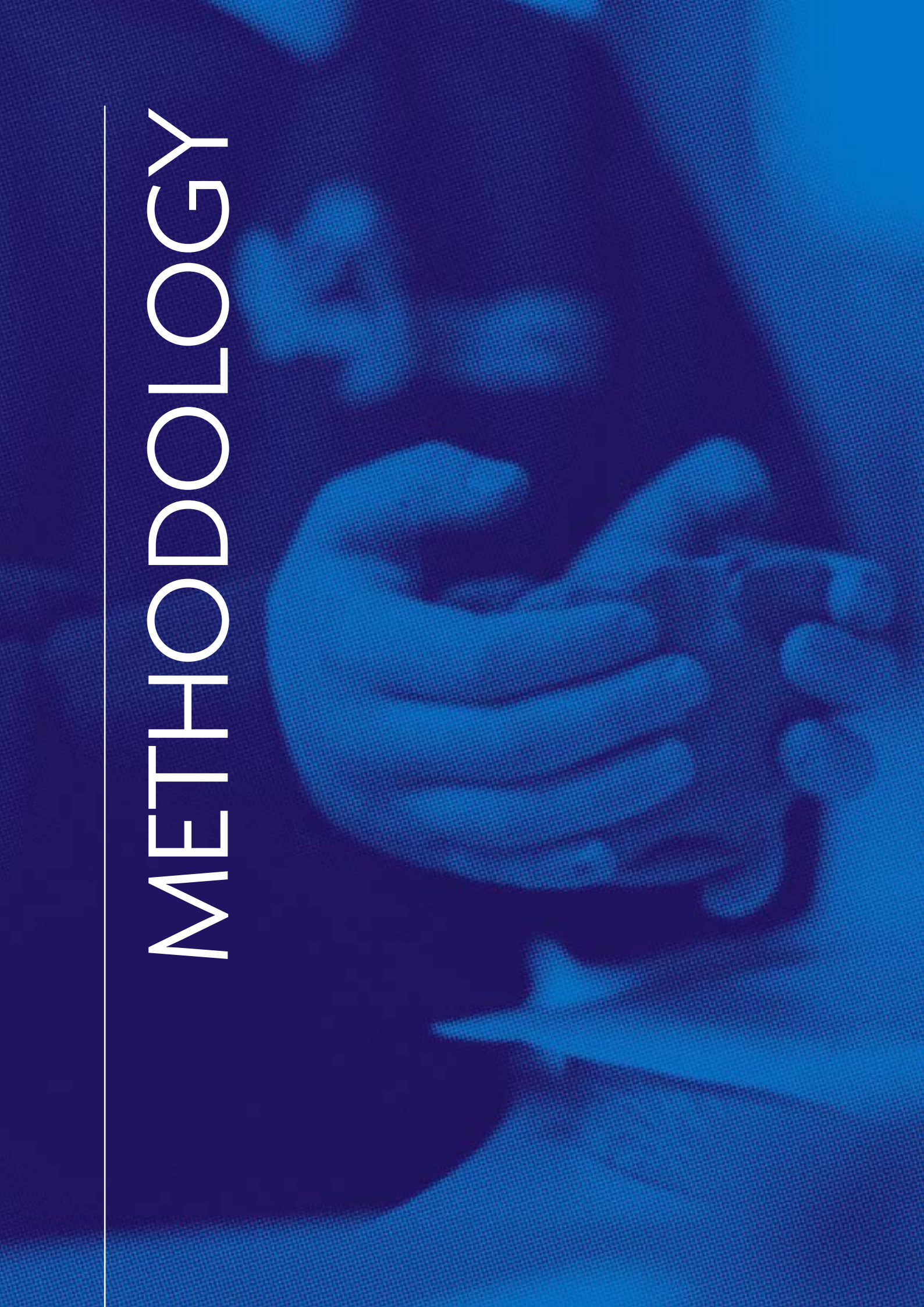
Within an increasingly focused curriculum, schools find it difficult to pursue and deliver co-curricular and enrichment activities. Parents, teachers, children and young people agree with the need for greater access to enrichment and extracurricular activities (CfEY and NCS, 2021). The Social Mobility Commission has recognised that access to extracurricular pursuits and enrichment opportunities is unequally distributed across socio-economic groups, and that this could be a barrier to social mobility for young people (Donnelly, Lažetić and Sandoval-Hernandez, 2019). Moreover, Child Poverty Action Group has suggested that embedding extracurricular enrichment in before- and after-school clubs would provide a more rounded educational experience without impinging upon curricular time (CPAG, 2022).

Labour has signalled a desire to broaden accountability measures through the inclusion of a vocational or creative subject in Progress and Attainment 8 measures (The Labour Party, 2023). This would be a welcome first step towards a more balanced view of the curriculum. Our research suggests this policy would be welcomed by parents and teachers alike.

This report’s research and recommendations are not about tinkering around the edges of the current education system; it is about enacting significant reform whilst retaining the academic core of what schools deliver. It doesn’t shy away from the fact that this will both cost money and take time – the scale of the reform needed is not something we can achieve overnight. This is a vision and a commitment for a government over two parliaments, but it is a commitment that would change the lives of the next generation and create a healthier, stronger society for all.

# METHODOLOGY

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This research took a mixed-methods approach to understanding parents' views. The core research was undertaken through a nationally representative poll of parents of children in state funded primary and secondary schools and a series of independently recruited focus groups with parents of school-aged children, teachers, and senior leaders. This project also drew upon a series of 1-1 interviews with experts from across the sector.

All the research for this project was undertaken in between May and July 2023.

### Polling

Public First ran a poll of 1001 parents of primary and secondary school children in England from 27 June to 7 July 2023. Results were weighted by Iterative Proportional Fitting to be representative of national demographics along lines of age, gender, and social grade. The polling questions were related to education quality, the balance between academic and non-academic priorities, reforming the assessment and qualifications

system, perceptions of Ofsted and options for accountability reform. Polling was carried out online, and the results weighted by gender, region and social grade to reflect the national proportions. Public First is a member of the British Polling Council, and company partners of the Market Research Society.

Full polling tables can be found on Public First's website<sup>2</sup>. As with all opinion polls, there is a margin of error in the answers, and the margin of error is greater when sample sizes are smaller (when there are crossbreaks of specific groups of people). The margin of error on the sample for this work is +/- 3%. All polling numbers in this report should be read on this basis.

Throughout this research, we refer to different socio-economic groups, as defined by the National Readership Survey's Social Grade system<sup>3</sup>. Social Grade is a classification system based on occupation and is based on the main income earner in the household. The classifications are:

Social Grade	Description	% of Population <sup>3</sup>
A	Higher managerial, administrative and professional	4
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional	23
C1	Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional	28
C2	Skilled manual workers	20
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers	15
E	State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only	10

02 Public First (2023). Accessed: <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/>

03 National Readership Survey. Accessed: <https://nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/>

### Focus Groups

Public First undertook four independently-recruited online focus groups between the 23rd of May and the 18th of July 2023. Two were run with groups of eight parents in different areas of the country. A third group was run with eight state teachers from Portsmouth, with levels of experience ranging from three years to 23 years. A final group was run with senior leaders in Education Investment Areas.

### Expert Interviews

This research included one-to-one interviews with seven professionals with experience in the education, cultural and accountability sectors.

### Sector Roundtable

As part of this research, we held a roundtable event with trustees of MATs, convened by Forum Strategy.

### Partners and Acknowledgement

This report and the primary research underpinning it was funded by the Laidlaw Foundation, which invests in the education of the underprivileged and underrepresented in order to break the cycle of poverty, reduce inequality and develop a new generation of leaders. The Laidlaw Foundation's programmes include:

- **Laidlaw Schools Trust (LST):** The Foundation established and continues to support strategically and financially the Laidlaw Schools Trust, a growing multi-academy trust in the North East of England. LST transforms the lives of children and communities through extraordinary education. Supporting over 5500 children across nine academies, it focuses on nurturing students from nursery to sixth form and is set to grow further.
- **Laidlaw Scholars Leadership & Research Programme:** An international programme supporting undergraduate students at 17

top universities around the world, designed to develop a new generation of leaders who are skilled researchers, embrace data-based decision making, and believe it is a moral imperative to lead with integrity.

- **Women in Leadership Laidlaw Scholarships:** Committed to promoting equal representation and power on both executive and non-executive boards, this programme has provided full and half scholarships to over 300 exceptional women at Columbia Business School, London Business School, and Oxford University's Saïd Business School for their MBAs.
- **Laidlaw Trailblazers:** Partnered with Trinity Access Programmes, this initiative supports women from lower socio-economic backgrounds in accessing higher education and career opportunities. The programme annually brings ten diverse women to Trinity College Dublin, many as the first in their families to attend university.
- **Laidlaw Scholars Ventures (LSV):** A for-profit initiative investing in start-ups founded and run by Laidlaw Scholars. Backed by \$50m, LSV accelerates Good Businesses by financing their growth, providing support services, delivering extensive training and development, and bringing a network of expert advisors and mentors to guide portfolio businesses.



This report has been authored by Dr Sally Burtonshaw, Associate Director, Ed Dorrell, Partner, and Will Yates, Policy Manager at Public First.

Design by Nikol Chen, Design & Development Manager at the Laidlaw Foundation.

# FINDING 1

**Exams continue to be seen as a cause of needless stress by teachers and parents alike.**

**B**oth parents and teachers agree that exams cause unnecessary stress for children, throughout both primary and secondary education. However, the strength of this view decreases with both the social grade and level of parental education – poorer parents are more likely to say that exams cause their children needless stress than their wealthier peers.

More parents disagree than agree that the stress of exams is necessary to teach children important life skills – this belief also intensifies among lower social groups.

63% of wealthier (social groups A and B) parents believe that exams cause unnecessary stress, compared to 74% of poorer (social groups D and E) parents.

There is also a clear relationship between level of parental education and the belief that exams cause unnecessary stress for children. The greater the level of parental education, the less likely parents are to feel that exams cause unnecessary stress for their children.

76% of parents with GCSE or equivalent qualifications agree with this statement, whereas 63% of parents with Master's qualifications agree with it.

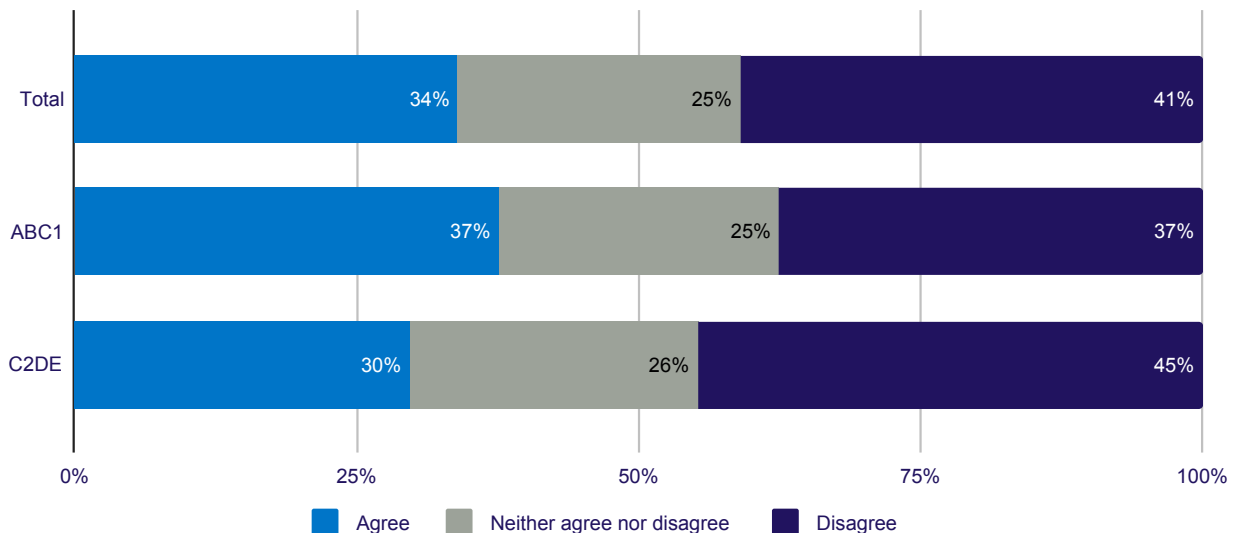
Belief that the stress exams place on children is worthwhile may also be linked to whether parents feel that exams are necessary to teach important life skills. Almost half (49%) of parents in social groups D and E disagree with the statement, compared to barely a third (35%) of parents in social groups A and B.

Based on our focus groups, parents think that exams are a source of considerable stress for their children, with the frequency and volume of assessment both cited as factors in this stress:

*There's too much at stake for getting good results.*

—J, 38-year-old father of 5, Rotherham, Social Group D

Better of parents are more likely to think that exam stress is necessary to teach children life skills



*It's just full-on paperwork and exams. And, you know, she's getting quite stressed... exams, exam, exams, and I think, you know, they need to give kids time to sort of evaluate things and take a breather, because there is only so much information and knowledge you can take. So I don't think they're given enough time.*

—S, 46-year-old father of 4, Leeds, Social Group D

*If, you know, my daughter's got an exam or test coming up, she's constantly worried.*

—J, 38-year-old father of 5, Rotherham, Social Group D

Teachers also think that the stress of exams damages their relationships with students, particularly those who struggle the most academically.

*There is a proportion of children for whom GCSEs are appropriate, and they do make progress, but those children it doesn't suit it really doesn't suit, and that's really damaging to the pupil-teacher relationship because they feel like failures and don't trust us.*

—L, Science Teacher of 23 years' experience

One expert believes that a certain level of stress is a normal part of academic and professional life, and that we should distinguish between mental health difficulties that need treatment and the occasional stressful moment while growing up:

*You know, getting nervous and a bit anxious [from time to time] - yeah, it is normal.*

—Sector Expert



# FINDING 2

**Parents are more open to wide-ranging exam reform than teachers or MAT trustees.**

**M**ost parents do not believe that exams are an accurate reflection of their children's academic abilities. They are supportive of measures that make exam stress more manageable; however, there is little support for abolishing exams entirely and moving to a coursework-based assessment process.

Despite wide-ranging frustrations with exams, teachers and MAT trustees see the value in them as an imperfect but preferable option to a system without them. This does not, however, mean they are against improvements and change.

This is particularly revealing in light of the suspension of exams during 2020 and 2021 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the resultant challenges in assigning grades through both 'teacher assessed' (TAG) and school or 'centre assessed' (CAG) methodologies.

60% of parents see exams as an inaccurate reflection of their children's academic abilities, compared to just 34% who see them as an accurate reflection.

Parents are particularly open to measures that make preparation for exams more manageable and less stressful. Making exams shorter, reducing the number of exams and increasing the length of revision time are all supported by over half of parents, with little opposition. Opinion is far more polarised on allowing children to bring in notes and more so for completely abolishing exams in favour of coursework.

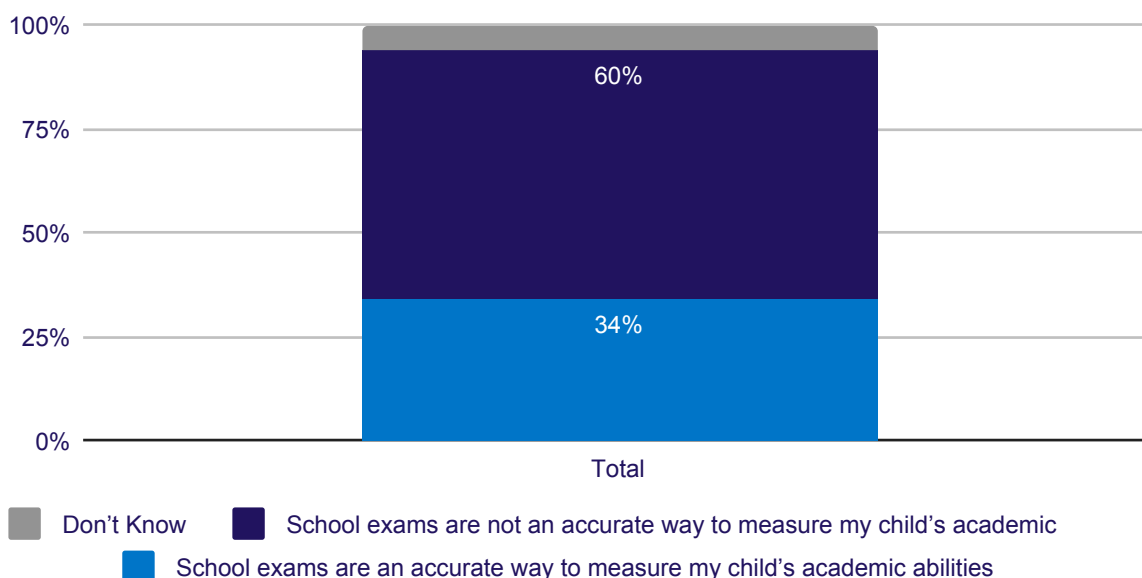
The appeal of a less exam-centred system is apparent from conversations with parents too:

*The ability to, you know, spread it out I think definitely helps.*

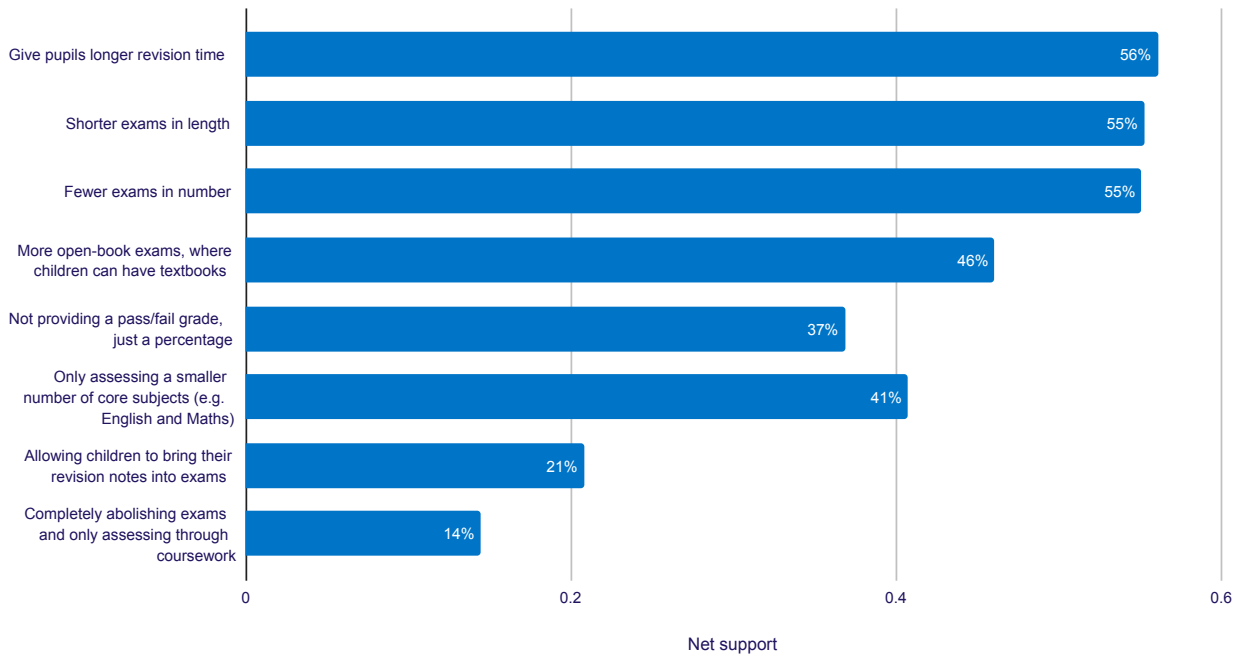
—M, 42-year-old father of 2, South Gloucestershire

Among teachers and MAT trustees, there is an awareness that exams have an important role in maintaining the impartiality of the assessment system.

Most parents see exams as an inaccurate gauge of academic ability



There is widespread support for making exams and exam preparation less onerous



*If you get rid of GCSEs, how are you going to replace it with something that is standardised rather than opinionated?*

—L, Teacher of 11 years' experience

*I'm quite conflicted about this. I don't know whether it's good or bad, because actually, when you look at the life chances for the students in the area, where they go for school, their destinations very much are based on their exam outcomes. So for them, at this point in time, it is advantageous.*

—A, Primary MAT Trustee

There is significant desire for the curriculum to be slimmed down, in order to both create time for depth within the curriculum and other, super-curricular learning and experiences.

*For example, instead of having 15 poems on the literature GCSE, if they were to have perhaps six, we could engage with them in a very different way: we could teach them some of the cool things that we've been talking about. And just have more time.*

—R, English Teacher of 14 years' experience



# FINDING 3

**Senior leaders, teachers and parents agree that exams and testing dominate school priorities excessively.**

Although they think there is a role for exams within the education system, parents, teachers and school leaders feel that exams cause excessive focus on the particular subjects and skills.

Parents feel that schools should focus their time and resources on subjects and experiences beyond exam preparation.

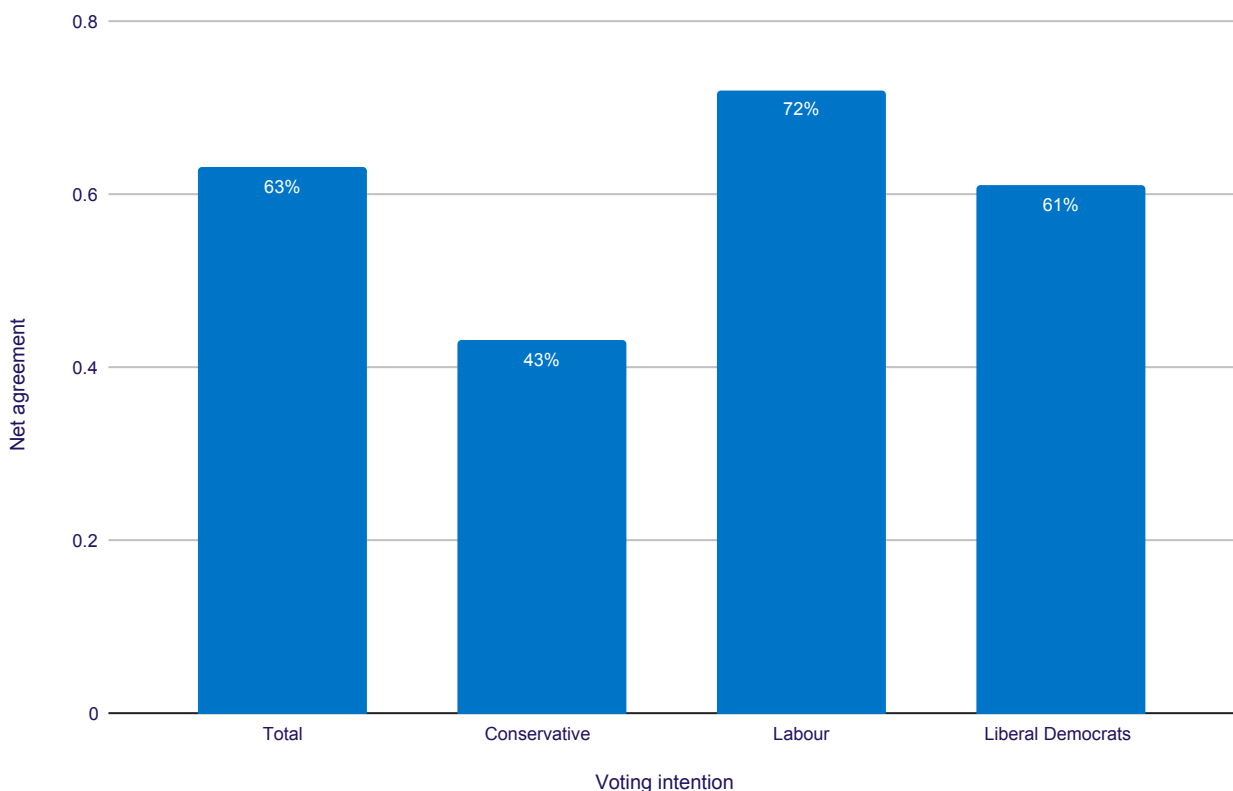
Teachers, leaders and MAT trustees all dislike the distortionary effects that exams have on the curriculum in schools and express frustration at the way in which the exam system crowds out students and activities that aren't well served by assessment.

Parents are clear that they want to see a broader, more holistic curriculum. 71% of parents think that exams cause excessive focus on certain subjects and skills. More than twice as many parents (62%) would prefer schools to focus their time and resources on other areas besides preparing them for exams than would prefer exams to be the main focus (29%).

There is a stark difference between the attitudes of different prospective voters to the relationship between exams and the curriculum: 72% net of prospective Labour voters agree that exams cause schools to focus too much on particular subjects and skills, compared to just 43% net of prospective Conservative voters.

Overall, parents are more than twice as likely to say they would prefer schools to prioritise things other than passing exams than prioritising exams. This is particularly strongly felt among parents whose children are eligible for free school meals.

Labour voters are particularly likely to agree that exams cause schools to focus too much on particular subjects.



70% of parents whose children are currently eligible for free school meals agree that they would like schools to focus on areas outside of exam preparation, compared to just 22% of parents of such children saying that they would prefer schools to focus on preparing for exams.

Conversations with parents make it clear that exams are an overwhelmingly central feature of school life for their children:

*My daughter is a really, really big worrier. And if, you know, she's got an exam or test coming up, and she's worried about what she knows, she's constantly worried about it.*

—M, 42-year-old dad of 2, South Gloucestershire

*My son said "I've got another mock this week". And I was like, "But you only had mocks, like weeks ago?" And he's like, "Oh, no, we keep doing them. We've got all these mocks. And then we've got another set of mocks". I don't think that they have been following their normal average timetable.*

—R, 39-year-old-mum of 1, Lewes

*There was this this massive pressure over the SATs tests and everything was – right, well, can't miss a day of school in case I miss anything, she's going to get revision sent home and everyone was just so on top of it.*

—L, mum of 4, Gateshead

This sense that there is more to educating young people than exam preparation is also keenly felt by teachers, leaders and professionals, who saw the volume of curricular activity and the primacy of exams as barriers to a wider view of school activities:

*I think [school] is about preparing people for life. I personally don't think it's about exam results at all, I think exam results are for the schools. Exam results are just stepping stones, and it's about ensuring people are well equipped to have successful lives.*

—L, Geography Teacher and Careers Lead of 17 years' experience

*It seems to me that the way of ensuring, showing some level of equal access to arts is to have it sort of firmly embedded in school life at a curricular and an extracurricular level. You can't just have it as extracurricular – it has to be something within curriculum time.*

—Sector Expert



# FINDING 4

**There is strong appetite among parents and teachers for greater emphasis on education in ‘life skills’ and building character at school...**

There is overwhelming feedback from parents that the main priority of schools should be ensuring that children grow up to be 'well-rounded' individuals. 82% of parents say that ensuring children grow up to be 'well-rounded' individuals should be a school's main priority or one of their most important priorities.

57% of parents view preparation for adult life (such as managing finances) as an essential role for schools, whereas only 32% see preparation for further academic study should be an essential role of schools.

Parents see character formation and discipline as key elements of school instruction, a view teachers also support.

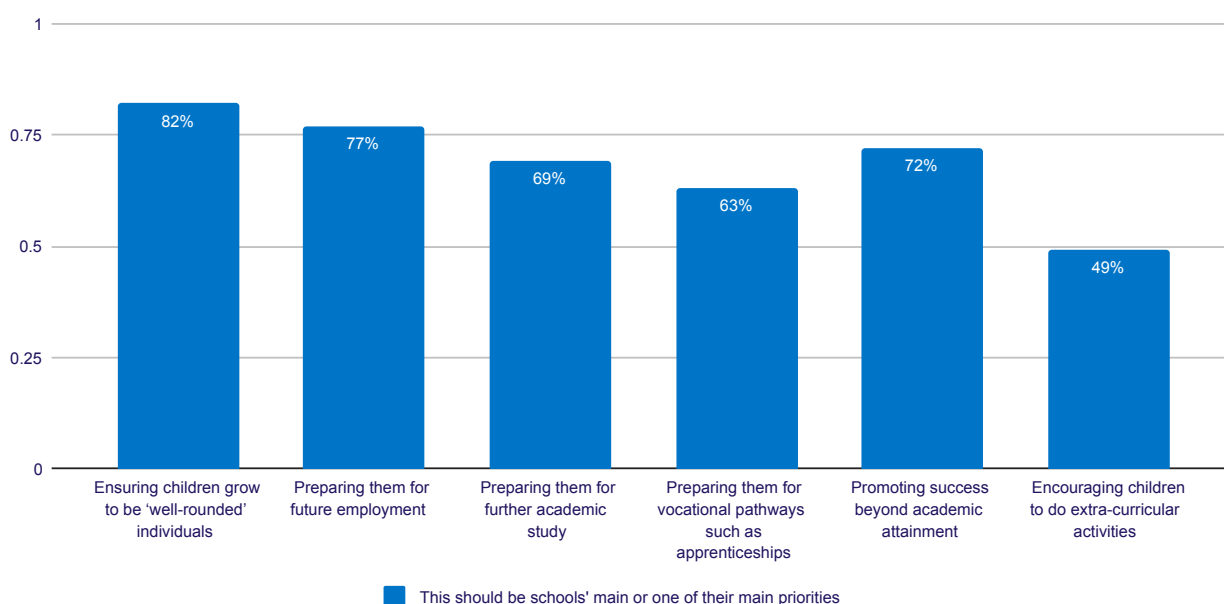
Models that prioritise character education and holistic development find support among professionals.

Parents are not satisfied with a narrow academic focus, with well-roundedness (82%), preparation for future employment (77%) and promoting success beyond academic attainment (72%) all preferred as a school's priority, compared to 69% of parents who think the priority should be preparation for further academic study.

Parents who have children who are not preparing for either SATs or GCSE exams (children in KS1 and KS3) are slightly more likely (85%) to say that child well-roundedness should be a school's top or one of its main priorities compared to parents with children facing exams in KS2 or KS4, for whom the equivalent figure is 81%.

Parents are almost twice as likely (57%) to name preparing children for adult life as an essential task for schools compared to preparation for further academic study (32%). Preparation for academic study is deemed important, although not essential by 59% parents, demonstrating a sense that academic outcomes are a foundation upon which many other elements of schooling should be built.

Parents think that ensuring children grow up to be well-rounded should be prioritised by schools



Preparation for the world of work is also seen as a major priority for schools, with 91% of parents deeming it essential or important. Preparation for the realities of adult life, such as managing finances, is also seen as a key function of schools, with 94% deeming it essential or important.

Parents told us that teaching life skills and character is seen as a key element of a successful curriculum:

*Life skills, social skills – it's those type of skills that when we suddenly have to go into in the big bad world, not necessarily grades.*

—I, father of 1, Gateshead

*For me, they should be leaving school with a mixture of life skills outside of the working environment, and also prepare them for the work working world when they leave school... And I think you know, for me as well for dealing with problems, a lot of it is about the emotional intelligence to think before you act and work out what to do and I think, you know, emotional intelligence and interest in becoming a better person and, you know, inspiring children to, you know, want to be a better person as a life skill.*

—R, 43-year-old father of 1, Seaford

There is also support from teachers for teaching life skills within schools.

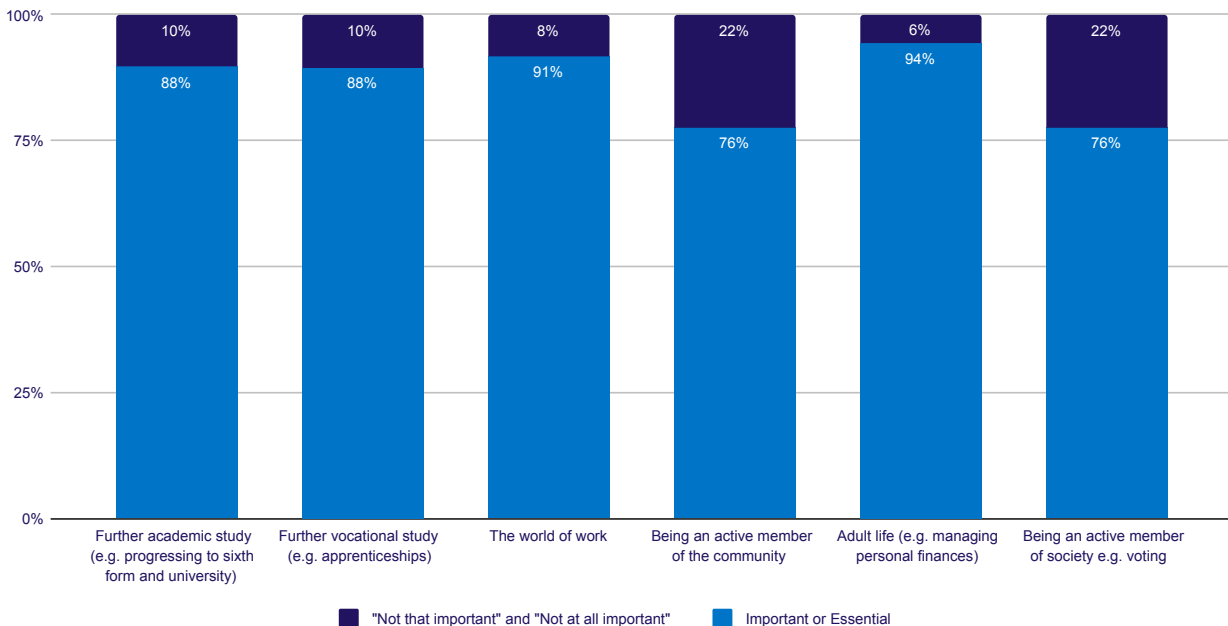
*I think that life skills is almost, arguably, as equally important as academic. A lot of the time they come out of it being shocked by money, and just general life management, how they have to work...*

—L, Teacher of 11 years' experience

*Just teach them the key values of like, respect, teamwork, responsibility, kindness.*

—J, PE Teacher of 11 years' experience

Parents think that preparing children for adult life and the world of work are two of schools' most important functions.





# FINDINGS 5

**...but limited clarity over what this looks like. More work needs to be done.**

While 'life skills' is a popular thing to offer parents, there is limited consensus on what this might look like in a curricular format.

When asked about what should be included in a life skills curriculum, no option received more than 40% approval as the most important thing for schools to teach. Parents have wide ranging opinions on which life skills schools should teach.

Different life skills divide parent opinion as to whether it is the responsibility of the school or the parent to teach children these skills.

40% of parents feel that financial literacy is the most important skill to teach, 34% prioritise interpersonal skills, 29% problem-solving and 28% communication skills.

In our focus groups, parents had mixed ideas about what life skills might look like, although financial skills were a common refrain:

*Yeah, mortgages, like, not everyone's academic, you know what I mean?... I would think by now we shouldn't be still churning out the same curriculum, the same rubbish that our parents were taught, we were taught, so on and so on. It hasn't changed that much.*

—S, father of 3, Gateshead

*My eldest, he's like, lacks any just general money awareness – general running of a house kind of thing.*

—E, mother of 2, Gateshead

*It's like finances as well. We're out there, like household finances and stuff and just learning everyday stuff instead of... I know your maths and English and stuff is important. But obviously, there needs to be more.*

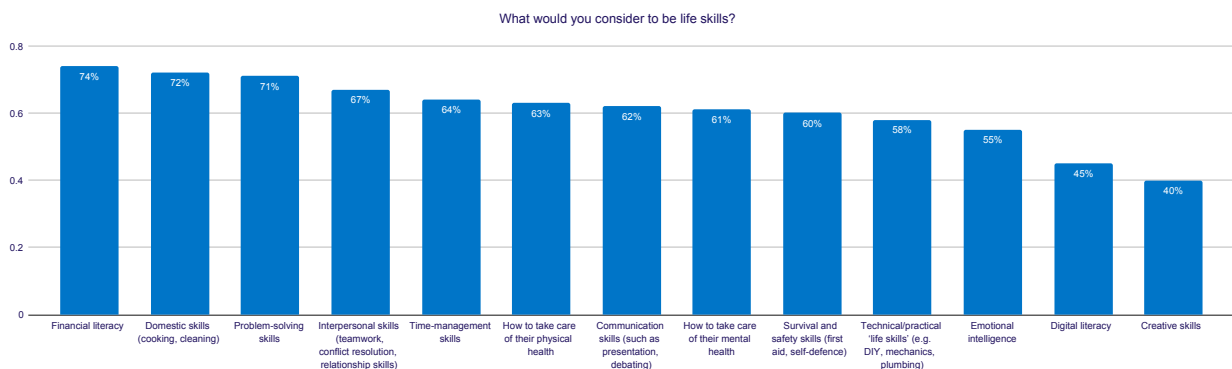
—R, 43-year-old father of 1, Seaford

Meanwhile, teachers and MAT trustees think that existing curricular opportunities offer some chances to develop life skills:

*I find students are very obsessed about "how does this link directly to a particular job, and why are we studying particular subjects when they don't lead to a particular job?", but I think it's the thinking skills or critical thinking skills they get from those that are going to be of benefit to them, as well as the life skills are important, definitely. But being able to think critically, I think it's really important to be able to progress through life.*

—L, Teacher of 11 years' experience

This is an area in which more research is needed to ascertain which 'life skills', if any, can be taught productively in school, by whom, and using what curricular time.





# FINDING 6

**Parents, teachers, trustees and professionals are all supportive of the expansion of extra-curricular and enrichment activity<sup>3</sup>.**

Parents are considerably more likely to prefer that their child goes to a school that focuses on extra-curricular activities and life skills than on academic achievement and exam preparation.

Less than one-fifth of parents rate their child's school as excellent at provision of extra-curricular and enrichment activities (17% and 16% respectively).

School leaders and professionals are keenly aware of the importance of extra-curricular and enrichment activities to healthy, happy schools. However, they recognise the huge challenges associated with prioritising enrichment and extra-curricular activities alongside academic imperatives within the confines of the current accountability system.

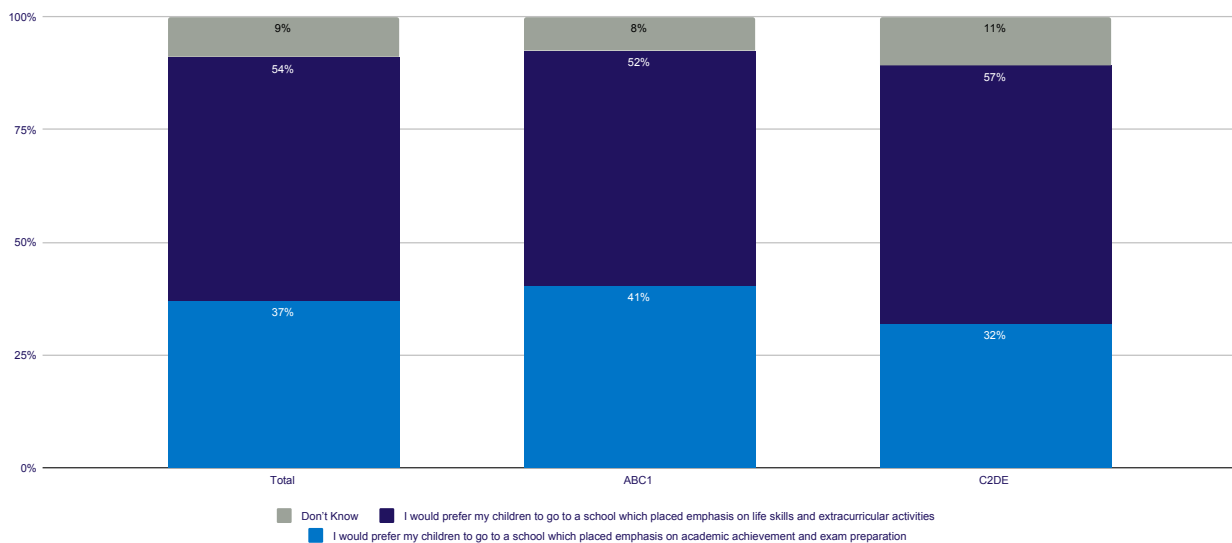
54% of parents would prefer for their child to go to a school prioritising extra-curricular activities and life skills versus 37% that prefer that their child goes to a school prioritising academic achievement and exams. There is a gap of almost ten percentage points, however, between the number of parents in socio-economic groups ABC1 who would prefer schools to prioritise academics over extracurriculars and life skills (41%) and the same figure among parents from socio-economic groups C2DE (32%).

Parents are keen to see their children doing more extra-curricular and enrichment activities and value the activity that is already delivered in schools.

*Basically, when the school day ends, that's it. They pretty much go home. That's it. It would be good if they could do sort of some sort of extramural activity afterwards, whether that's football, playing chess, athletics, swimming, something like that.*

—E, mother of 2, Gateshead

Parents, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups, prefer it when schools prioritise life skills and extracurriculars over academics



*So my son has like an after school club, where they go for a bit of sports. And they actually went to Gateshead stadium, and he won a medal. They're really proud of him. In terms of that regard, I like that.*

—E, father of 3, Gateshead

Teachers and MAT trustees also value extra-curricular activities and the wider skills they develop.

*When they're working in teams...I think they can learn a lot from that sort of independent work, that teamwork, the creativity.*

—L, Geography Teacher and Careers Lead with 17 years' experience

*I would like to see a much greater focus on arts education and an extra-curricular offer.*

—T, MAT Trustee

Among professionals, there is a strong feeling that more could be done to support excellent extra-curricular and enrichment activities:

*You have to have teachers who are trained and skilled to deliver that work. And arts organizations like the National Theatre work best as partners to those trained and skilled teachers.*

—Sector Expert

*When you look at using sport as a medium to engage with young people, and just, you know, encouraging a child to try out new things, to engage in a sport, they will have...a trusted adult, that resonates for them, and engages them in something, and then they can build and develop their skills through that.*

—Sector Expert

# FINDING 7

**Despite this, all stakeholders, particularly those responsible for the administration of schools, are aware of the need to fund enrichment and extracurriculars more substantially.**

Parents are keen for schools to provide a range of enrichment activities, with outdoor pursuits (46%), cultural visits (44%) and volunteering opportunities (39%) among the most preferred options.

Whilst supportive, MAT trustees and teachers are very aware of the challenges of funding a more holistic enrichment and extra-curricular offer in the current funding climate.

Parents would prefer schools to provide experiences relating to volunteering, culture and outdoor activities. Military-type activities receive the lowest support (7%) of any named activity.

Teachers and MAT trustees are very sensitive to the competing demands on school funding and teachers' time, which can frustrate efforts to resourcing extra-curricular and enrichment activities more thoroughly in the current accountability system, but they value the presence of such activities:

*We've worked incredibly hard to maintain an arts offer in our schools, but I know that other schools locally now...it's one of the things that comes up with parents who appealed to get into our schools because they're oversubscribed, is the arts offer. Because other schools just don't do it.*

—H, MAT Trustee

*There's a school in Liverpool which has music every day, it's in a very deprived area of the city. The numeracy and reading of the children has improved, the families - not just the children - are attending the doctors less. And the children have a kind of confidence.*

—M, MAT Trustee

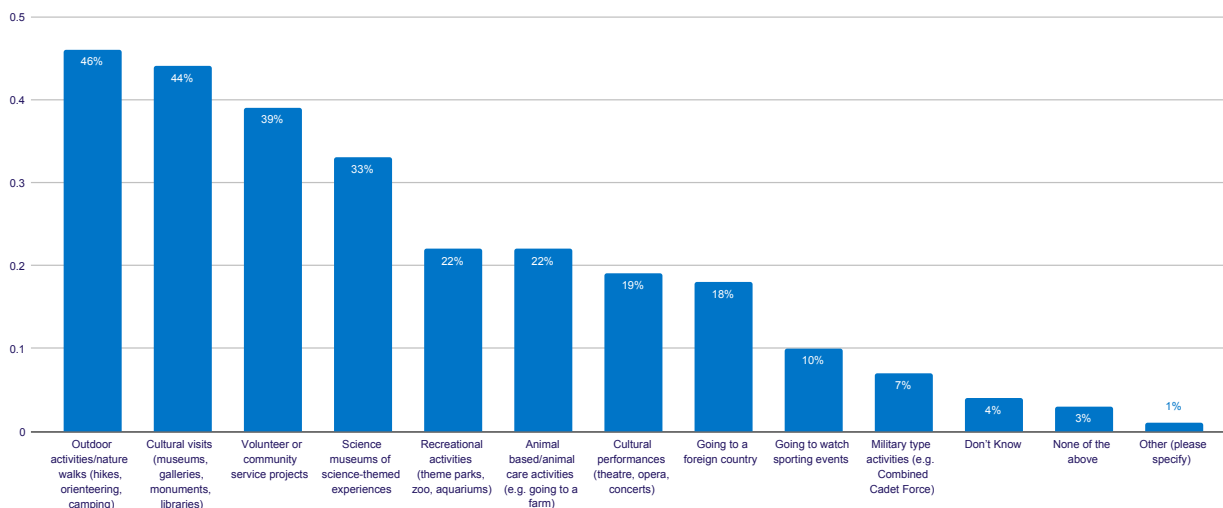
*I'd love to have, you know, three or four clubs a week that I know will have a huge impact, but there just isn't the time during the day.*

—R, English Teacher with 14 years' experience

*'Opportunities such as extracurricular, you know, trips the school run, all the opportunities.'*

—J, PE Teacher with 11 years' experience

What kind of cultural activities/trips/experiences do you think are most important for schools to provide?



Professionals and school leaders are also aware of the tough decisions facing state schools seeking to fund co-curricular activities:

*One of the other things we've seen is a diminution of dropping the number of schools that are able to come and see theatre. You know, it's easier for private schools than state schools. So I guess what it's done is it's forced us to then sharpen and be more responsive to what schools need.*

—Sector Expert

*Now, it takes a very brave person to say, well, actually, in order to improve my English and Maths, I'm actually going to focus on parental engagement. And I'm going to focus on a community staff. And I'm going to focus on co-curricular, because actually all of this will help the experience and it will help to develop the culture. It requires people to take that sort of view.*

—Sector Expert



# FINDING 8

**Everyone agrees that it is important for schools to continue to be held accountable.**

Parents are broadly positive in how they perceive Ofsted. They are more than four times as likely to say Ofsted makes schools better (47%) rather than worse (11%) for pupils.

Teachers and trustees do not always support Ofsted's inspection methods, but they agree with it as an important presence and do not shy away from the importance of accountability within the education system.

Parents are more likely to agree that Ofsted makes schools better (47%) for pupils rather than worse (11%). This view is particularly strongly held by prospective Conservative voters, where the figures are 60% and 3% respectively – while 46% of prospective Labour voters believe that Ofsted makes schools better for pupils.

Although parents are not universally positive about Ofsted, they acknowledge the important role it plays:

*And, you know, obviously that suicide of a head teacher was newsworthy. I don't think that's enough to scrap the system. I think they've just got to revise it and modernise it.*

—R, 43-year-old father of 1, Seaford

*When you go on to Rightmove and so on, when you click on the area you want to live in, they do show you the schools around to at least give us an idea as like a starting point to know which schools are good.*

—E, father of 3, Gateshead

MAT trustees and teachers agree that Ofsted has an important role, but members of both groups are apt to express frustration:

*I personally think that Ofsted inspections or something akin to a national accountability system is extremely important. I remember being an advisor in the days before we had regular inspections of schools and I have to say, in my view, some schools got away with blue murder.*

—R, 43-year-old father of 1, Seaford

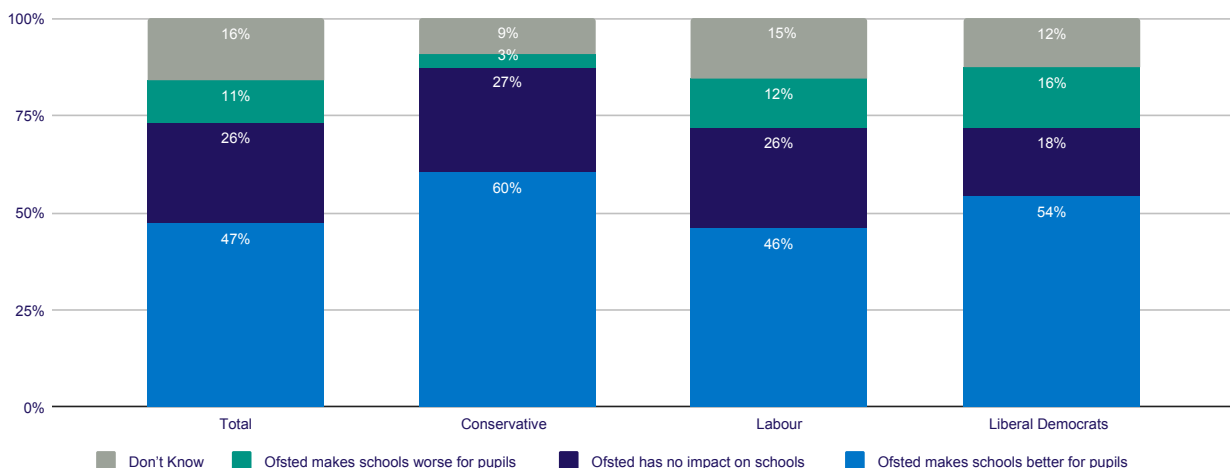
*Ofsted dominate what we do at school.*

—E, MAT Trustee

*It was a stick that they used to beat us with savagely for many, many years. And now it's all done with [post inspection], it's no different to what it was before... I think it needs to be objective.*

—C, Computer Science Teacher with 17 years' experience

Conservatives are most likely to think that Ofsted makes schools better for pupils



# FINDING 9

**Parents from higher social groups are more invested in Ofsted grades, but parents across all social groups believe that Ofsted accurately reflects their child's experiences of school. Nevertheless, they are very open to reform.**

Parents across all social groups agree that the Ofsted rating of their child's school accurately reflects their child's experiences.

Parents from wealthier social groups are more likely to know the Ofsted grade of their children's schools compared to poorer social groups.

Teachers and professionals are enthusiastic about the possibility of a less punitive and more supportive, holistic approach.

There is widespread agreement across social groups that Ofsted's ratings accurately reflect children's experiences at school.

Parents from higher social groups are more likely to know their child's school's Ofsted rating than

parents from lower social groups. 67% of parents from social group AB and 57% from C1 know the Ofsted grade of their child's school, compared to 43% from C2 and 49% from DE.

However, parents are not overly concerned with the Ofsted rating of their child's school and are more interested in the atmosphere within the school and their sense of whether their child would flourish there.

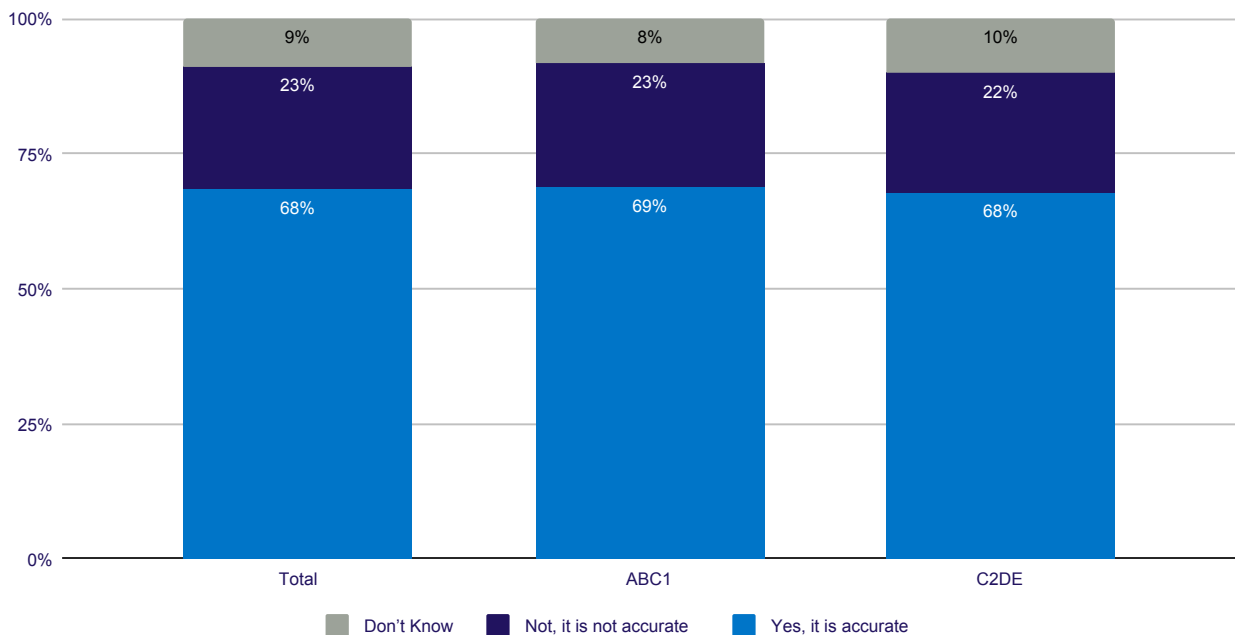
*With the primary school, they have improved, so they got a good rating. Now we're with the secondary school? I don't know.*

—N, 40-year-old mother of 2, Bury

*We had two choices. And we chose the one that was like 'Requires Improvement', whatever. When we chose his school, it was more of the feel of the school. And when we went and looked around it, we preferred it too, and it's closer to home as well.*

—K, 45-year-old mother of 2, South Gloucestershire

Do you think that the Ofsted rating is an accurate reflection of your child's experience at that school?



*We didn't send our kids to their school, you know, because of the Ofsted report – we sent them to the school because it did have a good reputation.*

—L, father of 2, Gateshead

*I think it needs to be objective. I think you need to I think you need to remove all the... anything to do with judgments. Just print the numbers, print the facts, and then read into those facts.*

—C, Computer Science Teacher of 17 years' experience

MAT trustees, teachers and professionals are more critical of the inspectorate, with many explicitly supporting reform.

*You've got to have an accountability system. There's no problem with that. The problem is that Ofsted is completely taking over. It's the big thing now in education. People worry about it unnecessarily and so on. I think it's- it's like a lot of things in life. The present system is past its sell-by date.*

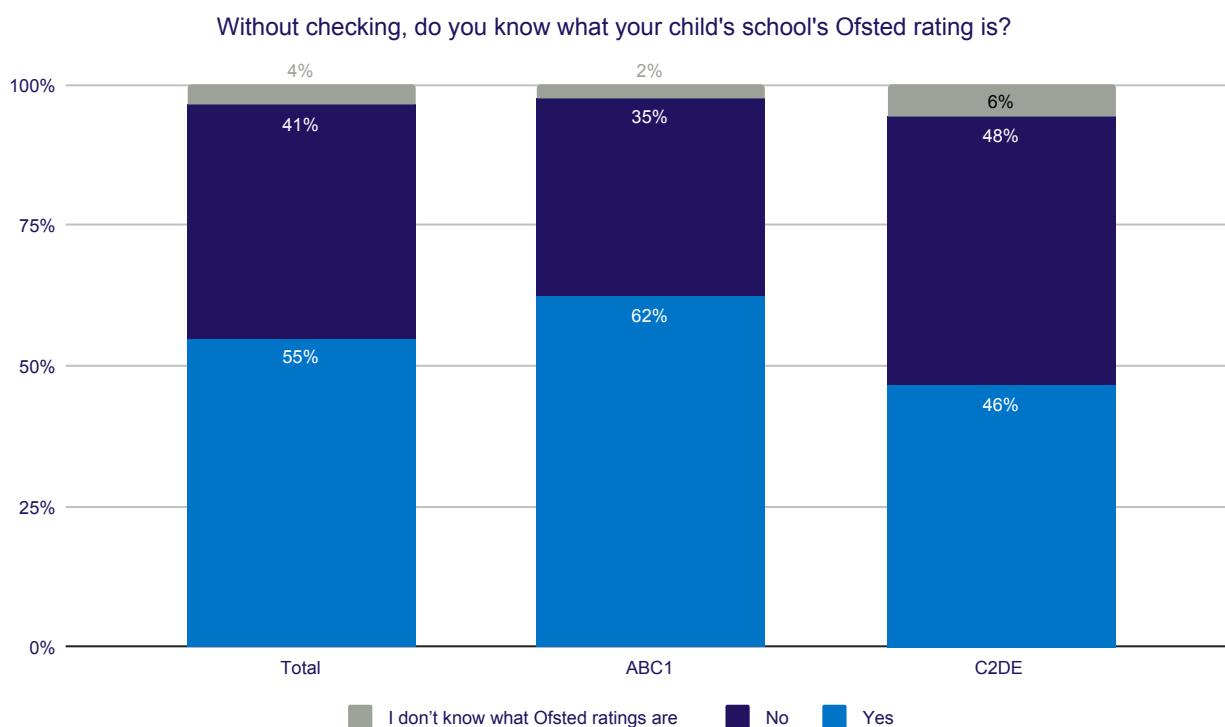
—E, MAT Trustee

*I think we should slim down Ofsted, in terms of what it focuses on. So by that I mean, I am a fan of a pass-fail system and removing single word judgments.*

—Sector Expert

*What's not sufficiently talked about is the politicisation of Ofsted, actually, and of league tables generally. I mean, it's really interesting being able to go in and look at different schools and progress, but actually, that assumes that all of those measures are reliable, valid, consistent over time, and completely acontextual.*

—H, MAT Trustee





# FINDING 10

**Teachers, parents and trustees all want the accountability system to be more transparent, well-rounded and less high stakes.**

Teachers, parents and trustees are all in favour of reform in order to create a lower stakes accountability system, with greater transparency.

Among changes sought by parents, the most common are greater transparency, longer and more frequent visits, and an end to single-word judgements.

For both teachers and parents, taking account of school wellbeing (both of staff and students) is a common theme driving calls for reform.

Parents want transparency from Ofsted above all else. 42% of parents say that Ofsted should be more transparent about how it reaches judgements. Elsewhere, 37% of parents want longer inspections, 36% want greater frequency of inspections and 34% want an end to single-word judgements.

Parents, teachers and MAT trustees express frustration with the current lack of transparency and accountability in Ofsted judgements, and argue for a wider range of performance measures:

*For me I think it needs to evolve, just looking at a more rounded model, rather than having such black and white grades, I think a lot more depth, so people don't just look at that headline.*

—R, 43-year-old father of 1, Seaford

*For me, one of the things that I'm not quite sure about Ofsted is what they're looking out for.*

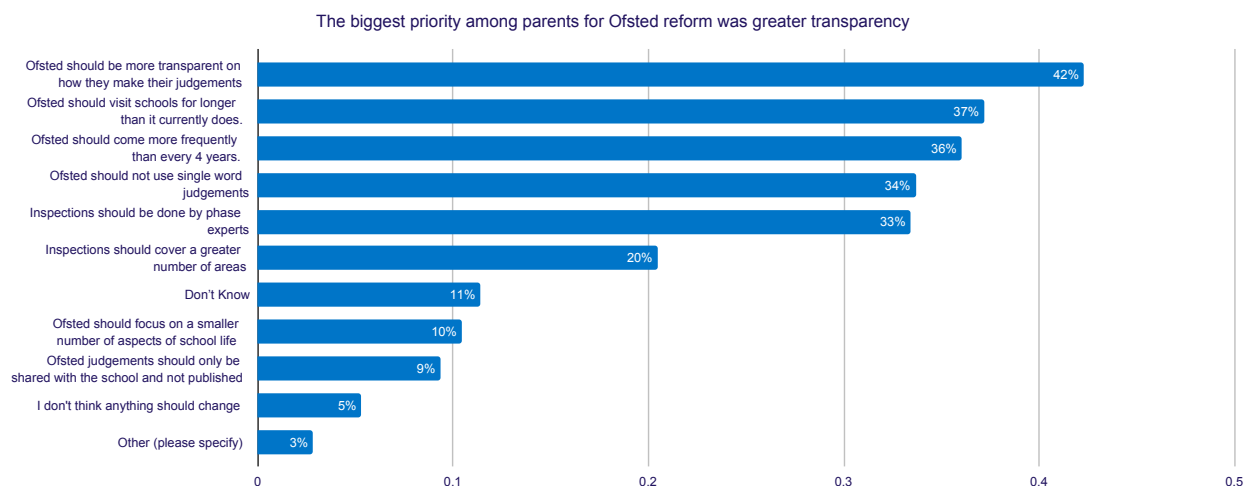
—E, father of 3, Gateshead

*Different schools will excel in different areas. And that doesn't make it right or wrong. The whole Ofsted process should be a sort of continuous coaching process, rather than a test that puts people under immense pressure.*

—L, Geography Teacher and Careers Lead of 17 years' experience

Although 85% of parents agree on balance that Ofsted should continue to inspect schools, 60% think that inspections should change.

Parents with higher levels of education are more likely to say that the accountability system needs to be reformed. Parents with a Master's degree are eleven percentage points more likely to hold this view (64%) than parents with GCSE or equivalent qualifications (53%).



*Staff wellbeing, student wellbeing the ethos, obviously... but also, you know, the happiness of the students looking at the different opportunities that are offered, curriculum-based and obviously extra curriculum-based.*

—R, English teacher of 14 years' experience

*Ofsted, as it's currently constituted, is carrying out very high stakes inspections, and they've got very low level of public accountability for themselves.*

—H, MAT Trustee

*I think, for me, the narrative around education is around having rounded education, having young people who are well and confident and have a sense of belonging. So there's a lot of narrative around what education is all about. But when it comes to actually monitoring educational performance, when it comes to monitoring schools, we're using very narrow definitions in terms of what success looks like.*

—S, MAT Trustee

Sector experts talk about the challenges of such a high stakes system:

*When Amanda Spielman says, as she does, you know, 'there's no reason to be stressed about Ofsted' or 'Ofsted doesn't force you to do this or that or the other'. No, she's right. I mean, on one level that's true in pure terms, but it's... nonetheless extremely pervasive, toxic. I often use the word cancerous.*

—Sector Expert

*I think anything that drives such an incredible amount of pressure on any kind of professional set of individuals cannot be a good thing. And I feel for school leaders because it's so – it's so binary, and it's such high stakes.*

—Sector Expert



# FINDING 11

**Only 6% of parents *disagree* with the idea of a report card-style judgement as a way of achieving it.**

Labour's proposal for a report card-style judgement received significant support from parents, with 77% in favour of adopting the proposal. There is hardly any opposition from the parents; only 6% of parents disagree with the idea of a report card-style judgement.

Parents also express approval for the wider set of perspectives that a report card would facilitate.

There is cautious approval for a report card-style judgement from sector professionals, although many are keen to see what it would include.

*If I was going in instead of [Ofsted] doing it to the teachers, I would see how happy the kids are. And maybe take a judgment on the kids' behaviour and the way they act and if they're happy in that learning environment.*

—R, 39-year-old-mum of 2, Lewes

*Yeah, it's always a bit like the portfolio of skills that I was talking about. For students, maybe schools need the same thing rather than the one-word, high-stakes judgment at the end.*

—L, Geography Teacher and Careers Lead of 17 years' experience

Although some professionals think that a report card would open up new accountability dynamics, there is a strong sense that it has the opportunity to provide a more holistic view of schools.

Parents approve strongly of a shift to a report card-style judgement. Parents from higher socio-economic groups are particularly in favour, while those from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to say they don't know whether they would approve or not.

*We're doing a lot of thinking about balanced scorecards, and, you know, different metrics and different data and what happens if we have really good, you know, wellbeing metrics?*

—Sector Expert

Parents and teachers think that a report card would allow a wider range of perspectives from which to judge schools:

*Yeah, that'll be personally to me that will be more useful. And when I'm comparing schools, I can quickly work out which ones are the best, or where they're weak.*

—E, father of 3, Gateshead

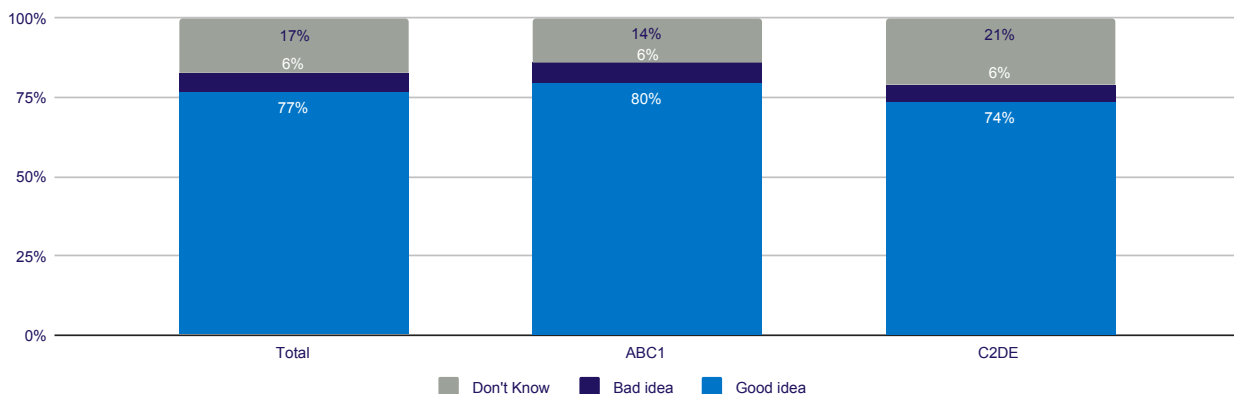
*I think this gives this potentially could give schools greater ownership over telling their own story.*

—Sector Expert

*I think it's a good idea. I think the question for me is quite what it would look like.*

—Sector Expert

Most parents support a 'report card'-style judgement, with parents from higher socio-economic groups particularly in favour





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# FINDING 12

**A report card – and its categories  
– is a blank canvas.**

Parents said that quality of teaching is the most important factor in judging a school, followed by pupil behaviour and pupil satisfaction.

Despite quality of teaching being seen as central to school quality, parents, teachers and trustees we spoke to are resistant to equating school quality with assessment outcomes.

When discussing what sort of other categories might appear on a report card, many professionals cited extracurricular, wellbeing and other measures of holistic performance.

For parents, quality of teaching is the most important indicator of a good school that Ofsted should report on, with 77% naming it as a key indicator. No other indicator had more than 50% support, but pupil behaviour (48%) and pupil satisfaction (46%) both received strong support. Only 37% of parents said that pupil outcomes should be used as an indicator.

Parents, teachers and MAT trustees are enthusiastic about a wider set of performance measures, particularly anything that reduces the centrality of exam results:

*I would want my child to leave school happy with a positive experience of school.*

—S, 46-year-old father of 4, Leeds

*If you go to work in a business, you get something called a 360-degree appraisal where colleagues are asked things, you're asked things about the company about and so on. And then they look at your performance. I feel a more rounded model is needed.*

—J, 38-year-old father of 5, Rotherham

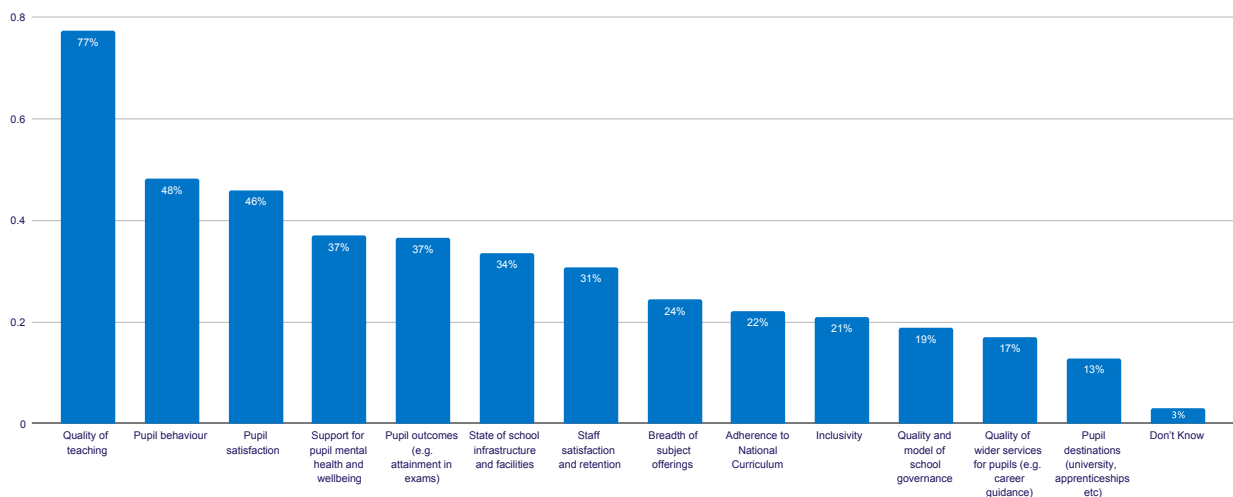
*I'm sure there are some amazing opportunities that are being given in one school that aren't necessarily needed in another. So, you know, schools are working differently for the benefit of their students.*

—R, English Teacher of 14 years' experience

*I'm sure there are some amazing opportunities that are being given in one school that aren't necessarily needed in another. So, you know, schools are working differently for the benefit of their students.*

—R, English Teacher of 14 years' experience

What do you think are the most important indicators of a good school ?



*You then get pressed for, you know, statistics, some sort of number that you can say how well this, or good this, kid is it something and that sort of you know, independence, or competence. You know, that's, that's not something you can easily put a number on. And so I think schools are always going to struggle; they're always going to default to what we do default to, which is subjects.*

—L, Teacher of 11 years' experience

*Actually giving people more scope in terms of healthy, happy individuals, looking at- have we really got the balance right?*

—T, MAT Trustee

Professionals are interested in broadening the accountability remit beyond academic performance in order to ensure that schools support all pupils, regardless of background.

*There's also lots of people who feel...you know, schools are about academic learning, and it's not our job and all the rest of it. And my view has always been, well, if not us, then who?*

—Sector Expert

*It feels like a sort of a more balanced report, and also maybe looks at students' experiences of schools into in terms of wellbeing and enjoyment.*

—Sector Expert

*If it is about helping our schools to be brilliant schools, and to deliver a great education for our children, well, what's the best way to go about enabling a school or any organisation or person to be the best that they can be? You know, identify things you're doing really, really well, a strengths-based approach, and highlight areas where you can improve and give examples of things that you could do or how you might think about this differently or do it better?*

—Sector Expert

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# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Building a school system that not only educates academically, but that supports families and communities to produce healthy young people who are ready to enjoy productive careers, and to make a contribution to wider society is hard. It is easy to talk about, but incredibly challenging to do in a way that has long-term and meaningful impact.

This report has explored the appetite for such reform among both parents and educators – and to think about what it might look like in practice. After all, it is relatively simple to imagine a system that supports young people with a rich character and co-curricular education. Delivering it is much easier said than done within the constraints of a system that is buckling under the strain of its current demands.

With that in mind, while the recommendations that form the conclusion to this report are aimed at a government with truly reforming zeal in its DNA, they are also for a government that wants to ensure its reforms are the right ones. Importantly, they are recommendations for reforms with a legacy that will leave schools and students more resilient in the long term. Recent experiences of rushed education reforms, such as the introduction of T Levels, speak to the danger of taking a shock and awe approach to change.

Much of this work is also framed by the desire to support wider society. Healthy, working and participatory adults are likely to bring up healthy and involved young people. There is an emerging agenda in Westminster about putting “prevention” at the centre of policy making: if we invest in public services – public health, education, prison literacy – up front, then we reduce significant costs further down the line (for example, in building prisons or unemployment benefits). We hope that these recommendations embody this refreshing approach to policy making:

# 1

## Reform should be built upon an academic backbone of teaching and learning.

Reform should not dilute the current focus on teaching and learning across a range of academic disciplines. Support for the idea of ripping up the current curriculum is thin, not least of all people working in the system itself – be it teachers, school leaders or sector leaders. When given the choice, parents too are keen for Maths, English and Science to form much of the backbone of teaching and learning in schools. This is the bedrock of what schools do.

# 2

## There is a need to define 'life skills' and to create a curriculum offer which meaningfully embeds these as part of the curriculum.

There is a significant appetite among parents and educationists for a stronger focus on the (currently nebulous) idea of life skills and character education; the desire to prepare young people to become happy and engaged adults who raise happy and engaged families in happy and engaged communities. Our research suggests more work is needed in this space – and more meaningful curriculum design if it is to be embedded more broadly in teaching and learning.

# 3

## Relatedly, PSHE does not currently deliver what is needed and should be reviewed.

A root and branch review of PSHE (together with what is left of citizenship teaching) is needed, with a view to deepening, extending, and giving it greater coherence. At the moment it is considered both a dumping ground and an after-thought. It does not meaningfully deliver the life skills that parents and educationalists believe are important, including digital and financial literacy - both topics repeatedly brought up by parents. While both parents and teachers want PSHE, they struggle to articulate what they mean, or give it shape, which in turn undermines it.

# 4

## The co-curricular offer in schools should be significantly expanded.

This should include music, drama, art and sport. In too many schools and in too many places these subjects are seen as sideline or a 'nice to have' because of the way that accountability deprioritises it. Schools where this currently happens are the exception, delivering this offer 'in spite of', rather than 'because of' the system. There is significant enthusiasm for rebuilding this provision in schools and best practice should be harnessed in order to do so.

This is an issue of equity as much as anything else. It is profoundly unfair that access to this part of education, often associated with building character and confidence, is now, too often, reserved for either independent schools or state schools in middle class areas.

One way to do so would be by extensively engaging voluntary organisations and wider civic society – and much greater use of peripatetic provision. But this would need to be given a formal framework and scaffolded by schools themselves.

MATs and their central functions should be encouraged to take ownership of this area of school life; designing and overseeing provision, co-curriculum development, ensuring provision is equitably distributed and that high standards are maintained.

# 5

## This offer would need to reach all children, in every school across England.

Any co-curricular offer needs to reach every child, including those who may need additional support to do so. A co-curricular offer should be understood as an integral part of a child's education, not just for those who are thriving academically, or those for whom accessing such activities would be easy. An inclusive co-curricular offer would include pupils of all ages and abilities, with specific focus on breaking down the barriers such as for pupils with SEND, those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and pupils living in geographically difficult to reach areas.

# 6

## There would need to be an extension of the school day in order to facilitate these reforms.

A reforming government would need to be realistic that significantly increasing the focus on “life skills” and the co-curriculum without undermining academic outcomes would only be possible by significantly extending the school day, and by opening up the school gates in a much more structured fashion during the school holidays. After school and outside term time is where much of this broader curriculum offer would need to be housed.

By extending the school day, these reforms seek to provide a viable offer for every child, in every school – not just those children in schools that are able to work around the current accountability system, and find funding – in order to do so. Our disadvantaged children are disproportionately impacted by the current constraints on school leaders in this space.

# 7

## Reforming the existing structures of accountability to reflect this new focus would be both efficient and pragmatic.

The idea of school inspection by an external, independent body, should not be abandoned. Our research suggests school accountability remains well established as a concept both within and outside of the education system – but there is extensive willingness to explore reform.

Labour’s proposed plans to introduce a “report card”, in place of a single word judgment, in which schools would be held account across much wider range of areas, is popular with both parents and educationists alike. It would also encourage schools to develop a greater collegiate approach to school improvement, learning from each other in multiple areas of best practice. Our research also suggests that including a “co-curricular offer” on such a report card would encourage both parents and teachers themselves to think of schools more holistically.

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# 8

There is some appetite among education professionals and parents for reforming other accountability measures including EBacc, Progress 8 and Attainment 8 - to reflect a wider focus on a more individualised and balanced curriculum.

This could be done in line with recent Labour commitments to increase the remit of the EBacc – or to be bolder. We were told in our research that for many schools and trusts, EBacc is not a significant driver of curriculum planning, and so there is potential to build more flexibility into the way school design their curricula offer.

Ultimately, schools know what is best for their young people – and should be encouraged to have the confidence to step away from the norm. This was one of the foundational principles of the academisation movement: we should aim to return to it.

However, relaxing the straitjacket of EBacc and other accountability measures would need to be done carefully, being mindful of workload and capacity issues. If this were to include the type of life skills highlighted in this research, it should only happen after ensuring the quality and rigour of the qualifications being adopted.

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# 9

Reform to accountability systems should only be done after deep consultation across the sector.

Changing the accountability systems risks creating a whole new gamut of unforeseen, perverse incentives in schools. Education professionals in our research were especially worried about this outcome. Engaging schools in this process is important to successfully achieving change, rather than schools performatively reacting to new accountability systems and metrics.

# 10

## Reforms would need to be supported by significant additional investment – in money and time.

Significant extra investment in facilities, leadership and in teachers is needed to underpin these reforms. Simply adding to the requirements placed on schools in their current circumstances would risk being counterproductive.

A brave government would do well to consider this as a long-term reform agenda, not forgetting the urgency that every cohort of pupils deserves the very best education. Our research suggests that there is neither the money nor the morale in the system for the “move fast and break things” approach to reform that characterised the Michael Gove reforms.

# 11

## There needs to be a “workload test” before the introduction of any such reforms.

Our research talking to teachers has found them to be at breaking point. This is one reason why the use of civic society groups and peripatetic support teachers would be the sensible option.

More work to reduce workload and bureaucracy more broadly should be undertaken by both multi academy trusts and central government to build in capacity to undertake these reforms. Relatedly, significant investment would be needed in rebuilding the morale and confidence of the profession – especially school leaders. Currently, ground down by years of austerity, many heads struggle to imagine a system in which school leaders are empowered to take greater ownership of the education (in the broadest sense) that takes place in their schools.

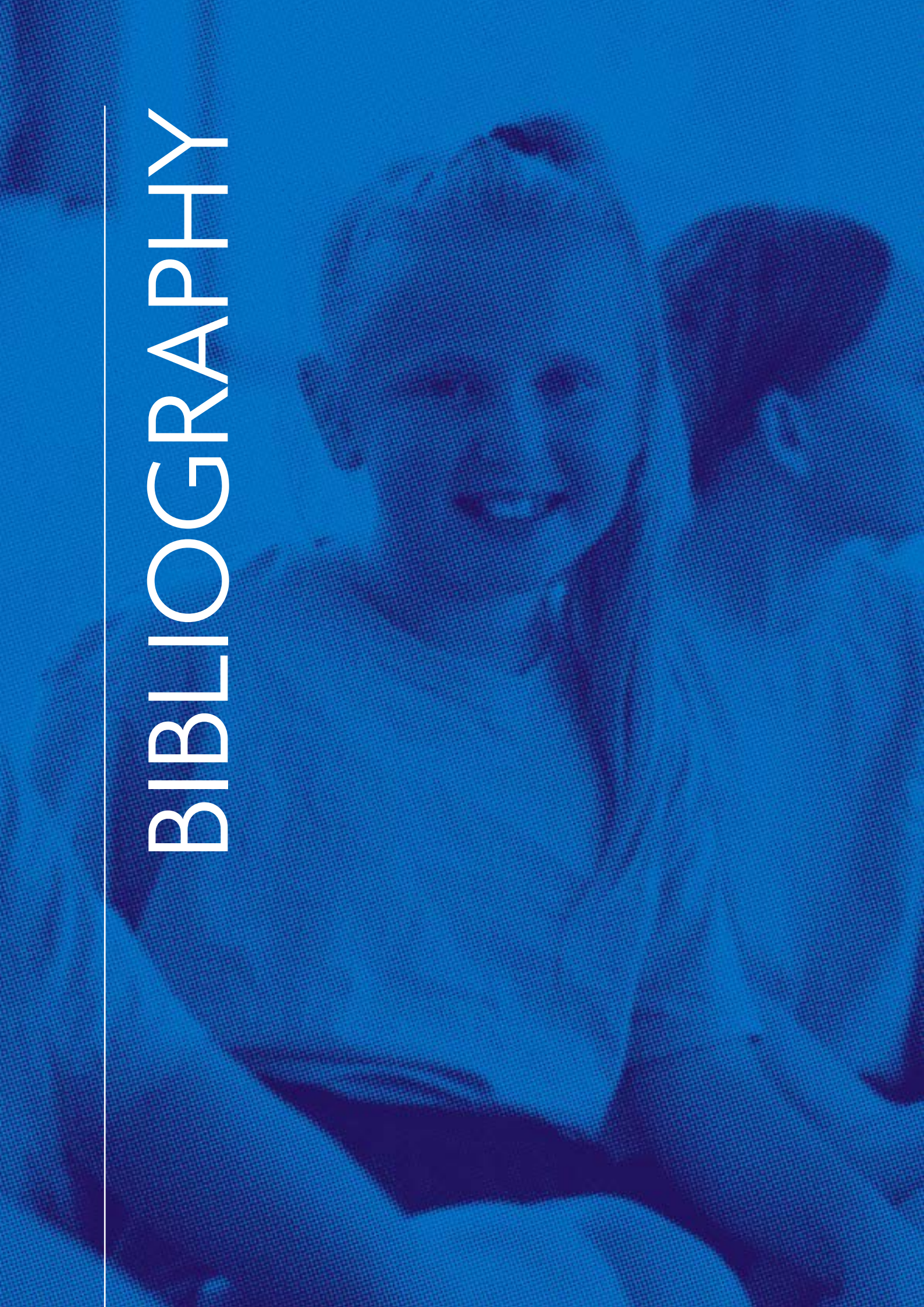
# The Ultimate Reward...

The ultimate reward for getting this right would be the creation of a new generation of happy and healthy young people. Often acting through successful trusts, primaries and secondaries could once again become community and civic institutions – institutions that are capable, ultimately, of playing a role in helping to rebuild our fractured society and local communities.

This research suggests that there is huge appetite both within and outside the education system for something akin to this vision. But only if the reforms needed to make it happen are conceived of, funded and delivered well. The findings of this report provide a starting point for this journey – a journey where every child, in every school, across England is given the education they need to be healthy, happy citizens in our society.

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