



A BLUEPRINT FOR A FAIRER EDUCATION SYSTEM

call for evidence | www.ascl.org.uk/blueprint

March 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

3

INTRODUCTION

4

AIMS AND INTENTIONS

5

QUESTIONS

7

CONCLUSION

13

HOW TO RESPOND

13

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A STRONG SYSTEM

There is much to admire about the education system in England. Our schools and colleges are led by passionate and committed people. Our teachers work tirelessly to give children and young people the best possible start in life. 86% of schools are judged to be good or outstanding by Ofsted. Our performance in the various international comparative studies which have gained so much prominence in recent years is both strong and improving.

In the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assessments¹, for example, the average scores of 15-year-olds in England were significantly above the OECD average in all three of the assessed subjects: reading, maths and science. England's 10-year-olds performed similarly strongly in the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)², with average scores which were significantly higher than the majority of other participating countries. And we see a similar picture in the 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)³, with English 10 and 14-year olds performing significantly above the international mean in maths and science.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

But this positive picture masks an uncomfortable truth. The benefits of this high-quality education are not felt equally by all children and young people in our society. If we look at those impressive PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS results through the lens of socio-economic status we can see that, while our more advantaged pupils perform extremely well, children and young people from more deprived backgrounds do much less well.

This opportunity gap was brought into sharp relief by a recent report on the state of education in England from the Education Policy Institute and the Fair Education Alliance, *Education in England*⁴. The analysis in this report indicates that, at the current rate of change, it will take more than 500 years to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers at the end of secondary school.

MUST DO BETTER

ASCL believes that one of the richest countries in the world, in the 21st century, can do better than this. Drawing on the knowledge, expertise and experience of our 19,000 members, and of other partners and stakeholders, our *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System* will explore ways in which we might narrow the gap more quickly, and improve the life chances of all children and young people.

Education can only ever be part of the solution to the difficulties faced by too many children and young people living in disadvantage. But we believe passionately that education can have a transformative effect on children's life chances, and that we, as a society, can do more to ensure that all children and young people can reap the benefits of a great education.

Through our work on the *Blueprint*, we will explore the following five broad questions:

In a society committed to social equity:

- what and how should children and young people be taught?
- how should teachers and leaders be identified, developed and supported?
- how should the education system be structured?
- how should the education system be funded?
- how should we judge if the system is doing what we want it to?

This call for evidence invites all those interested in supporting us in this work to share their thoughts on this crucial issue. We plan to publish our findings and recommendations in autumn 2020.

1 <https://bit.ly/2xfJqqj>

2 <https://bit.ly/2TroMMI>

3 <https://bit.ly/3cxrKXf>

4 <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2019>



INTRODUCTION

ABOUT ASCL

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a professional association and trade union for all school and college leaders. We are proud to support and represent over 19,000 school and college leaders of primary, secondary and post-16 education from across the UK.

Our members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people, in both the state and independent sectors. We work to shape national education policy, provide advice and support to our members, and deliver first-class professional development.

We speak on behalf of members and act on behalf of children and young people.

THE BLUEPRINT JOURNEY SO FAR

In 2015 we published our *Blueprint for a Self-Improving System*⁵, which set out a five-year vision for, and route map towards, an education system which had moved away from central direction towards 'unleashing greatness' in schools and colleges.

In 2020 we plan to publish a companion piece, a *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System*. This document will argue for the benefits of a more equitable society, and recommend actions that both policymakers and school and college leaders might take over the next five years to move towards an education system which promotes social equity and improves the life chances of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We are pleased to be working with the Education Policy Institute, the National Foundation for Educational Research and Public First to help us to explore existing research and to formulate clear, evidence-informed policy proposals. This call for evidence invites other organisations and individuals with an interest in this area to contribute to our thinking.

The call for evidence is focused on education in England; similar discussions are taking place in the other countries that make up the UK. It also focuses primarily on the compulsory phase of education, i.e. from ages four to 19. However, we welcome responses from organisations focused on both early years and adult education, in terms of how we can ensure that primary and secondary education both builds effectively on children's early learning, and prepares young people for further and higher education and training or for the workplace.

The call for evidence deliberately includes both broad questions on different aspects of our education system and invitations to comment on specific policy proposals. Respondents should feel free to answer all questions or just those in which they have a particular interest and expertise.

SCOPE AND STRUCTURE

⁵ www.ascl.org.uk/blueprint



AIMS AND INTENTIONS

500 YEARS TO CLOSE THE GAP?

It will take over 500 years to close the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers at the end of secondary school. This stark statistic was the headline finding of *Education in England*⁶, the most recent annual report on the state of education in England from the Education Policy Institute and the Fair Education Alliance.

The situation may be even worse than that number suggests. The year 2581 is when the report's authors estimate that the gap in attainment in GCSE English and maths will close, based on an average of results over the last five years. However, what that five-year average masks is while the disadvantage gap was slowly narrowing between 2014 and 2017, it widened again between 2017 and 2018. If this reversed pattern continues, warns the report, "it will no longer make sense to measure the trend in terms of when the gap will close".

In other words, we are in danger of moving from a period in which the disadvantage gap was narrowing, albeit at a glacial pace, into one in which the life chances of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are getting progressively worse.

WHY DOES EQUITY MATTER?

There is, of course, a strong argument for social equity based on intrinsic fairness. Few people would argue that, in the 21st century, our opportunities and successes in life should be determined by our parental background.

But there is an equally persuasive argument for equity based on 'harder' measures of productivity and national performance. In their influential book *The Spirit Level*, epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett map an extraordinary degree of correlation between countries with high income inequality (including the UK) and a range of undesirable outcomes. These include high levels of mental illness, low life expectancy, obesity, poor educational performance, teenage births and high imprisonment rates.

Societies with increased levels of these undesirable outcomes, argue Wilkinson and Pickett, are worse for *everyone*, not just those at the bottom of the pile.

While high imprisonment rates may disproportionately impact those people drawn into criminal activity, we all benefit from living in a society with lower crime rates. While obesity may be more prevalent among lower socio-economic groups, we all pay the price of the increased healthcare costs to which it leads. And while poor educational performance is more likely among disadvantaged children, we are all worse off when talented people are unable to reach their potential⁷.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

It would be a mistake, of course, to suggest that education alone can address the problem of poverty and inequity in today's society. Indeed, the central argument of *The Spirit Level* is that policymakers who try to address inequity in one area, such as education or health, are doomed to failure if they don't also tackle the root causes of income inequality across a population.

In other words, improving the educational performance of disadvantaged children and young people can't be done solely by changing what happens when they walk through the school gates every morning. Just as important, if not more so, is the condition of the house they left half an hour earlier, or the food they ate (or didn't eat) for breakfast, or how much help their parents were able to give them with their homework the night before, or whether they spent their weekend going to the theatre or looking after their siblings while their parents hold down second jobs in order to make ends meet.

However, it is equally true that education can have a transformative effect on the lives and life chances of many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Good GCSE results open doors to opportunities which can lead young people out of poverty. Strong personal, social and health education (PSHE) helps young people navigate the complex world in which they live, and to make choices with long-term implications for their future wellbeing. Wide-ranging extra-curricular activities enrich children's lives and help provide social and cultural capital on which they can draw in the future.

Education matters – and it matters particularly to children and young people in disadvantage.

6 epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2019

7 See also www.eif.org.uk/report/the-cost-of-late-intervention-eif-analysis-2016 for more on the societal and fiscal costs of failing vulnerable children and families

PRINCIPLES AND DEFINITIONS

Our work on the *Blueprint* starts from the overarching principle that a wealthy, democratic country in the 21st century should support all its citizens to succeed. It should be committed to ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education.

It should also recognise that children have different starts in life, and the support they need may vary. For this reason, we have chosen to use the term ‘equity’ rather than ‘equality’ in this document. Our understanding of these two terms is that ‘equality’ suggests that everyone should be treated the same, while ‘equity’ focuses on providing each individual with what they need to be successful. We have used the term ‘fair’ interchangeably with ‘equitable’.

We have also considered what we mean by ‘disadvantage’. Clearly there are many ways in which an individual can be advantaged or disadvantaged in comparison with their peers. Measurements of disadvantage inevitably lack nuance. For pragmatic reasons, we here follow the Department for Education’s definition of disadvantaged pupils as those eligible for pupil premium funding due to deprivation⁸. We hope, however, that the proposals and recommendations we make as a result of this work would, if implemented, benefit a much broader group of children and young people.

Finally, we have also grappled with what we mean when we talk about ‘success’. Official analyses of the disadvantage gap, such as that in the *Education in England* report quoted above, are generally based on measures which are relatively straightforward to quantify, such as attainment in national tests and exams. Such markers of attainment are hugely important – and indeed our previous work on the ‘forgotten third’⁹ used precisely this definition. We should never underestimate the importance of being able to demonstrate attainment in nationally recognised qualifications for all young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, neither should we fall into the trap of assuming that attainment in a small number of academic subjects is all that matters in terms of improving children’s life chances. A good education prepares people for their future lives in myriad ways: academic, cultural, moral, social and physical. Young people have different aspirations, and some have additional needs which make measuring their success in terms of attainment against standardised academic norms entirely inappropriate.

So in this work, while we will reference and value research which looks at the disadvantage gap in terms of academic attainment, we will also try to be mindful of other, less easily quantifiable, ways in which a strong education can improve all children’s life chances.

8 <https://bit.ly/2Q62LRt>

9 www.ascl.org.uk/forgottenthird



QUESTIONS

Our *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System* will be structured around five broad questions.

In a society committed to social equity:

- what and how should children and young people be taught?
- how should teachers and leaders be identified, developed and supported?
- how should the education system be structured?
- how should the education system be funded?
- how should we judge if the system is doing what we want it to?

This call for evidence invites responses to a series of more specific questions which we hope will help us to address these broad issues.

WHAT AND HOW SHOULD CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE BE TAUGHT?

The current situation

The last five years or so have been a turbulent period in the English education system, particularly in terms of curriculum, assessment and qualifications. It's likely that the next five years will see greater stability as those changes bed in.

There is value in that stability. The last thing that pupils, teachers and leaders need is more change for the sake of it. However, there is a balance to be struck between valuing stability and addressing issues which may be damaging children and young people. Our vision is for an education system which promotes equity and drives sustainable change.

Many school and college leaders see benefits in the changes that have recently been introduced. However, concern is growing around the impact that some of these may be having on some of the most disadvantaged people in our school communities.

Our concerns in this area include:

- incentives which promote an over-focus on a narrowly defined set of 'academic' subjects (EBacc at secondary, tested subjects at primary). This focus was introduced with the intention of ensuring that disadvantaged pupils don't miss out on a core academic education.

However, it can lead to too many pupils instead missing out on the broader curriculum to which they are also entitled. This is particularly problematic for disadvantaged children as they are less likely to receive this broader education at home

- deliberately harder tests and exams demotivating lower-attaining children and young people, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds
- a National Curriculum which is perceived as being overly politically or ideologically driven, rather than based on strong evidence of what children and young people need to succeed (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds)
- an entrenched undervaluing of vocational and technical education, which can provide strong alternative routes to success for young people from all backgrounds
- the system of 'comparable outcomes', introduced to ensure that young people aren't disadvantaged when qualifications change, but leading a third of young people to believe they are doomed to fail
- a lack of time and resources for teachers to develop the strong subject and pedagogical content knowledge needed to teach effectively

ASCL's 2019 commission into the 'Forgotten Third'¹⁰ recommended a number of actions to improve the prospects of the third of young people who do not achieve at least a grade 4 standard pass in GCSE English and maths at the end of twelve years of schooling, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The most radical of these was the introduction of a 'Passport in English' (and, in time, maths) to enable all young people to better demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Below, we seek views on what further changes we may wish to call for in how we teach and assess children and young people to better meet the needs of this group.

Questions

- 1 To what extent does the current National Curriculum meet the needs of today's children and young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and prepare them for successful futures? What, if anything, would you like to change about this?
- 2 Should all state schools be required to follow the National Curriculum? What difference might this make, both positive and negative?
- 3 To what extent do the teaching approaches and strategies commonly used in English schools and colleges equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies they need to succeed in their future careers and lives? What, if anything, would you like to change about this?
- 4 How well does the current approach to assessment at 11 and 16 (including National Curriculum Tests (SATs) at primary, and GCSEs and vocational/technical qualifications at secondary) allow schools and colleges to prepare children and young people for their future, and allow all children and young people to demonstrate what they are capable of? What, if anything, would you like to change about this?
- 5 How well does the current range of post-16 programmes of study and qualifications serve the needs of today's young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds? How coherent are these programmes and the assessment associated with them for all levels of attainment? What, if anything, would you like to change about this?

HOW SHOULD TEACHERS AND LEADERS BE IDENTIFIED, DEVELOPED AND SUPPORTED?

The current situation

Most teachers and leaders would agree that teaching is one of the most important jobs in any society, and that it is also a joy and a privilege.

And yet we find ourselves in the middle of a teacher recruitment and retention crisis. Pupil numbers have risen by around 10% since 2010 and are predicted to rise further

over the next decade. Teacher numbers have remained static, meaning pupil:teacher ratios have risen from around 15.5 in 2010 to nearly 17 in 2018. Teacher training applications have dropped, with targets missed year-on-year. Teacher exit rates have increased, particularly early in teachers' careers, with a third of teachers having left state-funded schools after only five years of teaching¹¹.

Falling teacher numbers also affect the pipeline into leadership. And worrying numbers of school leaders are leaving their posts after only a short time, with government figures showing that almost a third of secondary headteachers appointed in 2013 had left the profession within three years¹². Recruiting business leaders is also challenging, as the responsibilities of this crucial role expand.

The recruitment and retention crisis has multiple causes, including real-terms reductions in pay over many years, working hours which are amongst the highest in the world, the workload involved in adapting to major changes to curriculum and assessment, and our high-stakes accountability system. It is particularly acute in some geographical regions, and in subjects such as maths, science and languages. Many specialist areas of the curriculum in post-16 colleges are suffering the same fate.

There is growing evidence of what works in encouraging retention. For example, teachers' perceived autonomy over what they do in their jobs, and how they do it is strongly associated with greater job satisfaction and intention to stay in the profession¹³. Similarly, overcoming barriers to part-time and flexible working can increase retention and recruitment, improve staff wellbeing and increase the ability to retain specialist expertise and curriculum breadth¹⁴.

The government is starting to take steps to address this crisis, including promising a significant increase in starting salaries for teachers in schools, and introducing a new 'Early Career Framework'. But these commitments, while welcome, come too late to prevent the crisis in teacher and leader numbers in at least the short- to medium-term.

11 <https://bit.ly/2xffhaz>

12 <https://bit.ly/2POHo71>

13 <https://bit.ly/3cCs1rR>

14 <https://bit.ly/2PQ1ZYU>

A lack of sufficient (and sufficiently high-quality) teachers and leaders impacts all children and young people, but can be particularly devastating for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our particular concerns here include the following:

- Our accountability system serves to reward teachers and leaders working in more advantaged areas and penalise those working in more deprived areas.
- This makes it harder to recruit strong teachers and leaders in disadvantaged areas, meaning disadvantaged children are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers, or teachers who aren't specialists in the subject taught, or in larger classes¹⁵.

Questions

6. What actions can we take to encourage the best people to become teachers?
7. Should we actively incentivise our strongest teachers and leaders to work in the most disadvantaged areas? How?
8. How can we better encourage and support teachers and leaders, including business leaders, to stay in the profession, and to perform at a high level?
9. Do we need to accept that, in the short to medium term at least, we may not have sufficient teachers to structure lessons and classrooms in the traditional way? How might we rethink the traditional model of one teacher, plus one or more members of support staff, in front of a class of around thirty pupils? What role might technology play? How could we ensure that this doesn't have a detrimental impact on children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

HOW SHOULD THE EDUCATION SYSTEM BE STRUCTURED?

The current situation

Over the last decade, the English education system has undergone structural changes to a degree unprecedented in modern times. This has led to a system which is complex and fragmented, and which, so far at least, has had no proven impact on pupil outcomes¹⁶.

Within the state school sector we have a dual system of academies and maintained schools, with different oversight bodies for each (along with significant involvement in many schools from various religious bodies). Multi-academy trusts (MATs) have been established and grown in a piecemeal fashion, leading to a patchwork of provision which has not always been strategically planned or designed. One particularly problematic consequence of this is that it has left some schools isolated and struggling to find sources of support and challenge. Analysis has shown that the number of high-performing schools exceeds the number of schools 'in need' in all regions at primary and most at secondary, but that there are considerable regional differences in the level of support available¹⁷. Furthermore, the system relies upon the 'altruistic values and motivations' of CEOs of MATs¹⁸. Both early years and post-16 education are even more fragmented than the school sector.

The 'opportunity areas' initiative has done some good work in supporting schools in disadvantaged areas. However, the limited timescale of the original funding arrangements for the opportunity areas may have constrained them to focusing on short-term improvements, rather than the type of systemic change likely to lead to long-term improvement. There is currently no hard evidence of their impact, and we are unlikely to see this for some time¹⁹.

Finally, in some areas, selection by attainment or by parental wealth has a significant impact on the composition of other local schools and colleges.

Issues with particular relevance to social equity include:

- The more fragmented a system is, the more likely it is for children and young people to 'fall between the cracks', which can be particularly problematic for those living in disadvantage.
- The way in which children are allocated school places, even to comprehensive schools, can favour those from advantaged backgrounds, whether through their families being able to move near high-performing schools or through opaque admissions processes favouring children whose parents can navigate these²⁰.

15 <https://bit.ly/38zTl1v>

16 <https://bit.ly/2TqfqAp>

17 www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1864/gram01.pdf

18 <http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/13001>

19 <https://bit.ly/2vy5iNd>

20 <https://bit.ly/2VRSBaz> and <https://bit.ly/2v2l3M4>

- Schools that have become isolated are more likely to serve deprived communities.
- Post-16 education is socially stratified, with young people from advantaged backgrounds more likely to attend school sixth forms or selective sixth form colleges, and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to attend FE and sixth form colleges.
- Recruiting strong governors and trustees is more challenging in disadvantaged areas²¹.
- Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly under-represented in selective schools. And, in highly selective areas, there is evidence that grammar schools have a negative effect on the outcomes of pupils in other local schools and colleges²².
- Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are also significantly under-represented in independent schools. The per pupil spend on pupils in independent schools is, on average, between two and three times that on pupils in state schools (with an even greater difference in the 16-19 phase). This broad average masks significant differences in the fees charged by individual independent schools - and, of course, those fees are paid by parents, not by the state. And many effective partnerships exist between state and independent schools as a way of sharing resources and strong practice. But the disparity in overall spend, and the opportunities opened up by that additional funding, is stark.
- High-quality early education is particularly important for disadvantaged children, but the quality of early years provision is notably lower in disadvantaged areas, with 18% of settings in the most deprived areas rated less than 'good' compared with 8% in the least deprived²³.

Questions

10. Should all schools and colleges be required to be part of a strong and sustainable group, such as a MAT or federation, to enable them to better support each other and reduce the risk of children 'falling between the cracks'? If so, how might groups of schools also be encouraged to contribute to the wider system?
11. Should the admissions system be reformed to ensure a more representative spread of pupils from different backgrounds across all schools and colleges? If so, what is the best way of achieving this?
12. What role should selective schools and colleges play in a more socially equitable education system?
13. How might independent schools help promote social equity?

HOW SHOULD THE EDUCATION SYSTEM BE FUNDED?

The current situation

UK spending on education has fallen in real terms by 8% since 2010. These cuts have created problems across all sectors. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) put it in their 2019 annual report on education spending²⁴, "the early years sector has been tasked with delivering a large expansion in entitlement to free early education and childcare; schools have made their first real-terms cuts in over two decades; [and] colleges and sixth forms have had to make deeper cuts than any other area of education".

The government has committed to increasing the schools budget by £7.1 billion by 2022-23 (to include an extra £780 million for SEND next year)²⁵. If delivered, this will leave school spending per pupil in England at about the same level in 2022-23 as it was in 2009-10. To quote the IFS again, "No real-terms growth in spending per pupil over 13 years represents a large squeeze by historical standards". And, while ASCL has welcomed the proposed increase in teacher starting salaries, we are concerned that a significant proportion of the additional £7.1 billion will need to be spent on delivering on this commitment, leaving schools with little additional money with which to reverse the impact of recent cuts.

²¹ <https://bit.ly/2wB0SoA>

²² <https://bit.ly/2PRahIP>

²³ <https://bit.ly/2InQvay>

²⁴ www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14369

²⁵ <https://bit.ly/38rDTJS>

The government has also promised an extra £400 million for 16-19-year-old education next year. The IFS has calculated that, while this will lead to a real-terms increase in spending per student of over 4% in 2020–21, it still means this is more than 7% below its level in 2010–11 in FE and sixth form colleges.

And all of this is taking place against a backdrop of ongoing cuts to broader local social services, leaving schools and colleges as the ‘fourth emergency service’ for many families and communities.

Higher spending typically has greater benefits for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds²⁶. Inadequate school and college funding therefore hits these pupils and students particularly hard in a number of ways:

- Vulnerable families are particularly badly affected by the decreased funding for wider social services. In addition, spending on children’s services is directed increasingly at safeguarding and responding to crises at the expense of universal programmes such as Sure Start and youth services which also focus on early intervention²⁷.
- There has been a strong shift away from spending in the early years on low-income families (which include some of our most impoverished children) and towards programmes for working families²⁸.
- There is a significant overlap between children and young people with SEND and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, meaning that insufficient high-needs funding hits them particularly hard.
- Although we have a relatively progressive funding system compared with many other countries, we spend less per pupil on children in the early years and primary than we do in secondary, despite the fact that disadvantage is much more effective when tackled early.
- Struggling schools and colleges, which are disproportionately likely to be in deprived areas, are less likely to have the capacity and resources to bid for the current school improvement funding ‘pots’ or the post-16 equivalent.
- The indication is that the additional funding promised to schools and colleges in the 2019 Conservative manifesto will go disproportionately to those with less deprivation, due to the government’s desire to ‘level up’ funding across all schools.

In 2019, ASCL published a report on the *True Cost of Education*²⁹. In this report, we developed a model which establishes the level of per-pupil funding to deliver the basic education to which we believe children and young people are entitled. The questions below are designed to help us build on this thinking.

Questions

14. If the education budget were to increase, how should any extra money be spent in order to have the biggest impact on social equity?
15. Is it right that the per-pupil funding rates differ between the primary, secondary and 16-19 phases? If not, how would you change this?
16. How effective is the pupil premium in helping schools and colleges to prioritise disadvantaged pupils and ‘close the gap’? If this could be more effective, how would you change it?
17. How might the various school and college improvement funding ‘pots’ be sensibly consolidated to support schools and colleges, particularly those in more disadvantaged areas, to develop and fund evidence-informed practice?
18. Should schools receive additional funding for the services they increasingly provide in relation to safeguarding and social care, to recognise their role as community hubs and the extent to which they now function as the ‘fourth emergency service’?

26 www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1889/imsf01.pdf

27 See IFS report

28 See IFS report

29 www.ascl.org.uk/truecost

HOW SHOULD WE JUDGE IF THE SYSTEM IS DOING WHAT WE WANT IT TO?

England has a high-autonomy, high-accountability education system. The argument is that the relative freedom that (at least some) schools and colleges have needs to go hand-in-hand with strong checks and balances.

But too often those checks and balances have felt overly heavy-handed. The pressure of accountability is one of the main reasons why teachers and leaders leave the profession, and one of the principle drivers of excessive workload³⁰.

A culture of high-stakes accountability has also led to many other unintended consequences. These include a narrowing of the curriculum at both primary and secondary, an incentivisation of exclusion rather than inclusion, and a tendency to pit schools and colleges against each other rather than encouraging collaboration. The data included in performance tables, which should only ever provide a starting point for a discussion about the effectiveness of a school or college, is too often used in a blunt way to praise one institution and condemn another.

To their credit, both the government and Ofsted have taken measures recently to tackle some of these issues. The government's response to underperformance at a school level is starting to shift from punishment to support. The new inspection framework, though far from perfect, is designed to reward schools and colleges which offer a broad, rich curriculum, and to discourage an over-focus on data.

However, significant issues with particular relevance to social equity remain. These include:

- Inspection under the new framework still appears to favour schools with more advantaged intakes, making it harder for schools in deprived areas to attract pupils, teachers and leaders³¹.

- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds (along with those with SEND, those from certain minority ethnic groups, and looked-after children) are significantly more likely to be excluded than their more advantaged peers³².
- Encouraging schools and colleges to compete rather than collaborate exacerbates social divisions.
- As mentioned previously, a narrowed curriculum is likely to further disadvantage children from deprived backgrounds, as they are less likely to receive this broader education at home.
- School-to-school support in many places, particularly the more challenging areas, is too often scattered, overly bureaucratic and ineffective.

Questions

19. Does our current accountability system (including Ofsted and performance tables) help or hinder schools and colleges in focusing on the needs of disadvantaged children and young people? If the latter, how should this be changed?
20. Should the current performance tables be replaced with a 'dashboard' of broader information about a school or college? If so, what information might this include?
21. Should we find ways to encourage and measure collective local responsibility, e.g. hold schools and colleges across a town collectively responsible for the outcomes of all children and young people in that town? How might this work? What would be the pros and cons?

30 <https://bit.ly/2TrYRV1>

31 <https://bit.ly/2VPotNc>

32 <https://bit.ly/2xhmQxD>



CONCLUSION

This call for evidence sets out the problem, as we see it, with how well the current education system in England works for our least advantaged children and young people, and seeks respondents' views on how this could be improved. Please take this final opportunity to tell us anything you haven't had a chance to articulate in response to the previous questions.

Question

- 22 Do you have any other comments or suggestions on how we can move towards a fairer education system and 'narrow the gap'?



HOW TO RESPOND

The call for evidence opens on 12 March 2020 and closes on 10 April 2020.

Respondents are encouraged to use the online form at www.ascl.org.uk/blueprint to submit views. Alternatively, please email your response to blueprint@ascl.org.uk







130 Regent Road Leicester LE1 7PG
www.ascl.org.uk