

Campaign for Real Education

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“Freedom to teach, freedom to learn, freedom to choose”

Chairman: Chris McGovern

Vice-Chairman: Katie Ivens

Secretary: Alison McRobb

Treasurer: Dr. Anthony Freeman

Newsletter

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Contents

01. Editorial	Pg 2
02. Keeping Schools Open	Pg 3
03. A Surplus of Graduates but a Shortage of Skilled Workers .	Pg 4
04. ‘Spiritual Opium’ and the Chinese Solution	Pg 5
05. Is It All About the Money?	Pg 6
06. Diversity vs Similarity	Pg 7
07. No comment	Pg 7

01. Editorial

Following several months of school closures due to the Covid 19 lockdown, A-Level results across England, Wales and Northern Ireland this summer were the best ever. 44.8 percent achieved an A or an A* grade. This was up from 38.5 percent last year. For independent schools the top-grade pass rate reached 70.1 percent.

Since 'real' exams, the exam-hall version, were last sat in 2019, the number of top A-Level grades across all schools has risen by close to 75 percent.

GCSE pupils produced an equally record-breaking performance. 28.9 percent of results were at the top grades [7+/A], This included a 61.2 percent top-grade pass rate at independent schools. The 'threshold' pass rate grade [4/C and above] across all schools was 77.1 percent.

A cynic might opine that a permanent closure of schools would improve standards even further. Few people outside of the educational world, though, have been fooled into believing that teacher assessments have a validity that is equivalent to formal, sit-down exams.

Schools are forever promoting to children the importance of honesty whilst, themselves, turning a blind eye to the dishonesty of the government and exam boards in describing what amount to teacher 'predictions', as exam 'results'. This process of national assessment has the same credibility as asking football managers to predict the results of their teams.

Facing up to such inconvenient truths, however, is difficult for our educational establishment and for our political leaders. David Hughes, chief Executive of the Association of Colleges opined, for example, that: "Students should be proud of their results and confident that grades are meaningful."

Simon Lebus, the interim chairman of the exams watchdog, Ofqual, assured students that they had been "fairly treated" and that the grades, based as they were on teachers' judgements, could be trusted. Back in 2017, his predecessor as Ofqual boss told The Sunday Times that "All our kids are brilliant." The guarantor of qualification standards now appears to be doubling down on this assertion in order to justify the continuing debasement of the examination currency.

Our political leaders, unsurprisingly, joined the mood of celebration. The education secretary, Gavin Williamson, told pupils to give themselves a pat on the back, adding:

We should all celebrate . . . each and every one of them should feel incredibly proud of their achievements.

Kate Green MP, Labour's Shadow Education Secretary, was equally awe-struck by the results

Congratulations to every student receiving their GCSE or BTEC results today, these are incredible achievements in truly unprecedented circumstances.

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), however, rather gave the game away. In addition to calling for exam results to be "celebrated" he stated that it was "comparing apples with oranges" to compare this summer's results with other years. He failed to add that since 'apples' are not described usually as 'oranges' so teacher predictions should not be described as examination results. They should be described truthfully as what they are – school assessment grades.

Young people certainly wish to achieve good grades but, in my thirty-five years of teaching, I have found that most of them prefer honesty to dishonesty, truth to falsehood and, when it comes to attainment, fact to fiction. We do not do young people or, indeed, the future of our country and our economic competitiveness, any favours by creating a make-believe world of educational attainment and then promoting it as the real thing.

Chris McGovern
Chairman

02. Keeping Schools Open

Italy was the only European country to close down schools for a longer period than the UK between January 2020 and July 2021. A House of Commons Library analysis found that British children missed out on 44 percent of teaching days. The missed-school days for Italian pupils was 48 percent.

In contrast, Finnish and Swedish youngsters did not miss out on any teaching days at all through school closures and, in Belgium, only 4 percent of days were lost. Overall, fourteen European countries, including France and Spain, lost less than half the school days lost in the UK.

It is clear that UK pupils have been affected more adversely than the vast majority of young people across Europe. To cover up the damage inflicted, examination results

have been inflated but this is an ineffective and self-destructive palliative. The central question that should be asked with regard to schools staying open or closing is simple enough: “What is in the best interests of the children?”

For the new school term, head teachers across the UK have been granted much greater freedom to determine how to manage Covid outbreaks. They need to use it in the best interests of their pupils and not cave in to bullying union bosses who appear to see closing schools as part of a political scrap with the government.

Nor should teachers be spooked by teacher union claims about safety. A study from Public Health England, the Office for National Statistics and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, indicates that teachers are not at any greater risk from Covid 19 infection than other working-age adults.

As for children, vaccinated, or unvaccinated, the vast majority are hardly affected by the virus. Any risk they pose to their parents and grandparents has also been greatly reduced as a consequence of the vaccination programme.

The educational and social cost of school lockdown is too great a price to pay for a minimum of added safety. We need to draw some lessons from the Finns and from the Swedes and, indeed, from most of our European neighbours. Keep schools open!

03. A Surplus of Graduates but a Shortage of Skilled Workers

Around half of university graduates are either under-employed or unemployed or sometimes, it seems, unemployable.

In addition, most are burdened with student loan debts averaging around £47,000 that they will never be able to re-pay. 54 percent of loans have already been written off by the Treasury.

The total value of unpaid loans is around £150 billion. Government’s statisticians predict this will rise to a staggering £560 billion by the middle of the century.

It is not only taxpayers who are losing out. A recent report by the Office for Students found that amongst young people, those who attended university are the least happy.

Widening dissatisfaction, disappointment and even despair is one consequence of the vast expansion of higher education in recent decades. How extraordinary that at a time of acute shortages of skilled workers the country is deluged with graduates.

04. 'Spiritual Opium' and the Chinese Solution

The Chinese government has decided to further restrict children's access to online video gaming sites. The current allowance is ninety minutes per day and three hours per day during holidays.

In future, gaming platforms will be required to limit access for under-18s to three hours per week. A state media outlet has described online games as "spiritual opium". The Chinese government is concerned about the adverse impact of technology addiction on the young.

Its concerns are clearly shared by many of the super-rich software bosses in Silicon Valley, California.

For some years they have been increasingly sending their own children to Waldorf schools that greatly limit, or ban, digital technology in the classroom, on the grounds that it has "a negative impact on key aspects of children's learning".

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/silicon-valley-titans-got-our-kids-addicted-to-screens-are-sending-their-own-children-to-tech-free-waldorf-schools-xl7vm60bk/>

As long ago as 2015, The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported that education systems around the world that have invested heavily in computers have seen "no noticeable improvement" in their results on the authoritative international PISA tests of 15 year-olds, for reading, maths and science.

Worse, it noted that, "If you look at the best-performing education systems, such as those in East Asia, they've been very cautious about using technology in their classroom." It added that: "Those students who use tablets and computers very often tend to do worse than those who use them moderately."

The UK has among the highest classroom usage rates of technology in the world and, in recent decades, it has slipped into mid-table mediocrity in the PISA tables – behind the likes of Poland, Estonia and Vietnam and up to three years behind some of the Asia-Pacific states.

We ignore, at our peril, the damage being caused to our children by addiction to digital technology – both in terms of learning and in terms of mental health.

In 2011, *The Public Library of Science Journal* reported that scientists in China had discovered a wasting away of grey matter in the brain among its millions of computer addicts. It grew worse over time and affected, amongst other things, concentration and memory. It also reduced inhibitions and led to "inappropriate" behaviour.

Dr Aric Sigman, a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, has described the Chinese research as a 'wake-up' call but few amongst our educational establishment, including the DfE, seem to have been listening.

He commented that we should not need photos of the brain to realise that sitting in front of a computer screen is not good for children's health.

We now know that the physiological effect of computer addiction on the brain is the same as the effect of addiction to heroin or cocaine.

The latest Chinese initiative, its regulation of online gaming amongst children, is another wake-up call to the West and especially to the UK.

05. Is It All About the Money?

School leaders are fond of quoting data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies [IFS] in pursuit of more and more funding for our schools.

In a letter to government they are currently demanding at least £5.8bn to avert "serious long-term damage" following the Covid lockdown of schools.

Backing their claim is an IFS statement that by next year, spending per pupil will still be about 1-2% lower in real terms than in 2009-10. The school leaders fail to mention educational spending evidence from the IFS that is less supportive of their case.

Government spending on education increased by almost nine times, in real terms, across the fifty six years before 2009 [1953 to 2009]. This was accompanied by a comparative decline in educational standards in terms of international comparisons measured by the OECD.

It also turns out that, with the possible exception of the US, we are the only country in the developed world in which grandparents out-perform their grandchildren in terms of basic skills.

If spending money could solve the problem of under-performance of UK schools, the problem would have been solved many years ago.

The Campaign for Real Education is not against post-lockdown, catch-up funding for schools but it has always argued that 'how' money is spent is at least as important as the amount of money spent.

Pupils in countries such as Vietnam in Asia and, closer-to-home, Estonia in Europe, achieve higher standards than ours with much lower per pupil spending.

06. Diversity vs Similarity

The vice-chancellor of Oxford University, Professor Louise Richardson, has expressed her embarrassment that the one-time education secretary, Michael Gove, is a former student of her university. Addressing the World Academic Summit she called for more “ideological diversity” on university campuses.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9948711/Oxford-University-chief-says-embarrassed-count-Michael-Gove-former-student.html>

That call for diversity of opinion appears not to embrace the likes of Gove or, presumably, others who do not share her world view. The lights are going out in our universities, including Oxford, and are unlikely to be lit again for the current generation of students.

The witch-hunts are in full swing. How much more educationally productive the vice-chancellor’s repertoire of thinking would be if it were to include ‘similarity’ as well as ‘diversity’. Some knowledge of history and of current affairs would teach her that skin colour is no bar to humankind’s inclination to do good or to do evil.

07. No Comment

Primary teachers have criticised a "rude and condescending" new government framework for teaching reading, with some commenting that the guidance is "teaching us to suck eggs".

TES 12.7.21

The government will spend less on school pupils in England next year than it did in 2009-10 despite a recent £7bn funding boost, according to a report [from the Institute for Fiscal Studies] warning that the austerity-era spending squeeze still persists.

The Guardian 2.9.2021

Almost a quarter of a million poor children are ‘locked out’ of nursery education because their parents do not earn enough, a study warns.

Daily Mail 19.8.2021

Teachers have been urged to “decolonise” the Scottish curriculum in new anti-racism guidance which invites them to take a “white privilege test” and help pupils to embrace diversity.

The Times 27.8.2021

Thousands of UK families can’t afford toothpaste, soap or shampoo for kids

The Mirror 3.9.2021