

Campaign for Real Education [CRE]

www.cre.org.uk

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

Newsletter

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The Consequences of Intimidation

For some decades the CRE has been an independent voice within the educational world. The views of our committee members have been widely sought. This has included UK governments and their advisory bodies, exam boards and individual politicians, including prime ministers. The opinions of the CRE have been heard extensively in this country and around the world.

Most of all it has stood up for the interests of pupils and parents over what too often has been the self-interest of the 'educational establishment'. In recent years intimidation from our opponents has intensified. This has now made it necessary for us to remove website contact information for committee members. Contact details for the Chairman will, however, remain on the CRE website.

Given this changed context our Newsletters will move towards providing focal points and short commentary relating to current educational issues. We will also update CRE and associated material that may provide some policy guidance for education at a time of considerable flux in the political landscape.

Five Current Focal Points

Focal Point A

The National Association of Headteachers is to take legal action against Ofsted.

It will claim that there having been insufficient consultation over the new Ofsted 'report card'. In addition it will point to the negative impact of Ofsted inspection of the mental health of headteachers.

CRE response: *Around 90 per cent of schools are currently rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. Schools need to be accountable and Ofsted has been over-generous in its judgements. 'How to solve the problem of Ofsted reports' is covered in article 2 of Newsletter No. 115 Summer/Autumn 2025.*

Focal Point B

83.4 per cent of delegates at the National Education Union in April voted to take strike action over pay if the Government does not improve its proposed 2.8 per cent pay increase offer.

CRE response: *The majority of staff in schools are support staff and administrators, not teachers. We need to reduce the number of classroom assistants in order to fund a more generous pay increase. Such a pay increase should be based on merit. With fewer classroom assistants, teachers will need to revert to more 'whole' class' teaching from the front of class. This is more effective in raising standards and is the norm in the Asia-Pacific 'super star' education systems.*

Focal Point C

V-E and V-J Day: 2025 is a year of national commemoration for World War 2. The current version of the National Curriculum for History, however, specifies that teaching about Churchill and World War 2 is 'non-statutory', along with all other landmarks and personalities of British history.

The study of Islamic or central American or West African history, however, has statutory status and must be taught.

CRE response: *The National Curriculum for History is currently being revised. In the new version British history, including the two World Wars, should be given equivalent status, at least, to non-European history.*

Focal Point D

The Children's Wellbeing Bill: Section 41 of the Bill will require academies to teach the National Curriculum. These schools currently constitute over 40 per cent of all schools and are attended by over 50 percent of pupils.

CRE response: *As our new CRE Manifesto 2025 makes clear, the National Curriculum is a straitjacket that holds back innovation and development. It imposes a dead of uniformity and conformity that is damaging to the best interests of children.*

Focal Point E

Media reports suggest that some UK universities face risk of bankruptcy: this is in part a consequence of a decline in the number of overseas students, who pay much higher fees, and of higher staff costs.

Universities UK has recently stated that the solution lies in increasing fees and increasing participation to 70% of school leavers by 2040. Their justification is that you tend to earn more – a graduate premium - if you go to higher education

CRE response: *Currently around 50 per cent of school leavers are entering universities. The verified research of Paul Wiltshire published in The Daily Telegraph [23 April 2025] indicates for young people who enter university with no more than three C grades the 'graduate premium' disappears.*

Instead of racking up huge debts these young people would be far better served, in terms of income, by vocational training, apprenticeships or employment. The closure of some failing universities is a price worth paying.

CRE Manifesto 2025

- A strategy for school improvement and a starting point for debate -

Successful economies are increasingly dependent on a well-educated population. The most recent OECD PIAAC Survey of Adult Skills [pub. Dec 2024) indicates that 8.5 million adults in England have low literacy and/or numeracy skills.

The represents only a marginal improvement on the 9 million recorded in the previous survey, of 2013. Equally concerning is that the most recent PISA tests from the OECD, place our 15 year-olds at least three years behind the superstar education systems of the Asia-Pacific.

Where some educational improvement in the UK has occurred in recent years it has been largely confined to England and Northern Ireland and, largely, relates to reading levels. This has been attributed to the restoration of teaching phonics which was being urged by the CRE since its foundation in the 1980s.

On the most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), 9-10 year olds in England came fourth out of forty three countries.

This certainly represents progress but does it mean that 90 percent of our schools are now 'Good' or Outstanding' as Ofsted claim? As with so much in education we need to take account of the 'smoke and mirrors'. The integrity of the tests was affected by COVID disruption in those countries that opted to take part.

We can certainly be proud that we were in fourth position but cannot entirely ignore who came third - Russia. 'Catching up on Russia!' makes a less impressive headline.

Any improvement on the OECD PISA tests of 15 year-olds is harder to discern. On the latest tests (2022) the position of the UK was: Reading 13th, Maths 14th, Science 15th.

When the first PISA tests were sat back in the year 2000, albeit with a smaller cohort of countries, our positions were: Reading 8th and Maths 7th. Science was first tested in 2006 and our position was 13th.

It should be noted that the UK excludes far, far more pupils from the tests than other countries and that the dire education system in Scotland and Wales depresses our overall results.

Our political leaders have told us on countless occasion since the late 1980s, that ever improving exam results represented a genuine improvement in standards. The time has come for an open and honest debate on these issues.

Section 1 - National Curriculum Straitjacket

The National Curriculum is a straitjacket that has become a crutch for many schools. They are reliant on it and have stopped thinking for themselves. The memory is fading of a time when schools decided, more or less, what they would teach. They were guided by exam syllabuses, occasional inspection visits and by their own expertise and common sense.

It did not always work, of course, which is why Margaret Thatcher was persuaded to have a basic National Curriculum for English, Maths and Science. That idea was hijacked and we ended up with a massively prescriptive and complex curriculum and assessment system across a dozen subjects.

It took 25 years for the damage caused to be recognised and for an element of dismantling to be initiated by Conservative Education Secretary, Michael Gove, in 2014.

Under the provisions of the Children's Wellbeing and School's Bill 2004, however, the National Curriculum straitjacket will be strengthened by also requiring academies to teach it. Most already do so but in a form modified to meet the needs of pupils.

Even a rigorous and sound national curriculum needs the capacity to evolve, to grow and to improve. The CRE is proposing diversity and choice within the curriculum and between curricula. This would allow for vocational as well as academic pathways from around the age of 13 or 14. It would also enhance the prospects of our education system meeting the needs of the 21st century.

Curriculum diversity will help ensure that the best emerges. If the straitjacket of a single National Curriculum "Giant" is to be slain, schools will need to have the right to choose their own direction of travel but within defined parameters and overseen by Ofsted.

Section 2 - The Flawed Public Examination System

At 16+ the all-ability GCSE exam largely exercises a monopoly of the academic examination 'market'. Introduced for teaching in 1986, it aspires to be a 'comprehensive exam' for a largely comprehensive school system. When it was first sat in 1988 the pass rate [4/C or above] was 41.9 per cent.

This rose to a peak of 76.9 per cent in 2021 during COVID and was 67.4 per cent in 2024. This grade inflation since its introduction has undermined the credibility of GCSE.

The more rigorous grammar school examination that it replaced, the GCE O-Level, continues to be produced by an English exam board but only for export to our economic competitors such as Singapore. It is, effectively, banned here because it does not appear on the Government's list of approved qualifications.

The Government should allow a more rigorous exam such as GCE O-Level to be offered alongside GCSE. A freer market for exams would allow the best exams to win through. The monopoly exercised by GCSE is against the public interest and will not be broken up by simply allowing the option of the International version of GCSE.

At A-Level the overall pass rate [A to E] shows similar grade inflation. It was 68.2 per cent in 1982 and 97.2 per cent in 2024. 26.3% of entries attained A and A* in 2024, compared to under 10% gaining grade A [encompassing A and A*] in the mid-1980s. On the basis of A-level results it is, therefore, difficult for universities to distinguish between the best candidates.

Many now set their own entrance tests. More concerning is that some university departments have to put on remedial courses for new undergraduates because A-Level no longer provides adequate preparation to begin a degree course.

The Singapore-Cambridge GCE A-Level, a more rigorous examination than its UK equivalent, is not available in the UK.

The International Baccalaureate examination has not had its credibility undermined by grade inflation. It is the course of choice for some leading UK schools, mainly in the private sector, but it can be expensive to staff and its breadth does not suit all pupils.

A technical qualification, the multi-subject T-level, geared towards employment, but equivalent to A-Level, was first sat in 2022. It remains, however, a minor area of post 16 education. There were 16,085 entrants in 2024 as against 816,948 A-level entrants. The T Level pass rate was 88.7 per cent.

Although, in addition to T-Levels, a range of post-16 vocational qualifications are on offer the examination system is dominated by A-Levels. Vocational courses have Cinderella qualification status and, in many cases, for good reason. We have some way to go if we are to match the high quality and high status programmes of vocational training and education on offer in part of Europe and in the Asia-Pacific.

The 'dead hand' of the GCSE monopoly and the near monopoly of A-Level, has dumbed down standards. For too long, exam boards have competed to be easier in order to attract more punters and to increase market share. High quality vocational qualifications have scarcely seen the light of day.

Separate vocational and academic pathways, tied to rigorous public exams, need to be in place for the 14-18 age group. Norm referencing should be restored to these exams in order to eradicate grade inflation. This involves an unchanging percentage of candidates being awarded a specific grade each year e.g. 10% Grade A, 20% Grade B and so on.

A single exam board for England may be necessary in order to prevent the current boards from competing to be easier.

Section 3 - The Tyranny of Teacher Training

Nothing in education matters more than having high quality teachers. One can have the best curriculum and assessment system in the world but without good teachers it will be of little consequence.

Teacher training is the bedrock on which we build teaching quality. Too often, it is on the periphery of the educational debate. We focus on systems and structures when it is only what happens in the classroom that really matters.

Sadly, too much teaching training is focused more on politically correct ideology and 'accessibility' than on the craft of teaching and on subject knowledge. The stranglehold of so-called 'best practice' descends even at the application stage for teacher training.

So you are going to apply to be a teacher? You have a real love of your subject(s), a good degree, a passion to teach and a desire to 'make a difference'. In other words, you believe you have a classroom vocation. What advice can we offer you? To begin with, put aside your enthusiasms about subject knowledge and your desire to share it. Suspend your intelligence.

You are about to enter a world where common sense, academic rigour and intellectual debate, are suspended and where conformity to an alternative 'best practice' is mandatory. Welcome to the world of education in its most distilled form – teacher training.

Here are 'Ten Commandments of Best Practice in Teaching'. All new entrants to the profession should embrace them. Commit yourself to these and the door to teacher training will swing open. Question these and you will need to look for another career.

Ten Commandments of Teaching

- 1.** How you teach is more important than what you teach. The process of teaching is more important than what children learn, the product of teaching.
- 2.** Mastering a body of knowledge is an out-of-date aim since knowledge is easily accessed via the internet. Children need only be taught cross-curricula and utilitarian skills to access and evaluate knowledge, not the knowledge itself.
- 3.** Teachers are learning facilitators and process managers of the learning process for each individual child. Whole class teaching is undesirable since it is the antithesis of 'personalised', computer-assisted and AI learning.
- 4.** Central to a pupil's classroom experience, and of paramount importance, is the 'feel-good' factor. Children are not capable of accepting adverse criticisms or judgements and should not be subjected to them.
- 5.** There is no such thing as 'failure'. To try is to succeed.

6. All of a pupil's work should be celebrated all of the time.
7. A principal objective of education is to promote 'value relativism'. There is no such thing as objective truth. All knowledge is provisional.
8. Teaching is too complicated and sophisticated a process to be understood by anyone outside of the profession, including parents and Government.
9. Competition in both academic and non-academic areas of school life is divisive. It is inherently bad since it involves 'winners' and 'losers'
10. Assessment of pupils and of teachers can only be properly carried out from within the profession.

Whilst the most successful education systems around the world have been recruiting teachers from amongst its best graduates the majority of UK teachers have been recruited from the bottom end of the graduate pile. This is not to state that the most academic graduates will, necessarily, make the best teachers.

It is to propose that we need to be drawing more of our new teachers from those who combine academic ability with a vocation and an ability to teach.

A consequence of failing to recruit sufficient numbers of the brightest and best graduates has been the side lining of 'knowledge' in favour of so-called 'skills'.

Acquisition and mastery of a body of subject knowledge can be a formidable challenge to both teacher and pupil. Focusing, instead, on 'skills' and Woke ideology is the easy pathway.

So, we have phrase-book foreign language teaching, fake exercises in evidence evaluation for history, moral issues replacing scientific knowledge and study of literature with the hard bits taken out. All of this is enveloped in a 'knowledge-lite' blanket of political correctness and social engineering.

If we are to improve standards of education it is imperative that this stranglehold of teacher training, whether school-based or university-based, is broken. Trainee teachers might learn their first lesson from the speech made in 1978 by Isaac Bashevis-Singer on his acceptance of the Nobel Prize.

He was giving reasons why he writes for children:

'Children don't read to find their identity. They don't read to free themselves of guilt, to quench their thirst for rebellion, or to get rid of alienation. They have no use for psychology. They detest sociology. They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff.

They love interesting stories, not commentary, guides, or footnotes. When a book is boring, they yawn openly, without any shame or fear of

authority. They don't expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity. Young as they are, they know that it is not in his power. Only adults have such childish illusions.'

It can be argued that teachers are born, not made. The whole process of teacher training has, in many respects, become an impediment to successful teaching.

Section 4 - Ofsted Reports

Accountability should be central to all public and tax-payer funded services. It is doubly important for ensuring the education and safeguarding of children. Ofsted inspection is crucial for ensuring that schooling operates in the interests of pupils.

From September 2025 the one or two-word grading system plus an overall summary grade will be replaced by a wordy 'report card'. Why use one word to summarise a finding when a couple of hundred will more effectively blur meaning and, if need be, shield any failings?

And, of course, many parents are a lot more likely to read a single word than a few hundred. Indeed, schools are forever promoting themselves on the basis of single-word Ofsted judgements. Take a look at their websites.

There is a very strong case for abolishing single word judgments but not one that has been spotted. Currently, around 90 per cent of schools are rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. This is nonsense! Even Sir Michael Wilshaw, a former Ofsted boss, has admitted as much. The latest and most authoritative international attainment PISA tests from the OECD, place our 15 year-olds at least three years behind the superstar education systems of the Asia-Pacific.

The best argument for ditching single word judgments is that they are not rigorous or precise enough. A more honest way to summarise overall school performance would be to give each of the four current areas of assessment a percentage mark and convert that into a final percentage.

In educational terms we are living in a fools' paradise. The Government's new, non-grading proposal will entrench us further in the land of make-believe.

Section 5 - Artificial Intelligence

As we enter the second quarter of the 21st century schools will increasingly make use of artificial intelligence for teaching purposes.

For over-worked teachers, short on time, it is the availability of teaching resources that determine, to a considerable extent, how children are taught and what they taught. Many teachers do not think for themselves. They will become increasingly reliant on standardised lessons plans that AI can generate. Whoever controls the AI will control the teaching.

AI has the capacity to instantly match learning tasks to the individual needs of pupils. This is beneficial, but long-term exposure to this style of learning may come at cost to the mental health and well-being of young people. Digital technology is addictive.

UK pupils may be amongst the world's top users of AI but in a recent survey by the Children's Society they are also top of Europe's 'unhappiness' league table for children. The use of AI de-humanises learning by removing classroom camaraderie and interaction.

As robots become more like humans, humans become more robots. This is a danger. AI cannot replicate or replaced an inspirational teacher. It can, however, be better than an inadequate teacher.

In terms of subjects, AI lends itself well to those more dependent on logical and accumulative learning such as mathematics and languages. It lends itself much less well to subjects that involve more subjective reasoning such as literature or history.

Schools and parents need to wake up to the fact that many children are suffering from digital technology 'overload'. It may be difficult to restrict their use of new technologies but doing so is necessary; imperative, even. Schools need to balance every additional use of AI learning with a corresponding reduction in the use of digital technology elsewhere in school life.

A ban on the use of smart phones in schools is a step towards achieving the necessary balance. Other countries are beginning to do the same but the UK remains too 'laissez faire' in this area. School leaders need to have the courage to protect children from addiction; ultimately this is a child protection issue.

The government's role in this matter is crucial. Australia has moved towards banning social media sites for children. This is a move in the right direction and will act as a balance to the growing use of AI in the classroom. Parents, too, need government support since it is far easier for them to restrict the smart phone use of their children, and to de-toxify widespread current addiction, if they can point to government requirements.

In the long term the use of AI will reduce the need for so many teachers. This is a cost-saving that will attract governments but it will be folly to be driven by budget considerations. The use of AI confronts humanity with an existential crisis. The 'mind change' currently taking place in the developing brains of children is as important an issue as 'climate change'. Ultimately we must consider applying the same age restrictions on the purchase of smartphones and other digital devices that we apply to alcohol and tobacco.

