Campaign for Real Education [CRE]

www.cre.org.uk

"Freedom to teach, freedom to learn, freedom to choose"

Newsletter

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Introduction

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 are now providing;

1. Focal points and short commentary relating to current educational issues
2. A regularly updated CRE Manifesto for Change

Five Current Focal Points

1. ‘Diversity’ is to be embedded in the new National Curriculum for 2028

CRE Response: *A requirement to teach subjects through the prism of ‘diversity’ will distort the selection of subject content. Imposing a racial diversity filter on British history, for example, will lead to misrepresentation of the past and a destruction of national identity.*

2. GCSE syllabus content and the time length of exams is to be reduced from 2028

CRE Rresponse: *This change will make GCSE more accessible but, inevitably, lower standards. Educational attainment will fall further behind our economic competitors, especially those in the Asia Pacific.*

3. The teaching of of foreign languages is in serious decline:

This will be accelerated by the proposed scrapping of the English baccalaureate, as set out in the recent Curriculum Review. The take-up of GCSE and A-Level foreign languages had been in long term decline. Only 2.62 per cent of A-Level entries in 2025 were in foreign languages.

Twenty eight post-1992 universities have withdrawn modern foreign language degrees. Only ten continue to offer them. Foreign language teaching is also under threat and in decline in Russell Group Universities. In April 2025 Nottingham University suspended entry for new students wishing to study foreign languages. For further background see: ‘The languages

CRE Response: *Aside from their inherent educational values the collapse of foreign language teaching has damaging consequences for the British economy. Exporting is greatly facilitated by knowledge of the language and culture of country with which one is trading. Other countries are happy to sell to us in English but invariably more willing to buy from us if their own language is used. Knowledge of relevant foreign languages provides exporters with a significant competitive advantage. The English baccalaureate should, therefore, be retained.*

For the majority of pupils foreign language teaching should be given the same core status in the National Curriculum as English Maths and Science. Foreign languages should be expanded in universities to become a component part across a range of degree courses.

4. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities [SEND] – The spending gap

A high and growing percentage of pupils across the UK are classified as having special educational needs and receive extra support. For 2024 the percentage of SEND pupils was as high as 40.5% in Scotland, doubling the figure of a decade earlier. In January 2025 the equivalent figure for England was 19.6%, an increase of 44% since 2016. 5.3% of these pupils in England have a specific Health and Care Plan providing added support.

The most recently available data for Northern Ireland [2022-23] classifies 22% of pupils as having special needs. The latest figures for Wales [Jan 2025] are much lower, at 9.5%.

The categorisation criteria for special educational needs and disabilities, however, differs across the four nations of the UK. The position of Wales as an 'outlier' is likely to change as it introduces a new broader categorisation.

The growing number of children classified as SEND and in need of extra support has put considerable and unsustainable spending pressures on council budgets.

CRE Response: *Although the criteria for classifying pupils with special educational needs and disabilities differs across Europe, the average percentage for 30 European countries is 4.53%. This is close to the 5.3% of pupils in England who have high level needs and qualify for an Educational, Health and Care Plan.*

The 19.6% encompassed by the broader classification of special needs in England is neither credible not sustainable. The same conclusion may be drawn for the other parts of the UK. Too many, often middle-class, parents in the UK are gaming the SEND system in order to gain an advantage for their child. This advantage includes extra time in public exams.

In England alone, special needs spending will reach £12bn across 2025 and at the current rate of increase will reach £15bn by 2029. This is unsustainable. Spending should be reduced, and confined largely to those children most in need. In England this would mean those with an Educational, Health and Care Plan. The provision of support is currently spread too thinly.

It must be focused on those most in need. The increase in spending on Special Needs proposed in the November Budget is likely to reduce spending on all other pupils. It will take the management of school spending in entirely the wrong direction and damage the education of the majority.

5. Smart Phones - To ban or not to ban?

UNESCO recommends a ban on smart phones in schools and around 40 percent of countries globally have already implemented such a ban. These range from a total ban to a classroom-only ban. Across the UK the decision to ban or restrict the use of smart phones is determined by individual schools.

The latest National Behaviour Survey [Nov 2025], from the DfE provides important background data for the situation in England. It indicated that almost all primary schools and 90% of secondary schools in England have mobile phone restrictions in place. In only 9% of secondary schools, however, are pupils required to hand in their phone or to store them in a secure place.

Mostly, the restrictions do not require pupils to lose possession of their phone. Just 5% of secondary schools and 13% of primary schools have imposed a complete ban on smart phones. Three quarters of schools allow pupils to keep possession of their phones.

A third of pupils admitted to rarely or ever following school rules on phone use. Only 9% claimed that they did, indeed, abide by school policy on phone use.

CRE Response: *The Prime Minister has rejected calls for a legal ban on smart phones in schools. He has stated that since most schools already ban phones any legal restriction is unnecessary. He fails to understand that schools are unable to enforce their own rules on phone use.*

DfE data [National Behaviour Survey Nov 2025] shows that only 15% of secondary head teachers admit that pupils always follow school rules on smartphone use. Schools are unable to enforce the restrictions they place on mobile phone use.

The damaging impact that digital technology can have on children is well documented. Exposure to pornography and decapitations, for example, is seriously damaging to childhood and a huge safeguarding failure. The Government's refusal to place a legal ban on smart phones in schools is now being challenged in the High Court by two fathers.

The CRE supports this challenge. We also urge Government to go further than a simple ban. The age-restriction laws that currently restrict the sale of alcohol and tobacco should also apply to the sale of smart phones.

CRE Manifesto 2026

1. Standards of Attainment in the UK – The need for an honest debate

Successful economies are increasingly dependent on a well-educated population. At the time of writing, 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 close to 90 percent of our schools are now 'Good' or Outstanding' as Ofsted have claimed? 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.

2. National Curriculum Straitjacket and the Nov 2025 Review

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 highjacked and we ended up with a massively prescriptive and complex curriculum and assessment system across a dozen subjects. It took 25 years for the damaged 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 2025, 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.

The recently published Curriculum and Assessment Review for England [Nov 5 2025], however, adheres to the existing 5-16 National Curriculum structure. This is unlikely to lead to the 'renewal' of 'our country' promised by the Education Secretary. A few of its proposals are certainly needed. These include support for schools to offer triple science at GCSE and the teaching of 'financial literacy'. In addition, the proposal to include an element of the arts and of physical activity in the education of all pupils is to be welcomed.

An academic dumbing-down, however, will be consequent on of the proposed reduction in syllabus content for GCSE and a shortening of the exams themselves. Able pupils will not be stretched even though it is on these youngsters, most of all, that the future of the country is dependent. The proposed scrapping of the English baccalaureate will add to the dilution of academic rigour and will hasten the collapse of foreign language teaching.

The Review emphasises that 'diversity' will be embedded in the new Curriculum. This is likely to lead to an undermining of subject integrity. In addition, the proposal to teach 'media literacy' needs to recognise and safeguard against the danger of manipulation of content by teachers for political purposes.

The CRE regrets the failure of the curriculum review to propose a radical restructuring of the National Curriculum in terms of the years across which the Curriculum is taught. We propose a single core curriculum that terminates at the age of 14. This would then allow for vocational as well as academic pathways for the

upper years [14-18] of secondary education. The GCSE examination should be abolished and replaced by certificated National Curriculum tests at age 14. The provision of alternative pathways – academic or vocational from the age of 14 – will enhance the prospects of our education system meeting the needs of the 21st century. The review's proposed vocational V-levels exams, along with A-levels and T-Levels, should be the culmination of a new 4-year [14-18] curriculum.

3. Grade inflation and how to end it

Given that the all-ability 16+ GCSE exam is be retained under new Curriculum Review it is important that grade inflation is brought to an end.

The GCSE 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 67.4per cent in 2025. Such grade inflation has undermined the credibility of GCSE.

The more rigorous grammar school examination that it replaced, the GCE O-Level, continues to be produced by the Cambridge exam board but only for export to our economic competitors such as Singapore. It is, effectively, banned here because if does not appear on the Government's list of approved qualifications. In 2027, however, Singapore will be replacing the O-Level with a new the Singapore-Cambridge Secondary Education Certificate. The new exam, however, is to be comparable in rigour with the O-Level.

The governments of the constituent part of the UK should allow a similarly more rigorous O-Level style exam to be offered alongside GCSE and, in Scotland, the National 5 qualification. The monopoly exercised by GCSE is against the public interest. A freer market for exams will allow the best and moist credible exams to win through.

At A-Level the overall pass rate [A to E] shows similar grade inflation to GCSE. It was 68.2 per cent in 1982 and 97.5 per cent in 2025. 28.3% of entries attained A* and A in 2025, 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 Pre-U exam, academically more demanding than A-Level, needs to be revived. Its withdrawal in 2022 was based on the mistaken assumption that reformed A-Levels would halt grade inflation. In fact, outside of the Covid years, the top grades peaked in 2025. A possible solution would be to make available in the UK, the Singapore-Cambridge GCE A-Level, a more rigorous examination than its UK equivalent.

The credibility of Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers has also been undermined by grade inflation. Although Advanced Highers accumulate slightly more UCAS points than A-Level, Scottish pupils, too, would benefit from the option of the Singapore-Cambridge exam.

Aside from the Covid years [2020 and 2021] 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. The government has recently withdrawn funding for it in state schools from 2026.

Unless it is restored this exam will become largely the preserve of those able to purchase private education.

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. Only 11,909 received their results in 2025 as against 882,509 A-level entrants. The T Level pass rate was 91.4 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. The current Cinderella status of vocational course may be improved by the introduction of V-Levels proposed by the Curriculum Review.

We have some way to go, however, if we are to match the high quality and high status programmes of vocational training and education on offer in some parts 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.

In order to eliminate grade inflation ‘norm referencing’ should be restored. 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.

4. The Tyranny of Teacher Training needs to be broken

Nothing in education matters more than having high quality teaching. 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, however, it is on the periphery of the educational debate.

The latest curriculum review for England matters but it is what happens in the classroom that really counts. The decline in standards of attainment on international tests that have accompanied Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence provides a salutary lesson.

Sadly, too much teacher training is focused more on politically correct ideology and 'accessibility' than on the craft of teaching and on subject knowledge. 'Diversity, Equality and Inclusion' outweigh other considerations in the training of teachers. The stranglehold of this 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. The classroom is a 'secret garden'.

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.

5. Ofsted Reports and the need for a final mark

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, school 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 and make-believe!

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.

6. The need to use but not to over-use Artificial Intelligence

As we enter the second quarter of the 21st century schools will increasingly make use 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 are taught. Many teachers do not think for themselves. They have 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 the 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 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 smart phones and other digital devices that we apply to alcohol and tobacco.