

Campaign for Real Education [CRE]

www.cre.org.uk

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

Newsletter

No 118, Spring / Summer 2026

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. **An Editorial**
2. **Focal Points** and short commentary relating to current educational issues
3. A regularly updated **CRE Manifesto for Change**

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Editorial

A Call for the Observance of a Children's Commonwealth Day in all UK Schools

An identity crisis is engulfing the United Kingdom. Conservative Party leader, Kemi Badenoch, has gone as far as to warn that it could lead to civil war. The 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland show us where such divisions in the UK can lead. The Government and other politicians have also sounded the alarm. In terms of fundamental and workable solutions, however, we hear little.

Schools around the world play a key in building cohesive societies. The creation of such cohesion in our contemporary UK is challenging. As a former imperial power, recent identities sit alongside those that are more established and longstanding.

This summer's Commonwealth Games in Glasgow is, nevertheless, a timely reminder of the close connection and, ostensibly at least, the shared values across 56 member countries. The Commonwealth is a great legacy of the British Empire. It should serve as a foundation stone for building a more cohesive UK society. And a start should be made in schools.

Commonwealth Day falls on the second Monday of March. It is marked, often in token fashion, by some schools but by no means all. This is not good enough. A Children's Commonwealth Day should be required of all schools and a range of National Curriculum activities should be built around it.

Over three million Imperial and Commonwealth citizens fought for the UK in each World War. This, alone, is testimony to a shared past that trumps a narrative of Empire based only on exploitation. Shared history underpins the Commonwealth and should be taught to children and commemorated for at least one day of the year. A Children's Commonwealth Day would serve as an opportunity to build bridges amongst diverse communities.

It is time to move on from contentious evidence damning the British Empire such as was set out some years ago in a popular school history text book co-authored by the current Government's leading advisor on school history. The book told pupils: " We have tried to imagine what they [the rulers and the ruled] would tell us if they were to come back from the dead." Needless to say, these invented but speech-marked quotations from the undead were less than flattering about the British Empire.

A Children's Commonwealth Day would, by definition, provide an opportunity to explain to children why the peoples of the former British Empire have decided to stick together. It would be an opportunity to promote what unites our multi-racial British society rather than what divides it

Five Current Focal Points

1. Pupil petition against 'exceptionally hard' A-level maths exam

A petition signed by around 13,000 pupils has protested that this summer's Pearson Edexcel Maths A-Level exam was 'exceptionally hard'^[1].

CRE Response: *Grade boundaries are set and managed by exam boards and, so, candidates are unlikely to suffer.*

On a higher tier GCSE Maths exam in 2017, for example, it was widely reported that a mark as low as 14 per cent was sufficient to attain a pass grade^[2]. The level of expectation in maths teaching from primary school onwards, however, is certainly a matter of concern.

According to the OECD, attainment in maths amongst UK 15-year-olds is around three years behind attainment in the Asia Pacific^[3].

This means that the children of manual workers in, for example, Shanghai, are even out-performing most pupils in our leading independent schools.

This was confirmed by a BBC 'school swap' experiment in 2016. It showed that GCSE maths was equivalent to the level taught at primary school in South Korea^[4].

2. The veracity of Government data

England's Department for Education is claiming to have already recruited two-thirds of the 6500 additional teachers it promised as an outcome of imposing VAT on private school fees.

The Guardian newspaper notes, however, that according to the annual school workforce census^[5], there has been a fall of close to 2000 teachers since last year^[6]

CRE Response: *Schools are forever stressing to children the importance of honesty. It is incumbent on the UK governments, too, to set an example of honesty and transparency.*

Their presentation of data is often unhelpful and misleading. Issues regarding the integrity of the data surrounding international PISA testing process in the UK, for example, are set out in a previous newsletter [Winter/Spring 2023-2014].

3. The National Education Union's 'workload bargaining toolkit':

The National Education Union [NEU] is arming its members with this 34-page publication^[7]. It sets out bargaining tools, including strike action, to ensure what is deemed to be a healthy work-life balance for teachers.

This includes refusing to undertake such routine expectations as marking and lesson planning over the weekend. In addition, it states that teachers should be consulted over the timing of a range of job-related activities such as inset days, report schedules and parents' 'evenings'. Even minimal changes to established practices should be negotiated.

The Sunday Times reports headteachers as describing the NEU as becoming increasingly hardline^[8]. One told the newspaper: 'It looks like the union is looking for conflict, not resolution.'

CRE Response: *The Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act of 1987 limited teachers' directed time to a maximum of 1265 hours per year, spread across 195 days. The Act was a mistake.*

Teaching should be a vocation. It ceases to be so when a cap on working hours becomes statutory. It is because of the 1987 Act that teachers can now, effectively, work to rule.

In the interests of its member rather than of children, the NEU has legally exploited the opportunity the law presents to them. Opportunities for state school pupils to benefit from extra-curricular activities, such as sport, music and drama, are, therefore, much diminished these days. In addition, the job of a headteacher becomes ever more demanding and ever more less attractive.

4. Not in Education, Employment or Training [NEET]

Close to one million 16 to 24 year-olds are neither in education, employment or training^[9]. This constitutes one in eight young people and the number continues to rise. Around 60 per cent of them are not even looking for work.

Compare with the 27 countries of the EU we lag behind all but Romania. 40 per cent of our NEETs claim a mental health disability - up 70 per cent over the past decade.

CRE Response: *This is a national crisis and it is self-inflicted. We have a shortage of skilled manual workers in, for example, the building trade where we are much reliant on immigrant labour. A fundamental re-modelling of post-14 schooling is needed. The GCSE examination for 16 year-olds should be abolished.*

14-18 education needs to be re-set in order to provide alternative academic or vocational pathways. Rather than channelling half of young people towards university we should revive vocationally-orientated polytechnics and increase the number of apprenticeships and job-training opportunities.

University education should be confined to those with an academic aptitude - no more than 25 per cent of young people. Such an education and training model will boost the economy. By providing young people with a purpose in life it should also provide a powerful boost to mental health.

5. The Princess of Wales and the importance of early years learning

A recent visit by the Princess of Wales to Reggio Emilia in Italy was the subject of much media coverage. She was seeking to learn more about the Reggio Emilia Approach to early learning.

The Princess plays a central role in The Royal Foundation for Early Childhood. The Foundation promotes recognition and understanding of the importance of the first five years of a child's life.

CRE Response: *UNESCO's leading expert on early childhood education [ECE] has stated that it 'is still invisible... in plans, budgets and education systems'^{10]}.*

Amongst the UK educational establishment the Princess of Wales has little more than Cinderella status. She needs to be taken much more seriously, quite simply because she is highlighting what is most important in childhood.

Experience and learning during infancy does more to define an adult than GCSEs, A-Levels or degrees.

'A child's brain forms approximately 700 to 1000 neural connection per second. This is a level of neural plasticity that never occurs later in life!^{11]}. Contrary to popular wisdom the importance of education and learning does not increase a child grows older. It decreases.

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. This 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 occasions 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 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 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 upon 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 to 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 67.4 per 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 it 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 most 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 courses 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.

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, 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 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 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 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 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 smart phones and other digital devices that we apply to alcohol and tobacco.

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- [1] See for example: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4g9gz9d2qzo>
- [2] [thetimes.com/uk/education/article/students-pass-maths-gcse-without-basic-numeracy-skills-9h2f6cw66](https://www.thetimes.com/uk/education/article/students-pass-maths-gcse-without-basic-numeracy-skills-9h2f6cw66)
- [3] [oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i_53f23881-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i_53f23881-en.html)
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- [5] explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england/2025
- [6] [theguardian.com/education/2026/jun/04/teachers-englands-state-schools-drops-second-year-in-row](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2026/jun/04/teachers-englands-state-schools-drops-second-year-in-row)
- [7] The publication can be downloaded on the NEU website: [neu.org.uk](https://www.neu.org.uk)
- [8] The Sunday Times 7 June 2026: Weekend marking?
Just say no, union tells teachers.
- [9] [gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report)
- [10] [unesco.org/en/articles/giving-early-childhood-education-final-push](https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/giving-early-childhood-education-final-push)
- [11] ibid