

Balancing Act: Navigating the Tensions in our School System

Introduction and background

This paper from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), in collaboration with the organisation Big, explores what academic evidence says about the changes which are needed in education. It addresses 3 questions: How can school systems fairly and effectively assess young people's learning, recognise achievement beyond exams, and drive better school standards? What are the likely impacts and potential trade-offs involved in broadening the curriculum beyond academic subjects? What are the most effective ways in which school systems can support and improve young people's wellbeing?

This paper will be used to inform future work by IPPR and Big Change, including a publication seeking to shape the manifestos of political parties ahead of the next election. The main focus is on key stages 1 to 4, since the IPPR is conducting separate work focussing on the early years and post-16 education. It focusses on England rather than the devolved nations.

Key findings

Assessment

- National assessments are central to England's education system. Although qualifications in some subjects still have a practical element, externally marked tests are increasingly dominant.
- This approach is widely criticised. In a recent YouGov poll of 1,000 teachers, 92 per cent felt that the assessment system needs to recognise the full range of a young person's strengths and skills through more than just written exams.
- Further evidence suggests that assessments have a growing influence over teaching and learning and may be taking an unacceptable toll on children and young people's wellbeing. Structural reforms, including forced academisation and the 're-brokering' of underperforming academies, have turned up the dial on accountability. On the other hand, accountability reforms mean that Ofsted judgements and school intervention are now less dependent on exam results.
- It is difficult to navigate assessment related tensions between validity and reliability on the one hand, and reliability and relevance to the real world on the other. Reforming assessment involves a degree of risk, but improvements could be made by improving the assessment mix, reducing the high-stakes nature of exams, and fine-tuning the system so that it places a greater emphasis on the application of what pupils have learned. This may, for example, involve continuously reviewing the balance between terminal exams and non-examined components, on a subject-by-subject basis, or supporting the increased uptake of alternative qualifications. It may also involve conducting assessment in a greater variety of ways, for example through Vivas, open book exams, personal extended projects, and 'micro-credentialing' designed to certify pupils' ability to work independently and to bring together learning from across disciplines.
- The extended project qualification (EPQ) is a level 3 course taken alongside A-levels. Pupils choose the topic or project they work on and can present their work as an essay, report, or artifact. If qualifications like the EPQ at A-level and the personal project within the International Baccalaureate were separated from other qualifications and excluded from high-stakes school accountability, this would minimise the risks of malpractice and inconsistent support.
- The case for non-examined approaches to assessment should always be explored on a subject-by-subject basis since the appropriateness, need for, and popularity of coursework varies between subjects. Non-examined assessments still play an important role in art and PE GCSEs and a number of vocational qualifications, as well as the extended project qualification.
- There should be a wider range of assessment questions and task types. New technologies, such as comparative judgement, can help to mitigate the reduction in reliability associated with more open test items.
- The current high-pressure accountability increases schools' challenges in responding to pupils' wellbeing and mental health needs. There has been much discussion around the stress induced by a high stakes assessment system. However, for many pupils, exams are a source of short-term, manageable stress and there is even some evidence of increased school enjoyment around exams. Concerns regarding exam stress are not reflected at a population level in studies based on comparative and longitudinal data.
- Nevertheless, small adjustments could relieve the pressure, without lessening the government's capacity to hold schools to account and improve standards. One example of how this could be achieved is by making greater use of rolling averages in league tables. The knowledge that a single year's data can make or break a school piles unacceptable pressure on schools and incentivises 'quick fixes'. Another suggestion is to review whether pupil-level data is necessary at key stage 2. The purpose of SATs is to identify school underperformance, ensure high standards in the basics, and provide a baseline for the Progress 8 measure at age 16. If pupil-level reliability were not needed and such results were not published, a lighter touch, shorter test would be possible, and pupils' and parents' perception of the exams may change for the better.
- Another suggestion is to introduce an element of sampling at primary school level. This would reduce teaching to the test and incentivise schools to teach a broad and balanced curriculum.

Curriculum

- The curriculum should focus on a core until the age of 16 whilst providing opportunities for a wider enrichment offer. It should then allow for more specialisation.
- Up to the age of 16, the goal of the curriculum should be to ensure that as many doors as possible remain open for the next phase of education. Pupils should then be able to access a range of high-quality pathways.
- It is important to ensure that future versions of the curriculum provide all pupils with a common body of knowledge and skills. This will necessitate ongoing, subject-based debate about the key ideas within each discipline.
- Pupils should be given opportunities to apply their learning in independent and practical ways. Primary and secondary schooling should focus on gaining competency within a small number of core subjects, since attributes like creativity and critical thinking are best developed through mastery of these domains. As pupils develop solid foundations, they should be given more opportunities to apply their learning in less structured, more independent ways.
- Schools need to be able to shape the curriculum around their own community and context. This requires time, skill, and investment in training. Cultural institutions, large MATs, local authorities, and subject-expert bodies can all support this through providing learning resources and expertise, and by contributing to professional development. Ofsted should continue to inspect the underlying rationale behind each school's curriculum, focussing on quality not just compliance.
- The EBacc currently exerts significant influence over the taught curriculum at both key stage 3 and 4. There is no clear rationale for the subjects included. There is a need to review its components and its ongoing existence.
- The government should consider increasing the breadth of subjects at A level, reconsidering the proposed changes to BTECs following the introduction of T levels, and improving the offer to students re-sitting English and maths at key stage 5. Improved support for English and maths is urgently needed and options for an alternative qualification should be explored.
- There should be broader opportunities for learning outside school since schools are not the only places where children and young people learn and develop their skills, knowledge, and character. At present, there are serious inequalities in access to extra-curricular opportunities. For example, a study by Cullinane and Montacute (2017) found that only 46 per cent of disadvantaged pupils take up extra-curricular activities compared to 66 per cent of their better off peers.
- A more holistic approach is needed, including an increased focus on before and after school care, school culture and ethos, family life, and the opportunities available in the local community. More investment in effective lifelong learning could also reduce pressure on the curriculum.

Wellbeing

- There is currently a profound mental health crisis among young people in England which calls for an urgent response.
- Schools have some influence over the 3 domains which play a key role in determining a young person's life satisfaction and mental health. These are lifestyle (physical health and participation in social activities), risk-taking behaviours (alcohol consumption and drug taking), and environment quality (living conditions). Schools can help with early identification of severe mental health challenges and ensure that referrals to specialist services are made. They also exert a positive influence over environmental factors shaping health and can tackle threats to pupils' wellbeing in school, including bullying.
- There is a need for investment in high-quality research, such as granular, frequent, and comprehensive assessments of wellbeing and mental health, and exploration of the extent to which schools makes a difference.
- Schools are part of a wider system of partners and services that can contribute to giving young people a better start in life. However, elevated treatment thresholds are currently delaying or obstructing access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).
- Aspects of personal wellbeing like 'goal achievement, fulfilment and purpose' align with schools' other responsibilities. It is time to abandon the idea that learning and achieving in school is incompatible with wellbeing – and vice versa.
- Teachers cannot avoid having to respond to the rising incidence of mental ill health, despite not being specialists or therapists. They therefore need to be equipped to do so.
- Schools are ideally placed to improve access to specialist support and services that improve the family and community environment. By working with partners, schools can provide an extended offer to help pupils develop the passions and interests that will bring meaning to their lives, long into the future.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/balancing-act-tensions-in-our-school-system>