

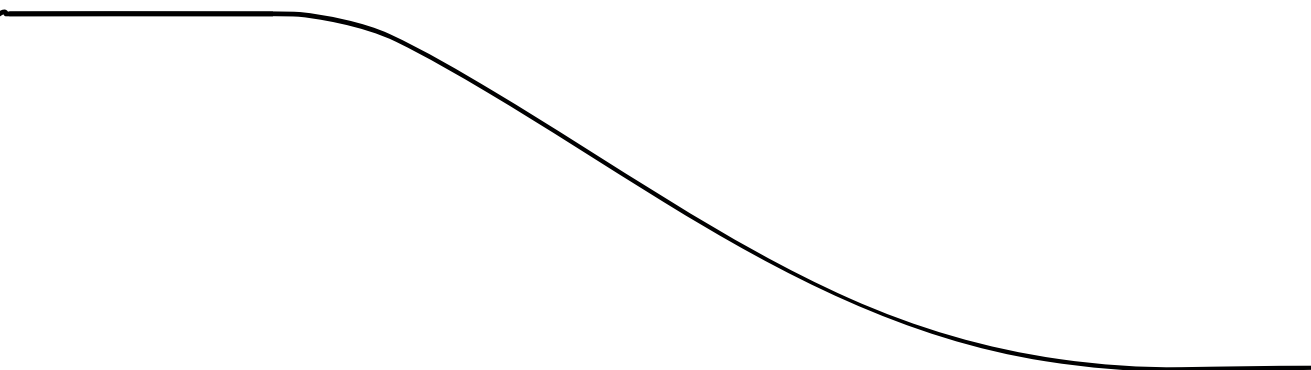
# THE FORGOTTEN THIRD

Final report of the Commission of Inquiry



**ASCL** Association  
of School and  
College Leaders

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they are 'forgotten' not only in the sense that they are never the ones pictured jumping for joy in local newspapers, but because their chances of progression are diminished in further study, future careers, and, ultimately, in life.





Like much in British life, GCSE results day follows a time-honoured ritual. We celebrate the achievements of our most able students, local newspapers picture them jumping for joy, and the media writes about stellar stories of success and of triumph over adversity.

But there's another story – and it's one we rarely hear. Every results day, in the margins, are the many, many students who don't do so well, the young people who leave secondary education at the age of 16 with less than a grade 4 'standard' pass in English and maths. What must results day feel like for them?

In the summer of 2018, we spoke publicly about the plight of these pupils, questioning why we cannot do better for them, so that every pupil finishes their 12 years of primary and secondary schooling with a qualification of which they can be proud.

The sentiment struck an extraordinary chord with many people, and this led in turn to the establishment of an independent Commission of Inquiry led by the distinguished educationist Roy Blatchford.

It was Roy who coined the term 'the forgotten third' to describe the pupils who are the subject of our concern, and it is a description which is starkly accurate. It refers, of course, to the proportion of pupils who fall short of a grade 4 pass in English and maths at the end of Key Stage 4.

In 2018, more than 187,000 pupils found themselves in this position. And they are 'forgotten' not only in the sense that they are never the ones pictured jumping for joy in local newspapers, but because their chances of progression are diminished in further study, future careers, and, ultimately, in life.

When we talk about improving social justice, it is these young people who most need our attention.

What is perhaps not widely realised by the general public is that this rate of attrition, this forgotten third, happens year in and year out because it is built into the way our exam system works. Grimly surreal as it may seem to the uninitiated, this level of collateral damage is an accepted part of the process for determining the distribution of grades. In other words, we judge the success of our education system by the number of young people who don't gain that national 'pass'. Few other high-performing jurisdictions would think that sensible or morally acceptable.

Criticising the current system, however, is the easy bit. Roy Blatchford and his Commission were charged with the more difficult task of suggesting a better alternative. They focused on English in the first instance, in the interests of taking one step at a time, and because confidence in English is so important in accessing other subjects as well as in all aspects of life.

The results of their deliberations are detailed in the report which follows. It presents a vision of how we can do better for children and young people in reading, writing and speaking, from the early years, through primary, secondary and 16-18 education.

And it includes a ground-breaking proposal for a Passport in English to replace GCSE English Language. It is a proposal which has the potential to be a game changer; a robust qualification grounded in the reality of the skills that young people need and which employers seek; which reflects competence and confidence at different levels; and provides the opportunity for pupils to improve over time.

We are immensely grateful to the Commission for taking the concerns that we raised in the summer of 2018 and turning them into a tangible, practical set of proposals. ASCL has a strong principle at the heart of our values: 'We speak on behalf of members; we act on behalf of children and young people'. Here is a Commission acting absolutely on behalf of children and young people, and setting higher aspirations for our education system.

We hope that policymakers will respond with open minds. It is surely not too much to ask that we at least think of doing things in a different way rather than insisting that a system which fails so many young people is a necessary condition of education in the 21st century. We could achieve so much more, as the Forgotten Third Commission so compellingly reminds us.

Geoff Barton  
General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders





The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) launched an independent Commission of Inquiry in October 2018 to look into how to improve the prospects of what we have called 'the forgotten third'. These are the students who do not achieve at least a grade 4 standard pass in GCSE English and maths at the end of 12 years of schooling. The fact that this represents roughly a third of 16-year-olds year in and year out is not an accident but the product of the system of comparable outcomes whereby the spread of GCSE grades is pegged to what cohorts of similar ability achieved in the past. Young people who fall below this bar pay a high price in terms of reduced prospects in progression to further and higher education and to careers. The Commission has focused specifically on how we can do better for these young people in respect of English, though many of its observations could also be applied to maths.

The Commission was chaired by educationist Roy Blatchford and comprises 14 members: serving and former school leaders and representatives of professional associations. Feedback was gathered from seminars, school inset sessions, conferences and direct responses. The Commission met formally five times, taking oral and written evidence from a wide range of sources. This is its final report.

### Main conclusions

Too many children face challenges and disadvantages from the start of life. High-quality early education has huge potential to improve outcomes for children. However, the current entitlement of 30 hours of free childcare or early education per week for three to four-year-olds is limited to working families and is unlikely to do much to improve social mobility of the more disadvantaged.

The teaching of English is compromised by a discontinuity between primary schools where national tests place a contrived focus on the use of grammatical and linguistic techniques, and secondary schools where teaching is determined largely by GCSE assessment objectives.

The current GCSE English Language qualification is not fit for purpose. It is focused on a restrictive choice of writing tasks with an emphasis on literary analysis, and consigns spoken English to an adjunct which does not contribute to the GCSE score. It is therefore not a suitable test for denoting competency in English and should be replaced with a competency-based qualification – a Passport in English. This would assess a basic standard of performance and could be taken at the point of readiness by stage rather than age. English Literature should remain as a GCSE exam with subject-specific content. Consideration should also be given to a companion Passport in Maths.

The current requirement for students aged 16-18 to retake GCSE English and/or maths if they have not achieved at least a grade 4 in these subjects is not achieving the intended outcomes. Too many young people are no nearer the coveted grade 4 at the end of this demoralising process. The introduction of a Passport in English – and in maths – presents an attractive and workable solution.

There are many problems with the high-stakes nature of our system of tests and exams. In primary schools, SATs have driven a narrowing of the curriculum. In secondary schools, GCSEs are used for too many purposes beyond being a test of student competence. Comparable outcomes mean that one third must 'fail' in order that two thirds 'pass', and the sense of failure is reinforced by changes to the grading system which describe a grade 4 as a 'standard pass' and a grade 5 as a 'strong pass'. Where does that leave those who attain grades 1, 2 and 3?

The Commission cannot hope to address all these issues in a single report, but it has devised a set of recommendations designed to improve the system as it is now and to start the thinking about what we might do for the better in the future. If these recommendations are adopted by policymakers we are confident that they would represent a significant improvement in the prospects of the forgotten third. It is surely not acceptable to continue to insist on a system which fails so many young people on the grounds that this is how we do things. It is our responsibility to do better.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Early years

- 1 The Department for Education, local authorities, and third-sector providers should continue to invest in high-quality support programmes for parents and carers, rooted in evidence-based models.
- 2 The government should extend the entitlement to 30 hours of free early education per week to all three to four-year-olds, and it should ensure the level of funding is sufficient to meet the cost of sustainable high-quality provision.
- 3 The government should work with local authorities and education providers to improve the skills of early years practitioners, working towards ensuring that every early education setting is graduate-led.

### Curriculum and pedagogy

- 4 The Department for Education, local authorities, multi-academy trusts, school partnerships and schools should continue to invest in language programmes which are having a measurable impact on closing the language gap. And, where possible, should provide training in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) techniques for all teachers and support staff.
- 5 As part of schools' and colleges' curriculum development, primary and secondary subject specialists should consider building into their planning the vocabulary that is needed to develop students' competence in their subjects, and the opportunities to practise this vocabulary.
- 6 Primary and secondary schools should consider how to implement high-quality whole-school programmes which explicitly promote oracy and articulacy, and the essential stepping stones in reading and writing which underpin children's learning in all subjects. This could have a special spotlight on the 10 – 12 age range, supported by Department for Education grant funding through the national English Hubs.
- 7 The Department for Education should commission a focused review of the English curriculum from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 3, with a view to providing greater continuity between what is taught in primary and secondary schools, and encouraging secondary schools to build more effectively on the strong foundations laid in primary.

### Teacher education

- 8 Professional development providers should be encouraged to run innovative courses for senior leaders on 'language at the heart of the leader's mission' – promoting the concept that every teacher in every classroom is a teacher of the English language.
- 9 From September 2020, all primary and secondary teacher training programmes should include substantial courses on the teaching of reading, writing and oracy; ESOL teaching techniques; and developing teachers' own skills as fluent and accurate writers.

### Qualifications

- 10 A working group representing the Department for Education, Ofqual and the professional associations should be established to introduce a Passport in English to replace the current GCSE English Language. This highly respected qualification would be taken by all students 'graduating' from school/college into the workplace or higher education. The Passport should be criterion referenced, comprising online assessment, a portfolio of a student's writing and a significant oracy component. The qualification could be taken at different levels between the ages of 15 and 19, ending the wasteful GCSE resit industry.  
It is recommended that the Passport in English be certificated by a body with international standing, with employer approval and branding. It is also recommended that similar consideration be given to a companion Passport in Maths.
- 11 All students should continue to take GCSE English Literature as a core subject. To safeguard good curriculum breadth and students' access to 'the best that has been thought and said', the examination should be taken at the end of Year 11 only.
- 12 A new approach to primary assessment and accountability should be developed to replace Key Stage 2 SATs, in order to redress the distorting effect on the curriculum of the current approach.
- 13 The Department for Education – supported by Ofqual – should no longer use the unhelpful terminology of 'standard' and 'strong' pass when announcing GCSE results to students, parents and the media. A grade is a grade.
- 14 The government should establish a cross-sector review of England's GCSE exam system which is currently rooted in testing and assessment designed for a different era, and, in parallel, review the current high-stakes school accountability systems which are outmoded for students, parents and schools today.

1. Each year in England over half a million 16-year-olds take their GCSEs. More than a third of these students do not achieve at least a standard pass (grade 4) in English and maths.<sup>1</sup> Why is it that a third of 16-year-olds, after 12 years of compulsory schooling, cannot read or write English at what the Department for Education (DfE) describes as standard pass level? Why is there not proper recognition of the progress these young people have made as they move on to further education and employment?
2. At age 11, as they leave primary school, a similar third of children do not reach the expected national standards in reading, writing and maths.<sup>2</sup> What is happening in homes and schools that means too many children and young people are judged not to be competent in English at a basic level? Does the answer lie with the students; their parents; early years, primary and secondary teachers; the content of GCSE English Language; the design of the examination system; the national accountability measures?
3. The fact that more than a third of 16-year-olds do not achieve at least a grade 4 standard pass in English and maths year in and year out is not an accident but the product of the system of comparable outcomes which is used to set GCSE grade boundaries. This system determines the percentage of students achieving the respective grades at GCSE by looking at what cohorts with similar Key Stage 2 results achieved in previous years.
4. There are good reasons for the system of comparable outcomes in that it means that students can be confident that their performance will be similarly recognised from one year to the next, and that they will not be disadvantaged, for example, by a major change in the specification of an exam. However, the downside is that around one third of students are always destined to score below a grade 4 standard pass in English and maths.
5. In theory this could change because of the introduction of the National Reference Test. This involves testing pupils at a random sample of schools in maths and English to provide a separate measure of whether there has been an overall improvement in pupil performance which would justify a change in GCSE pass rates.<sup>3</sup> However, this is in its infancy and we do not yet know to what extent it will affect the system.
6. The high stakes associated with GCSEs were raised another notch by the government's decision to introduce the new 9 – 1 grading scale from 2015 onwards in which grade 4 is described as a standard pass and grade 5 as a strong pass. The demoralising impact of the language of these descriptors should not be underestimated. The descriptor of a grade C as a good pass in the previous system at least held on to the notion that lower grades constituted a pass. If a grade 4 is now a standard pass and a grade 5 a strong pass, what does that mean for grades 1, 2, and 3? We have avoided the language of failure in this report as far as possible for fear of reinforcing the inevitable conclusion of these changes.
7. It should be noted also that the government's decision to raise the bar by describing grade 5 as a strong pass and making this the headline measure for schools means that far more students fall below this new aspirational measure. In 2018, more than half (57%) of pupils did not achieve a grade 5 or above in English and maths. We have to question how helpful this is for the self-esteem of students who have worked extremely hard to achieve a grade 4 and who should feel proud of their achievement.
8. This report addresses issues with the education system in England, and not in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland, where qualifications and accountability have diverged from the system in England.

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1 [Key stage 4 and multi-academy trust performance 2018 \(revised\)](#). 24 January 2019. Department for Education. Table 2a

2 [Key stage 2 and multi-academy trust performance 2018 \(revised\)](#). 13 December 2018. Department for Education.

3 [Need to know: The GCSE national reference test](#). TES. 10 December 2018



9. In October 2018, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) launched an independent, national commission of inquiry entitled 'The Forgotten Third' (the Commission) to look into these issues. In the first instance, the Commission has focused on English, in the knowledge that many of the same questions could be asked in relation to the companion core subject of maths. The remit of the Commission was as follows:
- To ensure that all children and students in the English school system reach a level of competence in the national language in order to flourish as 21st century citizens.
  - To ensure that all students receive meaningful recognition of their achievements in English at 16+, marking 12 years of compulsory education.
  - To make recommendations on how to achieve the above goals in the nation's primary and secondary schools and colleges, reviewing the current assessment and accountability system in England.
10. In the light of preliminary discussions of evidence gathered by the Commission, an interim report was published in March 2019<sup>4</sup> which identified the following questions as key lines of inquiry. The Commission invited responses to these questions, and held discussions with the DfE, Ofqual and other experts.
- How can we engage more effectively with parents and carers to ensure that all children entering school have a better command of spoken language?
  - What needs to be done to strengthen language teaching in early years' settings?
  - How can we more effectively teach and assess pupils' language development and learning across all phases?
  - How can schools secure confident oracy and articulation for all pupils?
  - Should all primary and secondary teachers be trained in learning-to-read techniques, and in the best practices of the teaching of English as an additional language?
  - Do we examine and recognise what students know and can do in English, in the way GCSE was originally designed?
  - Should we introduce a National Certificate of Competence, examined partly online, which employers value highly?
  - Should students have to resit GCSE English (and maths) post-16 when the rate who do not achieve at least a grade 4 is so high?
11. The Commission comprised 14 members:
- Lilian Bell, primary headteacher, Vice Chair, ASCL Ethics, Inclusion and Equalities Committee  
 David Birch, former secondary headteacher, English examiner  
 Roy Blatchford (Chair), former secondary headteacher and HMI, English teacher  
 Debbie Gillibrand, early years leader  
 Tiffnie Harris, secondary assistant headteacher and head of English  
 Kathleen Higgins, secondary headteacher, English teacher  
 Siobhan Horisk, primary headteacher  
 Misbah Mann, secondary headteacher, former primary headteacher  
 Julie McCulloch, ASCL Director of Policy  
 Julia Maunder, secondary headteacher and ASCL Council member, English teacher  
 Melanie Saunders, former secondary headteacher, international adviser, English teacher  
 Catherine Sezen, Association of Colleges Senior Policy Manager, English teacher  
 Iain Veitch, secondary headteacher, English teacher  
 Rachael Warwick, executive headteacher, English teacher, ASCL Vice President 2018-19
12. The Commission would like to thank the many school and college leaders, teachers, students, organisations and other individuals who responded to our call for evidence or informed our work in other ways.

13. English has spread more widely and penetrated more deeply than any other language.<sup>5</sup> Young citizens of the world learn English as a cornerstone of their education. It is surely a matter of national pride that English students should have a strong oral and written command of their native language. Learning the English language begins at home, and is a continuous learning journey from 3-18 in the nation's primary, special, secondary schools, and colleges. Language lies at the very heart of the curriculum.
14. The nation's productivity is crucial to the wellbeing of our public services and business sectors. An education system which maximises the potential of young people entering the workforce is of paramount importance.
15. A study by the Centre for Vocational Education Research at the London School of Economics explored the costs of narrowly missing a grade C (equivalent to grade 4 in the new grading system) in GCSE English. It makes for sad reading, concluding that "the marginal student who is unlucky pays a high price", and that in a well-functioning education system, "there would be ladders for the marginal student – or at least alternative educational options with good prospects."<sup>6</sup>
16. Children who have fractured language skills at a young age typically do not get good grades at school and are locked out of the job market, stunting their social mobility. The scale of the problem is significant. Far from being restricted to England's regions with low income, high unemployment and social deprivation, analysis by Experian and the National Literacy Trust shows that serious literacy issues exist in 86% of English constituencies.<sup>7</sup>
17. The Education Policy Institute's research set out in 'Education in England: Annual Report 2018'<sup>8</sup> identifies that the attainment gap for disadvantaged children will take decades to close unless fundamental change occurs. The Social Mobility Commission's April 2019 report notes that inequality 'from birth to work' remains entrenched.<sup>9</sup>
18. Teachers and school leaders who have contributed to our report are united in their belief that we cannot continue with a 21st century schooling system which 'fails' a third of its young people in order that two-thirds can 'pass'.
19. The Commission set out with the view that the 'failure' is both an issue of academic concern and one of dignity for young people. Few nations would think it acceptable to embed in the education system this rate of apparent underachievement and its consequent impact on productivity and skills in the national economy.
20. The Commission has worked resolutely on the basis that we can be more ambitious for young people, galvanising the impact of our teachers and leaders, and translating government rhetoric on social mobility into practical steps in classrooms.

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5 [Which languages are most widely spoken?](#) World Economic Forum. 13 October 2015.

6 [Students paying a high price for failing their English GCSE, warns report.](#) TES. 13 April 2018

7 [86% of English constituencies have entrenched problems with literacy.](#) Experian and National Literacy Trust.

8 [Education in England: Annual Report 2018.](#) Education Policy Institute. 25 July 2018.

9 [Social mobility in Great Britain – state of the nation 2018 to 2019.](#) Social Mobility Commission. 30 April 2019.



21. Humans are wired for sound. Common sense, experience, observation and research all point in one direction when it comes to a human being's early language development: immerse a baby in sounds and words, anywhere on the globe, and the child's innate language acquisition device begins working furiously. Parents and carers provide that special immersion as a foundation for a thriving human life.
22. A celebrated 1995 study in the US found that children from higher-income families hear about 30 million more words during their first three years of life than children from lower-income families.<sup>10</sup> This hotly debated '30-million-word gap' correlates with significant differences in tests of vocabulary, language development, and reading comprehension.
23. Much has been written on the vital role of parents and carers in the development of early language. Ofsted has presented an informative summary of some of this research,<sup>11</sup> while the Education Endowment Foundation has produced an accessible guide about having an impact in this context.<sup>12</sup>
24. There are clear links between early childhood experiences and attainment in later life. Too many children are facing challenges or disadvantages from the start of life which can affect their development and threaten future chances, health and happiness. Self-evidently, the earlier the intervention, the better the life chances.
25. Many of our most vulnerable learners are entering formal education at the age of four with delayed cognitive development, including speech and language delay. Children's cognitive development is highly associated with success in school and entry into the workforce. It is also associated with self-esteem and mental wellbeing through childhood.
26. Parents primarily determine what their children learn through their ability to respond to a child's unique learning needs. With the closure of Sure Start centres, libraries and cuts at local government level, there are fewer resources to support parents and the nation's most vulnerable children. Early intervention can strengthen parents' and carers' capacity to support children's development, bridging the gap before a child reaches formal school age.
27. Once children enter nursery, early years' practitioners and the educational environment play a critical role in determining children's language skills and academic success. We are reliant on these practitioners to have the knowledge and skill-set to assess and put early intervention strategies in place.
28. This country has inconsistencies within the early years' sector for what exactly is meant by quality childcare and education. Unlike formal education, early years is not a graduate-led workforce. Not all practitioners have been trained higher than basic child development level; they do not have the knowledge and skills to identify language delay or put strategies in place to ensure gaps are bridged. We risk putting practitioners with weaker language (and mathematical) skills themselves alongside some of the very children who need high-quality intervention.
29. Many children will enter formal education working considerably below some of their peers in speech and language. Furthermore, children's ages when starting school can be a full year apart. Without language skills to communicate, a child's wellbeing, self-esteem and concentration skills can be detrimentally affected. Without the ability to communicate or express knowledge and understanding of the world around them, children are already baseline assessed as working at a lower ability. This pattern, for some children, will have already determined later life attainment; sadly, they make up a significant percentage of 'the forgotten third' at 16+.
30. We need also to develop better transitions and working partnerships through early years, primary and secondary school education. Early years' specialists across the globe agree that the key to providing high-quality childcare and early education is well-trained and qualified professionals. What is needed is a workforce development strategy that would significantly improve the skills of practitioners, with a strong focus on better understanding of speech and language development and how explicitly to model words, phrases and sentences for the growing child.

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10 [The Early Catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by age 3](#). Betty Hart & Todd R Risley. American Federation of Teachers. 1995.

11 [Education inspection framework: overview of research](#). Ofsted. 16 January 2019.

12 [Working with parents to support children's learning](#). Education Endowment Foundation. 7 December 2018.

31. High-quality early education has huge potential to improve outcomes for children – wherever their families are starting from. The government currently offers free childcare or early education for two-year-olds from disadvantaged families for 15 hours per week for 38 weeks, and the same entitlement for all three to four-year-olds.<sup>13</sup> However, the more recent introduction for working parents of 30 hours of free childcare or early education per week for three to four-year-olds is unlikely to do much to improve social mobility of the more disadvantaged. In general, it is offered to families who are already comparatively well off, further widening the gap between poorer children and their peers.
32. The government should extend funding for early education so that all three to four-year-olds are entitled to 30 hours of high-quality provision per week. Our funding systems need to be more generous to support our most vulnerable children, bridging the attainment gap at the earliest possible time. Currently, the government funding for early years providers is insufficient to cover the cost of high-quality provision. Investment is needed to allow the sector to provide the entitlement whilst remaining financially sustainable.<sup>14</sup>

13 [Childcare Choices](#). HM Government

14 [Poor funding of 30 hours free childcare is “crippling nurseries” – as dozens are forced to shut down](#). Daily Mirror. 20 June 2018.

1

### RECOMMENDATION

The Department for Education, local authorities, and third-sector providers should continue to invest in high-quality support programmes for parents and carers, rooted in evidence-based models.

2

### RECOMMENDATION

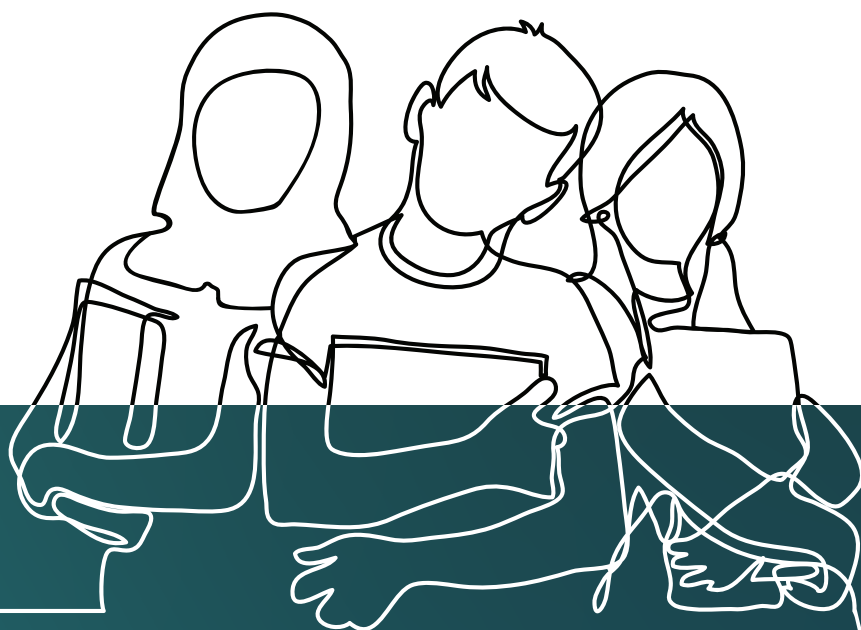
The government should extend the entitlement to 30 hours of free early education per week to all three to four-year-olds, and it should ensure the level of funding is sufficient to meet the cost of sustainable high-quality provision.

3

### RECOMMENDATION

The government should work with local authorities and education providers to improve the skills of early years practitioners, working towards ensuring that every early education setting is graduate-led.

33. Many children enter school having had limited opportunity through play and wider learning opportunities to develop their ability to express themselves in speech. What then must schools do, as we are talking here about many of the same children who will become our forgotten third at age 16?
34. Speaking and listening needs to be seen as an integral part of the curriculum across all subjects. As teachers we are intuitively confident in teaching students how to access and analyse a text. However, we often assume students arrive with developed speaking and listening skills. Phrases from the teacher along the lines of “get into groups and discuss” are common, but when and where do we teach students the skills necessary to discuss effectively? How and when do we teach keen and active listening skills; or the skill of reading body language to gauge opinions; or the skill of practising empathy?
35. Many teachers argue that there is not enough time to do this in English due to the weight of literary and non-fiction texts that need to be mastered. We need to counter this view, particularly for many of the forgotten third students. We need to consider drama as central to the curriculum to enable students to “practise their voices”.
36. Of course, talk happens naturally but it needs skilled practitioners to enable pupils to develop their skills in a wide range of informal and formal settings. The pioneering work of School 21 in Stratford, East London, and subsequently the charity Voice 21 has much to teach us about how oracy can be structured in schools across all phases.<sup>15</sup>
37. Evidence to the Commission from primary and secondary teachers across the country indicates the following future priorities:
  - Training in oracy is made available in all schools so that all teachers can develop a repertoire of effective speaking and listening techniques. Training in oracy should feature in all initial teacher education programmes.
  - Pupils are given more opportunities to develop and practise speaking and listening in formal situations.
  - Schools harness local networks to enable students to develop and practise speaking and listening in ‘real-world’ situations (e.g. mock interviews, business and enterprise events, as ‘tour guides’ on open days).





38. The teaching of phonics will most likely deliver a good proportion of children meeting the standard of the national phonics screening check in Year 1. However, it won't, on its own, deliver 'readers'. Forcing the reading curriculum to meet benchmarks of the phonics screening check can often be detrimental, reducing or even eliminating rich reading experiences and the development of a love of books within classrooms. While phonics has a role in enabling access to literature, it should be appropriately in its place and not allowed to replace the literature experiences we offer.
39. Immersion in rich experiences of literature in the primary phase is a gateway for cultural, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual development, and a powerful way to develop a child's ability to listen, speak, read and write for a wide range of purposes.
40. There is a conflict between how we measure reading in England and what we know to be valuable about reading. We measure reading skills through the phonics screening check and SATs. Yet it is unquestionable that having a love of books is what will ultimately make a child literate, broaden their horizons and raise their level of thinking. The risk is that teaching to the measured parts overtakes the overarching aims of a school's reading curriculum. This is what school leaders need to preserve.
41. The introduction of the phonics check has introduced a rigour and ambition for early reading, but has sadly prioritised it above important aspects of children's early development which are sometimes being sacrificed in order for schools to reach targets.
42. Many successful education systems do not teach reading until children are older. It is true that for many children, age four is too young. For other very young children, they are desperate to crack the code of the books they love and to become independent readers. Expert teaching of reading in primary education should follow expert early years teaching: start with the child and enable them to work in their zone of proximal development. Personal dignity and self-esteem are embedded here as children and young people develop their character, knowledge and skills.
43. What is their stage of development in relation to communication and language, and personal, social and emotional development, whatever year group they are in? In this way, we ensure they have the necessary tools to access and enjoy learning to read when the time is right. They are more likely to become lifelong readers in this way.
44. To this end, from evidence received by the Commission, schools might consider the following:
  - Ensure there is a literature curriculum that is broad and rich and that this is what defines the school's teaching of English. Children come to school expecting to be enthralled by their travels through worlds, their introduction to varied characters, and they are thrilled by the interesting new words they encounter.
  - Formally assess, every half-term, communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; and reading to know where children are. Use technical teaching sessions such as daily phonics and guided reading sessions to teach next steps, and continue to immerse children in rich literature at every other opportunity.
  - Allow children to express themselves creatively and imaginatively as they become ever more enthusiastic and critical readers of stories.
45. If language skills are essential for participation in society so are they for full participation in school. If the teaching of language is restricted to classrooms and grammar lessons it is never truly embedded. The language curriculum begins the minute children walk through the school gates on their first day of school. High expectations of children's contributions should saturate the school day.
46. Personal, social, health and economic education is one of the most important spaces in the school week for children to talk, to listen, to articulate difficult things and to be given vocabulary and language to support exploration of important matters such as difference and relationships.
47. Evidence to the Commission suggests that much of the best practice in primary language development is only loosely continued into secondary schools. As one headteacher said: "We must stop talking about primary-secondary transfer, and start talking about 3 – 16 continuity."

48. The ability to read well is a key skill which will support children through life, regardless of their backgrounds or their complexities. Yet the gap is significant between those children who go into Reception as successful 'beginner readers' and those children who don't and do not become fully 'reading ready'. What is more, this gap is not reduced enough during the primary school period for many disadvantaged children in particular.
49. It is not that efforts are not made in primary schools to increase children's capacity to read. Interventions are planned in detail and delivered diligently but their impact for some children is small. Why is this? Many teachers will talk about the limited impact schools can make when children come from homes where reading is undervalued because reading is hard to access for parents and carers themselves. Teachers are also aware that some parents and carers, particularly those in challenging circumstances, struggle to find the time to read with or to their children.
50. These problems hamper children's rapid progress in reading but they have to be overcome through engaging children in the joy of purposeful reading as well as in the mechanics of decoding and deciphering. "If seeing the value to wider reading can't or won't come from home, then it falls to schools that fill that void" (James Clements, *Teaching English by the Book*, 2018). Primary schools should teach children how to read and, far more importantly, teach children to want to read.
51. That 'want' to read comes from children seeing purposeful reading based in a rich curriculum, where great books help teachers to make links between learning. The 'want' comes from children being given time to enjoy books, not just search for answers from them. If children are beginner readers who, due to age or cognitive ability, are not yet able to decode, understand or respond to text, it is vital that primary school teachers develop a genuine desire to read within them.
52. Primary schools are full of 'trusted adults', who can help stimulate and shape children into thoughtful readers. These adults should feel confident to give children books that challenge, books that can be analysed 'softly' and books that children can read without direction. In such ways, we are more able to develop purposeful readers and thus close the gap between successful readers and those who are not ready to read.
53. Moving into the secondary phase, as and when a child begins to master the art of independent reading, the door is opened to many educational possibilities. The ability to talk about what they are reading strengthens oral language which in turn, forms a platform for stronger literacy development. Scientific studies have shown that fluent readers have improved attention spans and better concentration levels. The ability to read strengthens comprehension skills which enable students to study effectively and extract information from a wide range of sources.
54. However, as teachers, we cannot presume that students arrive at our classroom doors with such reading aptitudes; we need to understand how to teach the skills necessary to succeed in the full range of subjects: reading for information, reading for analytical purposes, reading as research, alongside reading for pure curiosity and pleasure.
55. The Commission notes the high profile given to early reading in the 2018 Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, and commends this section of the report to all primary practitioners.<sup>16</sup> The Commission has also noted the success, rooted in significant investment for each child, of the Reading Recovery literacy programme, an early intervention designed to help the lowest attaining children aged five and six learn to read. A study by Pro Bono Economics reported on research which found that: "Reading Recovery support increased the likelihood that a child will attain 5+ good GCSEs (including Maths and English) by 18 – 26 percentage points and reduced the proportion of children requiring a SEN Statement/EHCP by 7 percentage points."<sup>17</sup>

16 [The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2017/18](#). Ofsted. 4 December 2018.

17 [Assessing the impact of the Reading Recovery programme. An economic evaluation](#). Prepared by Neil Pratt, Jon Franklin and Toby Kenward. Pro Bono Economics. 2018

56. All English teachers would agree that our aim is that young people should develop fluency in a range of writing for different purposes and audiences. That aim is presently compromised by:
- a discontinuity between Key Stage 2 and 3
  - the limitations of GCSE English Language, with its restrictive choice of writing tasks and neglect of the essential process of planning and drafting
57. Securing continuity in pupils' writing across the key stages would be easier were there to be a common language to evaluate the development of pupils in their expertise as writers. What we have at Key Stage 2 is a preoccupation with the naming of parts of speech and a contrived focus on the use of grammatical and linguistic techniques. In secondary schools, the teaching of writing is determined largely by GCSE assessment objectives and, ultimately, the ability to produce something in the artificial setting of an examination hall.
58. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) has produced 'reading and writing scales'.<sup>18</sup> It explains:
- "There is one scale for reading and one for writing. Each scale offers a description of the observable behaviours of pupils at different stages. Teachers will be able to think about where on the scales they could place the children that they teach. Once they have thought about this they will be able to see what is the next set of observable behaviours they are likely to see if the child is progressing with reading and writing. Using one of the scales to reflect on the attainment of children in their class will give teachers a clear idea about what to look for in day to day assessment and the key areas they need to plan for next. Every child will have a different journey through these scales. Their starting points and their rate and pattern of progression will depend on many factors including their prior experience, their interests and their learning preferences."
59. The scales enable teachers to evaluate progress from 'beginner reader/writer' through to 'mature independent reader/ writer'. Despite the primary tag there is no reason why these scales could not be adopted across the phases to provide a common language of continuous assessment that holds good for all children from 4 – 16. For each of the points on the scales there are descriptors of "the provision, practice and pedagogy a teacher could use to help the child move forward in their literacy".
60. As part of the transition process from primary to secondary school, pupils could bring a portfolio with examples of their work with them. Ideally, a moderation process involving teachers of the 8 – 13 age range, using the CLPE framework, would enable greater continuity of teaching and provide teachers with a more secure grasp of pupils' capabilities. Given the current uncertainties over the assessment of writing at KS2, this would mark a positive step forward.
61. In truth, we are asking too much if we expect an external examination lasting a couple of hours to capture the extent of a young writer's capabilities. Again, the completion of a portfolio, which includes a range of writing from the imaginative to the transactional is surely essential in demonstrating what pupils can achieve in writing. The portfolio would be assembled over time and could include writing from a range of subject areas.
62. There are, of course, well-rehearsed issues around the assessment of coursework but these could be mitigated if a writing portfolio formed part of the proposed Passport in English (see 'Passport in English' p. 22).

63. A clear vision for language development within and across the curriculum is needed in every school and college. The chances of 'the forgotten third' in particular would be massively increased by the explicit teaching of three key strands: vocabulary, reading and oracy.
64. Many students from lower-income backgrounds arrive at their primary and secondary schools with a significantly narrower vocabulary than their peers. This can be attributed to the lack of books at home, but also the lack of back and forth conversation, especially using a range of vocabulary from a very young age. In addition, the current GCSEs in all subjects demand a much broader vocabulary than previous specifications, putting students from lower-income backgrounds at a further disadvantage.
65. The two obvious solutions lie in the explicit teaching of vocabulary through a well-planned and delivered curriculum – both subject-specific key words and academic vocabulary – and promoting more independent reading, which has been proven to broaden vocabulary. This can be challenging, because in order to be most useful, students need to be reading books of a certain quality. And before this can happen, they need to discover the joy of reading at all. It is a slow process that must begin with a nurturing of reading for pleasure at the youngest possible age, leading gradually to a focus on finding pleasure in reading richer and more challenging texts.
66. All of this must be underpinned by high-quality oracy. If students can articulate themselves clearly, effectively and confidently in conversation, they are far more likely to be able to express themselves well in writing. That is why teachers must demand excellent standards of oracy in their classrooms and, again, explicitly model how to use academic language in their subject, mindful that everything they say in a lesson is a form of modelling.
67. But we also need to find ways to encourage students who don't have the experience of much back and forth conversation at home to find their voice and to be more confident using it in classrooms, without overwhelming them. Again, this is a slow process that needs to begin in schools as early as possible to support students who are not going to have these experiences at home.
68. The research is compelling. There is a powerful story to share here with all teachers about their role in creating social justice, even having an impact on social mobility. Teachers hold not all, but many of the cards. Explicit teaching of subject-specialist vocabulary, well-chosen texts and an insistence on articulate debate and discussion in the classroom is how we enable young people to become experts in our curriculum subjects and, simultaneously, their own native language. The first step is to inspire trainee and current teachers with this story, and then for school leaders to provide the tools through training and support to make this story a shining reality.
69. Oxford University Press has carried out research with more than 1,300 teachers in the UK to better understand the word gap. It found: "Over half of those surveyed reported that at least 40% of their pupils lacked the vocabulary needed to access their learning. Worryingly, 69% of primary school teachers and 60% of secondary school teachers believe the gap is increasing." To help close this gap, it has created resources with ideas and activities to help improve children's vocabulary which can be downloaded from the website cited below.<sup>19</sup>



70. A number of respondents to the Commission have told us that techniques used in the teaching of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) would also be useful in the training and development of teachers in the UK. This is different from and complementary to supporting children in the UK learning English as an additional language. We are persuaded of the merits of this argument and recommend schools look at the following for training and resources:

- [Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages](#). Cambridge Assessment.
- [The International English Language Testing System \(IELTS\)](#). British Council, IDP, Cambridge Assessment. Measures the language proficiency of people who want to study or work where English is used as a language of communication.
- [Oxford Test of English](#). Oxford University Press. General English proficiency test which assesses the ability to understand and communicate effectively in English.
- [EAL Assessment Framework](#). The Bell Foundation. Includes early years foundation stage, primary and secondary support strategies and provides practical ways to support EAL learners at each stage of their language development.

71. Evidence to the Commission also highlighted the importance of applied linguistics in developing language programmes for early years, primary and secondary. Leaders of language in schools and colleges may find it useful to familiarise themselves with much of this research as part of their work in embedding language across the curriculum in an explicit and fun way.





4

**RECOMMENDATION**

The Department for Education, local authorities, multi-academy trusts, school partnerships and schools should continue to invest in language programmes which are having a measurable impact on closing the language gap. And, where possible, should provide training in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) techniques for all teachers and support staff.

5

**RECOMMENDATION**

As part of schools' and colleges' curriculum development, primary and secondary subject specialists should consider building into their planning the vocabulary that is needed to develop students' competence in their subjects, and the opportunities to practise this vocabulary.

6

**RECOMMENDATION**

Primary and secondary schools should consider how to implement high-quality whole-school programmes which explicitly promote oracy and articulation, and the essential stepping stones in reading and writing which underpin children's learning in all subjects. This could have a special spotlight on the 10 – 12 age range, supported by Department for Education grant funding through the national English Hubs.

7

**RECOMMENDATION**

The Department for Education should commission a focused review of the English curriculum from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 3, with a view to providing greater continuity between what is taught in primary and secondary schools, and encouraging secondary schools to build more effectively on the strong foundations laid in primary.

8

**RECOMMENDATION**

Professional development providers should be encouraged to run innovative courses for senior leaders on 'language at the heart of the leader's mission' – promoting the concept that every teacher in every classroom is a teacher of the English language.

9

**RECOMMENDATION**

From September 2020, all primary and secondary teacher training programmes should include substantial courses on the teaching of reading, writing and oracy; ESOL teaching techniques; and developing teachers' own skills as fluent and accurate writers.



72. GCSE English Language was reformed in 2015 and the conditions set out by Ofqual require exam boards to assess students on unseen texts from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.<sup>20</sup> These must include a literary fiction text and a literary non-fiction text. The requirement for the selection of texts seems arbitrary and it is clear that there are large parts of the reading element of each English Language paper that many students are simply not intended to access. The current examination does not test or recognise significant key skills in English, notably planning and drafting writing for a range of purposes and audiences.
73. The GCSE includes a teacher-assessed spoken language assessment but this does not count towards the marks for the GCSE. Students who pass this element are awarded a separate grade of either a pass, merit or distinction. The requirement for each student to deliver a presentation for the spoken language assessment that doesn't count towards their GCSE is a source of annoyance for teachers and students – not least because the talks need to be filmed for a moderation sample.
74. What is the purpose of the English Language GCSE? The DfE, in a factsheet for parents, describes a grade 4 standard pass as “a credible achievement for a young person that should be valued as a passport to future study and employment.”<sup>21</sup> Let us remind ourselves here that one third of students at 16+ are currently denied this passport.
75. Elsewhere, the DfE says that GCSE English Language should enable students to<sup>22</sup>:
- read a wide range of texts fluently and with good understanding
  - read critically and use knowledge gained from wide reading to inform and improve their own writing
  - write effectively and coherently using Standard English appropriately
  - use grammar correctly, punctuate and spell accurately
  - acquire and apply a wide vocabulary, alongside a knowledge and understanding of grammatical terminology, and linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language
  - listen to and understand spoken language, and use spoken Standard English effectively.

Spoken language will be reported on as part of the qualification, but it will not form part of the final mark and grade.

76. A thoughtful and appropriate summary, yes. Yet what has this rubric meant in practice? These aims were translated in the 2018 examination into the following Pearson Edexcel papers:<sup>23</sup>

#### Paper 1

A passage from a translation of Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel 'Crime and Punishment' (1866) with questions which tested:

- Factual recall (1 mark)
- Interpretation of language (2 marks)
- Understanding of the authorial use of language and structure (6 marks)
- Literary analysis of the narrator's thoughts and feelings (15 marks)

A choice of written tasks - both centred around imaginative writing (40 marks). One task was about 'A Secret' and the other about 'When you had done something that you should not have'.

20 [GCSE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for English Language and Certificate Requirements](#). Ofqual. July 2015.

21 [GCSE factsheet for parents](#). Department for Education. 20 June 2017.

22 [GCSE English language: subject content and assessment objectives](#). Department for Education. 1 November 2013

23 [Pearson Edexcel Level 1/Level 2 GCSE \(9-1\) English Language](#) June 2018.

## Paper 2

An extract from 'Really the Blues' by 'Mezz' Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe (1946) about jazz singer Bessie Smith, and an extract from 'Little Milton' by Tony Russell (2005) about blues singer 'Little' Milton Campbell. The texts were used to test:

- Factual recall (2 marks)
- Interpretation of language (2 marks)
- Understanding of the authorial use of language and structure (15 marks)
- Factual recall (1 mark)
- Interpretation of language (1 mark)
- The ability to evaluate how successful the writer was in his craft (15 marks)
- The ability to compare and contrast the two articles in terms of character (6 marks) and the presentation of ideas and perspectives (14 marks).

A choice of two transactional essays (40 marks): one was a newspaper article about 'How Music Affects People' and the other a review of a band, film, concert or book.

77. It is noticeable that:

- both here and in the assessment criteria there is no mention of a grade 4 standard pass equating to competency in one's own language.
- the qualification as tested here has a subjective feel to it – in terms of the materials chosen, the students' differing experience of the topics, and the room for inconsistency in the way the papers could be marked.
- in the tasks set, the papers attempt to test both the functional and the aesthetic: this is because of the need to cover the National Curriculum and reflects a time when not all children studied Literature to GCSE.

Thus, emerges a qualification which will be used by employers to define an applicant's literacy capabilities – and which will define life chances – yet leading to outcomes which are at best questionable, at worst unfit for purpose.

78. The Commission has considered submissions by teachers about how to reshape the current GCSE English Language qualification. These included:

- Restore the assessment of coursework through a portfolio of writing assignments assessed on criteria which are consistent throughout the primary and secondary phases.
- Assess oracy through a framework such as that developed by the highly respected Voice 21.
- Assess reading, comprehension and summary skills online, thus ensuring marking reliability, and support this with evidence from a reading-age test administered in Year 11.
- Administer assessments in English language when students are ready – 'age not stage' – rather than as part of the suite of GCSE exams.

79. The Commission has concluded that GCSE English Language should be replaced by a competency-based qualification – a Passport in English – which assesses a basic standard of performance through a range of different assessment methodologies and which can be undertaken at the point of readiness. This would not be a pass/fail examination. The expectation is that the majority of students would reach the required level of competence by the age of 18 and those that are not on track are supported to do so.

80. English Literature would remain as a GCSE examination with subject-specific content. It has a particular purpose, and students and teachers enjoy teaching and learning in this important area of the curriculum.



81. The Commission sets out a possible model for a new Passport in English, rooted in our conclusion that the current GCSE English Language qualification is not fit for purpose. We are confident that the professional expertise in examining and assessing in this country can be harnessed to produce a high-quality Passport, valued and respected over the long term by students, parents, employers and the wider society.

82. A model for the passport

The following section sets out a possible model for the passport. This is but one approach and there may be other models which should be considered. The following is intended to illustrate how this system might work in practice.

English Language would become a proficiency test for the vast majority of students; an extension test could also be available which would involve more complex tasks and address the aesthetics of language usage.

#### (i) Reading profile

Each student would sit a one-hour, online reading paper which would test how well a candidate can:

- read for the general sense of a passage
- read for the main ideas
- read for detail
- understand inferences and implied meaning
- recognise a writer's opinions, attitudes and purpose
- follow the development of an argument

The texts would be non-fiction gaining in sophistication as the paper progressed to allow distinctions in comprehension ability to be distinguished. The final texts would be complex, with one being literary, in order to test whether mastery in reading has been achieved.

#### (ii) Speaking and listening

As now, teacher assessment would be used to judge a student's communicative competence. Each student would have an interview with someone from the business world, which would be split into three parts: the student introduces themselves; answers questions about their future plans; and answers questions about wider concerns within business.

An extension test would be for a student to be given a topic one hour before interview and have to prepare a short, entertaining talk upon it.

#### (iii) Writing

An approach which could be used would be of the nature that used to exist in English Language A level Paper 5 (The Editorial Paper) where students were given a case study of articles on a subject three days before the exam. In the exam, they were asked to select and synthesise relevant information into a form which would match a stated purpose and audience. Thus, they were given time to cope with the reading, to think through how it could be reshaped for a variety of circumstances and then, in exam conditions, to write.

An extension paper could also be offered. Students would be given a text and a follow-on task, typically to complete a short story or article in the style of the original, with an hour to plan and begin to draft their text, and an hour to complete their final submission.

#### (iv) Certification

The assessment would be designed to test communicative competency in a fair way, with outcomes which produced a profile of what a candidate could do in reading, writing, speaking and listening – ranging from entry level to operational proficiency to expert. Each student would thus be on a 'flight path' over time. These would not be norm-referenced nor would they be included in league tables, so all perverse incentives would be removed.

Because of the progressive nature of the papers, and the lack of a sense of failure, resits could be taken in subsequent years to reach the desired level. Instead of a GCSE grade which effectively tells employers, colleges, and universities little about what a student can do, the assessments would lead to a skills profile (a passport). For example:

Skill Area	Candidate has the ability to:	Level achieved in skill area
Writing	Punctuate written work accurately Use paragraphs effectively Vary sentence structures in order to affect reader response Structure ideas coherently in writing Write fluently Employ a wide-ranging vocabulary in order to affect reader response	Expert
Speaking and listening	Communicate basic information effectively on familiar topics Respond appropriately when asked a question Talk at an appropriate length in response to an interviewer Use the appropriate register in a formal situation Listen to views and pick out factual information in order to fashion a response	Operational proficiency
Reading	Read for the general sense of a passage Read for main ideas and understand these in detail Understand inferences and implied meaning Recognise a writer's opinions, attitudes and purpose Follow the development of an argument	Entry level

83. In establishing the Passport in English, it is vital that the examining organisation which leads on the passport works closely with employers and the CBI in developing subject content. Consideration should be given to a comprehensive review of employer requirements for English language skills in the workplace.
84. The Education and Training Foundation's report 'Making maths and English work for all'<sup>24</sup> outlines research undertaken with nearly 650 employers. It identifies that employers were more concerned about poor English (46%) than maths (17%) skills, and that 26% had concerns about both. Only 11% of employers said they had no concerns about either subject.
85. The report said: "Employers report that they are looking for the 'basics' in English, and need significantly enhanced listening and speaking skills, good writing, oral and spoken comprehension and improved spelling, grammar and vocabulary. Employers reported problems with some of their potential recruits and young employees who have difficulties in constructing e-mails, use text speak rather than properly constructed sentences, and have poor spelling and communication skills."





86. If the Passport in English tests high-level skills which will stretch all students, including the high attaining, how is it possible that the majority of students will secure success? The Passport will be designed to test a wide range of English competence including understanding and using inferential and emotive language, extended writing, reading for enjoyment and nuance, and the construction of complex, reasoned argument. The Passport is seen as a mastery model where students, over time, develop high levels of expertise in the understanding and use of both written and spoken English in a range of contexts both applied and creative.
87. It is not the sophistication of the content nor the level of challenge which will change. The fundamental changes will be to the way in which students are taught and assessed. The majority of a student's English time will be spent in acquiring and enhancing their literacy and oracy skills rather than practising for a terminal one-off, quasi-literature test for which the required pass mark is unknown.
88. These skills will be tested through appropriate and modern media which may be via web-based tests, through online spoken vivas, as well as through extended writing tasks, traditional comprehension and timed responses. Students could 'bank' achievements and move on to focus on improving their areas of weakness so that the qualification builds over time into a competency record which clearly shows higher education institutions and employers the level of expertise the student has attained across a menu of differing English skills.

# 10

## RECOMMENDATION

A working group representing the Department for Education, Ofqual and the professional associations should be established to introduce a Passport in English to replace the current GCSE English Language. This highly respected qualification would be taken by all students 'graduating' from school/college into the workplace or higher education. The Passport should be criterion referenced, comprising online assessment, a portfolio of a student's writing and a significant oracy component. The qualification could be taken at different levels between the ages of 15 and 19, ending the wasteful GCSE resit industry.

It is recommended that the Passport in English be certificated by a body with international standing, with employer approval and branding. It is also recommended that similar consideration be given to a companion Passport in Maths.

89. If English Language GCSE is replaced by a Passport in English the place of GCSE English Literature takes on much greater significance. The current, and inappropriate, emphasis on the comprehension of literary texts in GCSE English Language should properly be the focus of exams in literature.
90. We recommend that GCSE English Literature remains within the core entitlement for all students at Key Stage 4 and as part of the current English Baccalaureate (EBacc) for the following reasons:
- The study of English literature enables students to learn from and engage with the best that has been written in the English language. We acknowledge the strong emphasis on our traditional literary heritage in the current specifications for GCSE Literature. While this is to be commended, the subject also needs to embrace writing in English from other cultures and backgrounds, better to reflect our national diversity.
  - Studying English literature promotes life-long learning. It has the capacity to inspire and stimulate an independent interest in and love of poetry, prose and drama.
  - The study of English literature develops and sharpens students' skills of critical appreciation and understanding, which prepares them for advanced study in English and other disciplines.
  - The skills demanded for writing an English literature essay (analysis and selection of material, the development of a coherent and logical argument and a strong personal response) are not only valuable in themselves but also transferrable across other disciplines.
  - The study of English literature enables students to appreciate and understand writing in its cultural and historical context and make connections with other areas of learning.

11

**RECOMMENDATION**

All students should continue to take GCSE English Literature as a core subject. To safeguard good curriculum breadth and students' access to 'the best that has been thought and said', the examination should be taken at the end of Year 11 only.



91. The Commission has spent some considerable time focusing on the 'what next' for the large number of students who do not achieve GCSE grade 9 to 4 in English and maths at the end of Key Stage 4.
92. Current government policy is that students aged 16 to 18 who do not have a GCSE grade 9 to 4 in maths and/or English must study these subjects as part of their study programme in each academic year. This requirement is known as the 'condition of funding' because the funding allocation for these students is contingent upon this requirement. Students with a grade 3 must study for a GCSE qualification. Those with a grade 2 or below can study towards a functional skills qualification. From the academic year 2019 to 2020, once they have achieved this, there is no requirement to undertake further maths or English qualifications.<sup>25</sup>
93. There has long been concern that the condition of funding requirement is consigning young people to a demoralising cycle of retaking exams without any improvement in their grades. In the 2018 exam series, only 29.7% of 16 to 18-year-old students achieved grade 9-4 English GCSE, and only 18.2% achieved grade 9-4 in GCSE maths.<sup>26</sup>
94. The current English and maths policy and funding arrangements are not achieving the intended outcomes – too many young people do not achieve a grade 4 standard pass in English and maths GCSEs both at age 16 and by age 18.
95. Colleges recognise the importance of English and maths and the impact not gaining these skills has on limiting life chances and opportunities to progress in learning and work and life. Colleges would like to work towards policy and practice which allows young people to develop both English and maths skills appropriate to their individual needs and employer requirements, and enables colleges to deliver on the skills required for adults. The Passport in English – and in maths – presents that attractive and workable solution.

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25 [16 to 19 funding: maths and English condition of funding](#). Education and Skills Funding Agency. 4 December 2014.

26 [16 to 18 GCSE English and maths pass rates](#). Association of Colleges. 23 August 2018.



96. Ofqual published a report in November 2018 on marking consistency in GCSEs and A levels. In this exercise, the 'definitive mark' for an answer – generally the mark set by a senior examiner – was compared to the mark awarded by other examiners. This data was then used to estimate the probability of candidates receiving the definitive grade in the exam. Ofqual found the probability of receiving the definitive grade varied by qualification and subject. For example, the probability of a candidate receiving the definitive grade in maths was high at 96%, but in subjects with essay-style questions it was lower. In English Language, the probability of receiving the definitive grade was 61%.<sup>27</sup>
97. Thus, if the national data set shows that 39% of candidates get what we might therefore call the 'wrong' grade in English Language GCSE, this means that over half a million students who have taken this core subject in the last two years were awarded the wrong grade (either lower or higher than the definitive grade).
98. There are clearly inherent difficulties in providing an objective assessment of attainment and ability in subjects like English, as compared with subjects like maths. However, these findings undermine the prevailing orthodoxy of recent times, namely that external examiners are more reliable than students' own teachers in coming to fair decisions about competency in English. Oral assessments and coursework have, apparently, been abolished in favour of external examiners awarding more than one in three students the wrong grade.
99. High-stakes decisions are being made regarding individual children's futures on the basis of what users of the grades believe to be definitive information – for example, whether a student who achieved a grade 3 in English has to resit, at significant cost to her/him and the national education purse, or whether another student is offered a place on an apprenticeship or at university.
100. The Ofqual data raises the question of whether unreliable grades should be the sole way in which students are judged and decisions made about their future. Exams are worth working hard for and GCSE grades will continue to serve us until we can find a better alternative. No system of marking is foolproof. But the time is right to find that alternative in English Language. And Ofqual and other key national players must raise awareness of the extent to which grades can or cannot be relied upon to signify a student's potential.
101. In the primary phase, schools are held to account for pupils' attainment at the end of Year 6 in reading, writing and maths, and for their progress in those subjects from the end of Year 2 to the end of Year 6. The data that feeds these measures comes from children's performance in SATs in Years 2 and 6. In Year 2, these assessments are externally set, but marked by teachers (with local authority moderation to encourage fairness and consistency). In Year 6, reading and maths are assessed through standardised tests, set and marked externally. There is also a test of grammar, punctuation and spelling, which isn't included in the performance tables. Writing is teacher-assessed, against a set of centrally-produced assessment frameworks.
102. Until recently, children's perceived under-performance in these assessments automatically triggered punitive consequences for schools. Schools which failed to reach a government-determined 'floor standard', based on their SATs results, were at risk of a number of serious sanctions, including the replacement of their governing board or compulsory academisation.
103. Unsurprisingly, such high-stakes consequences made a mockery of government's insistence that the SATs were simply designed to demonstrate how well a school was doing, and that they should not put any pressure on pupils or teachers. In many schools, the stakes associated with the SATs have led to a narrowing of the curriculum, particularly in Year 6, and to significant stress for both pupils and teachers.
104. Thankfully, recent changes are going some way towards lowering the stakes associated with these assessments. At the time of writing this report, the government's intention was to scrap the use of floor standards and instead use the Ofsted grade of 'requires improvement' to trigger an offer of support to help improve educational performance.<sup>28</sup>
105. This proposal, particularly when combined with Ofsted's intention in its new inspection framework to give more focus to a school's broad curriculum offering, has the potential to lower the stakes associated with the SATs. However, there remain a number of significant issues with primary assessment and accountability, and particularly with the Year 6 SATs, which are pertinent to the subject of this commission.
106. Whatever your view on the content of the SATs, there is no doubt that there is a glaring disconnect between what is taught and assessed in English at primary school, and the content of the National Curriculum and exam specifications at secondary school. Children spend much of their primary years acquiring a detailed, and really quite advanced, knowledge of grammar, much of which is never mentioned again once they start secondary school.

27 [Need to know: Are nearly half of GCSE and A-level grades wrong?](#) TES. 17 December 2018.

28 [Identifying schools for improvement support.](#) Department for Education. 28 January 2019.

107. While the reading and maths tests are generally perceived, including by Ofqual, as relatively high-quality assessment instruments, there is much less confidence in the quality of the (teacher-assessed) writing assessments. Although teachers' judgements are scaffolded by a set of assessment frameworks, there is substantial evidence, both anecdotal and more objective, that different teachers interpret these frameworks in very different ways, and that the moderation of these assessments by local authorities also varies significantly<sup>29</sup>. As a result, there is a significant degree of scepticism around the writing results, with fewer than one in five teachers, according to a 2018 poll,<sup>30</sup> believing that they are honest and accurate.
108. In the Commission's view, there are major issues with the way in which children's results in the SATs are reported. In each of the tested subjects (reading, maths, and spelling, punctuation and grammar) children are given a score on a scale from 80 to 120, with a score of 100 identified as the 'expected standard'. Government guidance for Key Stage 2 SATs requires schools to include in their reports to parents, in as many words, whether or not their child has 'met the expected standard'.<sup>31</sup>
109. In 2018, 36% of 11-year-olds were told, at the end of seven years of primary school, that they had not lived up to the expectations of their teachers, and indeed of society as a whole.<sup>32</sup> How does that make them feel, as they prepare to leave the security of primary school for the uncharted waters of secondary? Children should not, in the commission's opinion, be told that they have failed in the first stage of their education, just as they are about to move on to the next. We can do better than that.
110. English, together with maths, has always been a significant part of government accountability measures. Before the introduction of Progress 8 in 2016, pupils needed English and maths at a grade C or higher in order to achieve the headline measure of five or more GCSEs at grade C or higher. Ofsted also looked at levels of progress in English from Key Stage 2 to GCSE.

Key Stage 4 headline measures in 2018	Role of English Language and Literature
Attainment 8 and Progress 8	English is one of the elements of Attainment 8 and Progress 8. The better grade of English language and literature is used, with point scores doubled if a pupil takes both English language and literature. The unused English grade can contribute to the 'open' element of A8 and P8, and hence English can contribute 30% of the Attainment 8 score.
EBacc attainment and entry	English forms one of the 'pillars' of the EBacc measure. Both English language and literature must be taken for points to count. This measure has changed from a threshold type prior to 2018 to an average points score, and is a strong proxy for Attainment 8.
Attainment in English and maths	This is a threshold measure for the percentage of pupils who achieve at least a grade 5 (i.e. a 'strong' pass) in both English and maths. English can be either language or literature. The measure is also currently reported at grade 4 (i.e. a 'standard' pass).
Destinations	Whilst no subject in particular features in the destinations measure, access to further education, apprenticeships or work with suitable training is invariably a function of grades in English.

111. At post-16, students who do not achieve a grade 4 or higher (a 'standard' pass) in English (or maths) must either retake GCSE or pursue an alternative additional course, most likely to be functional skills. The progress made by students in this situation is a headline measure for post-16 providers. The grade 4 can be in either English language or English literature.
112. In 2014, the decision was taken that English Literature GCSE should fulfil essentially the same role as English Language GCSE in performance measures. The Commission believes this is unhelpful because it disguises potentially weak performance in English Language. Whilst the Commission greatly values the contribution English Literature makes to students (and proposes no changes in this report), we do not think it is equivalent to English Language in this context. When considering progression to the next phase of learning or particularly to employment, it is the student's ability to communicate fluently and accurately which is the desirable skill in English. This is not tested in the same way in English Literature which has, for example, different weight placed on spelling, punctuation and grammar.

29 [Consistency in Key Stage 2 writing across local authorities appears to be poor](#). Education Datalab. 1 September 2016.

30 [Sats: Most teachers say writing assessment will not produce accurate results](#). TES. 5 February 2018.

31 [2019 Key Stage 2: assessment and reporting arrangements](#). Standards and Testing Agency. 15 October 2018.

32 [Key stage 2 and multi-academy trust performance, 2018 \(revised\)](#). Department for Education. 13 December 2018.



113. The challenge for GCSE exams in the core subjects of English and maths, in particular, has been the multifarious purposes assessment is trying to fulfil. Not only are they a test of student competence, they also operate as:

- A judgement of school performance
- A mechanism for assessing teacher competence
- An opportunity to influence cultural values and priorities
- A yardstick to measure changes in national performance over time
- A basis for international comparisons
- An instrument to 'fail' one third in order that two thirds pass.

Whilst we continue to place so much weight and expectation on one examination, we are unlikely to find a single, effective methodology of assessment.

The methodology which assesses student competence at a point in time and builds expertise is never going to be the same methodology which judges the performance of a school. The one is diagnostic, developmental and rewards persistence and hard work; the other cements underachievement and rewards a useful but limited skill set. This duality drives school 'gaming' of the system and creates an examination which is unfit for purpose – any purpose.

114. If we want to develop the skills, and the values, that young people need and the economy wants, we have to move beyond the terminal and inadequate pass/fail exam towards one which both builds and assesses the varied and deepening competences we need in the next generation.

115. Whilst all this above is especially the case for the core subjects of English and maths, the same is true of the wider GCSE system, and especially in the current cliff-edge accountability climate within which schools operate.

116. According to Ofqual, National Reference Tests may over time lead to schools being able to demonstrate a raising (or falling) of standards within the current comparable outcomes system. However, these tests are in their early days and the extent to which they may change the landscape is not clear. There does not appear to be any way to escape the reality of 'one third failing in order that two thirds pass.' Or at least this Commission has over the past year missed the exit. This 'grim and very frustrating' reality – as one headteacher described the current context to the Commission – requires major system change, a review of 'comparable outcomes' as an underpinning rationale of GCSE.

117. Linked to the above, by accident or design, the introduction of the descriptor for grade 4 GCSE as a standard pass and grade 5 as a strong pass has embedded the most unfortunate language. Where does this leave lower grades which are neither a standard pass nor a strong pass? The DfE insists that grades 1, 2 and 3 are a pass. No student, parent, teacher or headteacher interviewed by the Commission thinks that is the case. This state of affairs needs changing with urgency in relation to the current system of reporting on all GCSEs taken by students throughout the country, this year and in succeeding years.

12

### RECOMMENDATION

A new approach to primary assessment and accountability should be developed to replace Key Stage 2 SATs, in order to redress the distorting effect on the curriculum of the current approach.

13

### RECOMMENDATION

The Department for Education – supported by Ofqual – should no longer use the unhelpful terminology of 'standard' and 'strong' pass when announcing GCSE results to students, parents and the media. A grade is a grade.

14

### RECOMMENDATION

The government should establish a cross-sector review of England's GCSE exam system which is currently rooted in testing and assessment designed for a different era; and, in parallel, review the current high-stakes school accountability systems which are outmoded for students, parents and schools today.

The central proposal of this report is the introduction of the Passport in English, and in time, the introduction of a similar qualification in maths. To those outside the education sector this may not seem to be a radical suggestion, but within the sector it is likely to be regarded as seismic, particularly among those for whom GCSEs are an article of faith. They are likely to fall back on the argument that GCSEs are a 'gold standard' qualification, recognised and understood by employers and parents alike, and that any alternative will undermine standards. They will defend the accountability system built around GCSEs – with all its quirks, confusion and contradictions – as essential in upholding those standards.

These are all arguments for the status quo. This is how we do things and it is heresy to think otherwise.

So, let's be clear about what we intend and we don't intend.

What we don't intend is a system which abandons high standards in the pursuit of prizes for all. On the contrary, the Passport would be a robust qualification which encourages the highest standards in reading, writing and spoken English and thereby helps students to access all areas of the curriculum. The fact that every student should be able to achieve a recognised level of competency in the Passport is surely a good thing, not a bad thing. Why does a system which 'fails' a third of students uphold standards better than a system which allows every student to leave school or college with a qualification of which they can be proud? Why are we seemingly addicted to the analogy of education as some sort of sporting competition in which the very notion of 'prizes for all' is instant anathema. Surely our aim should be a system in which all young people can achieve.

Neither is this report proposing the wholesale abandonment of the GCSE system. It focuses on English, and suggests maths could be treated similarly, because these are the essential gateway subjects to the whole curriculum and key to the life chances of young people. Our report certainly recommends that a bigger conversation is needed about what our exam and accountability system should look like in the future, and how we might make it better for young people. That conversation may lead to the conclusion that we need to do things differently.

But that is for another day, and the concrete recommendations of this report are intended to change things in the here and now. We recognise that the government has committed to no new curriculum and qualification changes in the lifetime of the current parliament, but we see the Passport as an initiative which could be introduced rapidly after that time, and begin making a difference for young people very soon.

Surely it is time for us to stop insisting that the way we do things now is the only way that is right despite the manifest failings of the current system. Surely it is time we believed that things can be done in a better way, and most importantly of all, that we then deliver the change that is needed.



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