

Labour's proposed Curriculum and Assessment Review

Initial thoughts from the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a trade union and professional association representing over 25,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business leaders and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people across primary, secondary, post-16 and specialist education.
2. ASCL hopes this proactive submission ahead of Labour's proposed Curriculum and Assessment Review will be helpful, setting out as it does where we think approaches to curriculum and assessment are working well, where they're working less well, what changes our members would like to see, what the key barriers to change are. Our response is based on the views of our members, obtained through discussions at ASCL Council, with relevant advisory groups, and prompted and unprompted emails and messages. It builds on previous policy proposals made in our [Blueprint for a Fairer Education System](#) (2021) and [Manifesto for the 2024 General Election](#) (2023).
3. We hope that this paper will also be of interest and use to the current government, as well as to the Labour Party and any future government when considering curriculum and assessment reform. While we have structured this paper around Labour's five principles, the intention is for this thinking to contribute to the wider discourse.
4. When considering the impact of any proposals on different groups, it is ASCL's policy to consider not only the nine protected characteristics included in the Equality Act 2010, but also other groups which might be disproportionately affected, particularly those who are socio-economically disadvantaged.

B. Context

5. In July 2023, the Labour Party set out five national missions, the final of which is to 'break down barriers to opportunity'. In their [paper](#) on this mission, they promise an urgent Curriculum and Assessment Review, should they be elected to government. The review is based on the following principles:
 - An excellent foundation in the core subjects of reading, writing and maths.
 - A broader curriculum, so that children don't miss out on subjects such as music, art, sport and drama.

- A curriculum that ensures young people leave school ready for work and ready for life, building the knowledge, skills and attributes young people need to thrive. This includes embedding digital, oracy and life skills in their learning.
 - A curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring every child is represented.
 - An assessment system that captures the full strengths of every child and the breadth of curriculum, with the right balance of assessment methods whilst maintaining the important role of examinations.
6. We are pleased that many of these principles correspond to ASCL's suggestion for an incremental programme of curriculum and assessment reform in our manifesto.
 7. The paper also promises that, following the review, all state schools, including academies, will be required to teach the core national curriculum, to 'give parents certainty over the core of their children's education'. This was a key recommendation in ASCL's 2021 *Blueprint*, and we are pleased to see it being formally proposed by Labour. Our belief is that the national curriculum should be a common entitlement for all children and young people, and that it should be the single legislative document that governments use to impose curriculum expectations on schools.
 8. This paper is intended as a reflection on the five principles of Labour's review, and offers insights into each of these areas. We hope this will be helpful for both current and future governments in formulating policy in this space.
 9. ASCL is always mindful that any reform to curriculum and assessment brings significant additional workload, opportunity costs and financial burdens to schools and colleges, and that the evidenced benefits of any reform must outweigh these factors. There may also be unintended consequences of reforms. We have therefore been cautious in proposing significant changes to curriculum and assessment in this response. Instead, we have attempted to signal what is working well (and shouldn't be touched by future governments), where savings could be made, and where small changes could be made, with minimal costs to government. Any significant proposals are, in most cases, already suggested in our *Blueprint* and manifesto.

C. The five principles

10. ASCL strongly supports the five principles proposed in Labour's paper as a foundation for a review into curriculum and assessment.
11. However, we suggest that the needs of learners with SEND should be made explicit in the principles themselves. Too often, and for too long, decisions about curriculum and assessment have been made without these pupils in mind. Any changes must be as inclusive as possible. For example, there is evidence that the curriculum is often narrower for pupils with SEND or for those who have lower levels of literacy and numeracy. Broad provision for all children must be funded by government, beyond the urgent priority to bridge the gap between current higher needs funding levels and current need.

D. Principle 1: An excellent foundation in the core subjects of reading, writing and maths

12. The government's current target for 90% of children to leave primary school having met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths by 2030 is rightly ambitious, and future governments should not lower this expectation.
13. However, we note that this is a notional and *national* target (much like Ebacc entry at Key Stage 4), meaning that individual primary and junior schools should not be held accountable for it. It is, and should be, government's own metric by which they hold themselves accountable. Furthermore, government has a role in supporting schools to meet this national ambition, rather than simply telling them that must, and penalising them if they don't.
14. The increased emphasis on phonics in the national curriculum from the 2010s has had a significant and positive impact on children's literacy and ability to read. ASCL would strongly caution against moving away from synthetic phonics as a way of teaching decoding. This should always, of course, be balanced with a requirement to teach reading for comprehension and pleasure.
15. The Key Stage 1 phonics screening test is an appropriate, and proportionate, national test to check whether children are reading at the expected standard.
16. However, we do not think that the current Key Stage 2 assessments are an adequate test of literacy and numeracy, and we dispute the current definition of the 'expected standard'. A review should certainly look at what key skills and knowledge we expect primary school pupils to leave with, and whether national assessments are actually assessing these. For example, successive Key Stage 2 reading tests have required certain cultural capital (beyond the national curriculum) to answer the questions. We argue this is poor assessment design, as it's not actually testing pupils' decoding or comprehension skills, and further disadvantages already disadvantaged children.
17. Moreover, the current assessments can skew the curriculum to a narrower set of outcomes, based on the expected Key Stage 2 standard in reading, writing and maths. This speaks to Labour's second principle below.
18. A significant barrier to achieving this excellent foundation is the widening disadvantage gap, which shows it is harder for primary schools in underserved communities to meet the national average. This is due to a range of factors, many of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. There is a sense that post-pandemic recovery is over, when this is very much not the case. Part of any review into the curriculum should consider where recovery intervention is still needed, especially in the early stages of education.
19. Parental support is also key to a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy. There should be a fully funded programme to support parents of 0-4 year-olds in childcare and in the early stages of child development, so that they arrive at school ready for the next stage of their development. ASCL members report that, since the pandemic, many more children are arriving at school without the skills and functions that would have previously been expected. This programme should be led by the DfE, and not left for schools to implement.

E. Principle 2: A broader curriculum, so that children don't miss out on subjects such as music, art, sport and drama

20. Attainment 8, Progress 8 and the Ebacc have clearly had a significant impact on the breadth of curriculum at Key Stage 4. Ebacc prioritises a small number of (albeit valuable) subjects, at the expense of others.
21. We are particularly concerned by the emphasis placed on the Ebacc qualifications. Progress 8 incentivises take-up of Ebacc subjects, without mandating it. In this sense it is a more nuanced performance measure. At times of budget restraints, entering a majority of students for the Ebacc in Key Stage 4 inevitably means that schools cannot run a large number of small-entry, non-Ebacc subjects. This, in turn, has a knock-on effect on the affordability of the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Any changes to the Ebacc measure (e.g. introducing new elements) must, therefore, be carefully thought through. There is a risk that broadening the Ebacc could, paradoxically, narrow the curriculum.
22. The same is true at Key Stage 2, where too much emphasis is placed on English and maths, at the expense of other subjects. It is, of course, right that children learn the fundamental skills of literacy, numeracy and oracy, so that they can access the full curriculum, but this foundation must not be at the expense of a broad and balanced curriculum.
23. ASCL's suggestion that all state-funded schools follow a national curriculum would go some way to achieve a common entitlement for all learners, and we are pleased Labour has adopted this as policy. ASCL believes that, by mandating a broad and balanced curriculum for all state-funded schools, there would be less need for high-stakes accountability measures, as quality assurance of individual schools' curriculum would be through the content and quality of the national curriculum.
24. Ofsted's 2019 framework (EIF) focuses on the quality of education (the curriculum), rather than historical outcomes. ASCL welcomed this approach, although we believe its implementation has been flawed. We recommend that Ofsted continues to focus on the quality of education, though this should always be inspected against the national curriculum and no other non-statutory expectations, as part of a broader accountability dashboard.
25. The recruitment and retention crisis in the teaching sector is a significant barrier to some schools and colleges being able to offer a broader curriculum, as they cannot recruit specialist teachers in some subjects. For example, in 2022, the DfE only recruited 25% of ITT design and technology teachers, against its own target. This problem is only going to get worse – unless government intervenes – as the pipeline of specialist teachers will become smaller as fewer students take GCSEs and A levels in these subjects.
26. A further barrier to a broader secondary curriculum is the assessments themselves. The reforms of the last decade have seen a greater emphasis on exams and essay writing, including in art, vocational and technical subjects. ASCL members believe that this has undermined love for the subjects in some students, and led to fewer students taking certain optional subjects due to the demands of the assessment.
27. The Prime Minister's proposed new Advanced British Standard is in some ways welcome, in that it increases breadth post-16, and is an attempt to give equal standing to academic and technical qualifications. These plans are in their infancy,

and ASCL has concerns about the practical implementation of them. However, the intent is attractive, and would certainly increase the breadth of content most 16-18 year-olds learn.

F. Principle 3: A curriculum that ensures young people leave school ready for work and ready for life, building the knowledge, skills and attributes young people need to thrive. This includes embedding digital, oracy and life skills in their learning.

28. Schools and colleges already do a good job in preparing students for life and work, with a vast majority of students going onto further study, apprenticeships or employment.
29. On the wording of the principle itself, ASCL would suggest a syntactic change to 'ready for life and ready for work'. Although employability is undeniably important, the ability for all to live lives of dignity and worth is paramount.
30. While the view of employers should certainly be sought through any review, it is important to note that 'work readiness' means different things to different groups. In any job, new employees will be expected to do some training or learning: they may not be 'ready' to do the job on day one. Government should not expect schools and colleges to produce the 'finished article' in those aged 16-19, but rather develop students who are willing and able to learn new concepts, knowledge and skills when they begin work or further study.
31. Life skills and employability skills are, and should be, embedded through the key stages leading up to 16-18 education. We have focused our comments below on the 16-18 stage, as this is where the most significant challenges are, but government should have a longer term, cohesive approach to life skills and employability skills.
32. However, provision is not equal across the country. For example, the lack of employer engagement in some local areas means that students are not able to access the same range of T levels as in other areas. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) report that they are keen to support industry-based learning and apprenticeships, but don't always know how. Government should better facilitate the relationship between education and employers.
33. One of the barriers some schools and colleges face is a lack of time in the post-16 curriculum to include 'life skills', such as financial literacy, oracy and digital literacy. Where this is taught, it is sometimes by non-specialists. A review should consider what the core entitlement for all learners should be in terms of life skills and employability, and how this is funded by government so that all schools and colleges are able to offer quality provision in this area.
34. A further, and more immediate, challenge is the lack of infrastructure around careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG). Many schools and colleges do this very well, but the defunding of dedicated CIAG services and advisors over the past decade has significantly impacted the provision that is available. This is particularly true of small school sixth forms, which may not have a dedicated careers advisor. This limits the advice that they are able to give, and may therefore limit the opportunities for some young people.

35. We suggest that, as part of this review, the CIAG landscape is considered, particularly the extent to which high-quality careers advisors are available in all parts of the country, and what costs would be associated with expanding that provision. Affordable options could include an in-house advisor in every school or college (or shared between a small group of local schools), who is given funded time for training and to offer CIAG.
36. It is difficult for the national curriculum or national assessments to keep up to date with latest technologies. Digital literacy should, therefore, focus on key computational thinking, building on what has been learned in earlier key stages. As far as possible, schools and colleges should have space to teach students about the latest technologies, but there should be a core syllabus of digital literacy that all young people learn by the end of compulsory schooling.
37. The decision to defund applied general qualifications (AQGs), and to replace existing courses with either T levels or alternative academic and technical qualifications (AAQs and ATQs), will be damaging to many learners, and will undermine progress in this area. ASCL is pleased that Labour has committed to a 'pause and review' of this policy if elected next year. However, awarding organisations have already done extensive work on the new alternative qualifications, and it may be too late to reverse previous decisions. The 'pause and review' of applied general defunding should feed into this wider review, with a particular emphasis on an impact assessment of whether the new qualifications will meet the needs of learners in the same way.
38. However given the immediacy of the present defunding schedule, it will be necessary to take urgent decisions about the defunding process. Waiting until the full curriculum review is established will be too late for thousands of learners. ASCL has submitted a separate paper to the Labour education team, with more detailed thoughts on how this process could be managed.
39. The review should also consider the effectiveness of the current requirement for post-16 students to resit the same Level 2 GCSEs in English and maths, if they did not achieve a Grade 4 or higher in secondary school. This model of endless resits (in which only a third of the third of students who have to resit go on to improve) is demeaning and ineffective. Instead, we have proposed a new assessment of literacy and numeracy – separate to the academic assessment of language, literature and maths – that all students could take when they are ready. This could be incorporated into, or run parallel with, both academic and technical programmes at 16-19.

G. Principle 4: A curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring every child is represented.

40. Schools and colleges have significant flexibility in the curriculum to reflect a diverse range of issues and contexts. Future iterations of the national curriculum should retain that flexibility.
41. However, schools and colleges are not always sure how to approach some sensitive and emerging topics, many of which are contested. Government guidance has not always been helpful in supporting school and college leaders in this, with some guidance being delayed, therefore impeding the ability of schools and colleges to approach certain topics.

42. Future guidance must be clear enough to safeguard and protect schools and colleges, but flexible enough for curriculum to reflect local context and need.
43. There is also a tension between the need for diversity across the curriculum and the need to teach a received canon of knowledge. This is hotly contested, and there is no single answer. It is all too easy for the curriculum to become a battleground of so-called culture wars, with ministers changing the requirements based on their own views.
44. ASCL would like to see any incoming government establish an independent curriculum review group, who would be commissioned directly by government on a periodic basis, or as needed. They would consider specific issues (such as diversity in the curriculum), as set out in a letter from the Secretary of State. The group would make recommendations to government, but ultimately the decisions would be made by government. This could operate in a similar way to the current independent STRB on teachers' pay.

H. Principle 5: An assessment system that captures the full strengths of every child and the breadth of curriculum, with the right balance of assessment methods whilst maintaining the important role of examinations.

45. ASCL is clear that any reform to Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications must be undertaken extremely cautiously. This would have a huge impact on staff workload and pupil and student wellbeing and could, if not undertaken effectively, also undermine existing relationships between employers and education. Further comments should be read with this caveat in mind.
46. The amount of assessment that is carried out, particularly at Key Stage 4, is too great, and actually undermines the breadth of the curriculum, as schools understandably feel the need to teach the syllabus, without going off topic.
47. As part of this review, we would encourage Labour to consider both academic and technical assessment across the 14-18 range, and consider the relationship between exams at 16 and exams at 18.
48. Accountability measures clearly drive behaviours in assessment. Governments must fully understand the relationship between assessment and accountability, and not try to reform one without thinking about the implications for the other. For example, Progress 8 and Ebacc drive the assessment patterns that happen in school.
49. Consecutive governments have unhelpfully focused on threshold measures (C+ under Labour, and 4+ under the Conservatives). This undermines the achievement and progress of a third of students each year. Future governments must address this as a matter of urgency to ensure that the language they use is not demeaning to a third of students, and that assessments work equally well for all students.
50. Digital innovations, using adaptive assessments, already exist, and are enjoyed and welcomed by learners. The notion that all students need to sit in an exam hall at the same time, and answer the same questions seems outdated. However, any reform must include a full and detailed equalities analysis, as not all students have access to digital devices on a daily basis. While adaptive technology has many benefits, it could inadvertently increase the disadvantage gap if this digital divide is not addressed.

51. Likewise, there is research to suggest that exams are a fairer way of assessing students than teacher assessment. Any reforms must be mindful of this research, and not risk reintroducing teacher bias. In 2020 and 2021, centre-assessed grades (CAGs) and teacher-assessed grades (TAGs), when centres were asked to grade their own students, saw a widening of the disadvantage gap. Ofqual's analysis of these years should be carefully considered when proposing any reforms.
52. These risks could be mitigated by changing the high-stakes nature of assessments and rethinking the number and nature of assessments across the 14-18 stage.
53. At ASCL we advocate a 'balanced scorecard' or 'accountability dashboard' approach, which would provide a broader evidence of a school or colleges' outcomes than is currently the case in our accountability system. This should be the sole dashboard for information, and replace the current confusing system of ASP, IDSR and the school performance website. A more balanced approach to accountability would produce, in turn, a more balanced approach to assessment.

I. Conclusion

54. We hope this paper has been helpful to all policymakers considering curriculum and assessment reform. We welcome any review into curriculum and assessment, but are always mindful of the impact on workload and wellbeing associated with it, for leaders, teachers and pupils.
55. ASCL is always happy to contribute further to any debate about curriculum and assessment, and will respond in full to any future review.

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December 2023*