

# House of Lords Committee on Education for 11-16 Year Olds: Inquiry into Education for 11-16 Year Olds

## Written evidence submission 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 24,000 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. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
2. In September 2021, ASCL published [A Great Education for Every Child](#) – our blueprint for a fairer education system. The blueprint sets out a long-term vision for how we can ensure our education system helps our most disadvantaged children and young people to succeed, and makes a series of recommendations to that end, including many of relevance to this inquiry.
3. We also published, in 2019, the [final report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the 'Forgotten Third'](#), which investigated how to improve the prospects of students who do not achieve at least a Grade 4 'standard pass' in GCSE English and maths.
4. We welcome the Committee's inquiry into secondary education. We hope this written evidence submission – which draws and expands on the two documents mentioned above, as well as a number of other documents – will prove useful to the inquiry.

### B. Key points

5. The curriculum in secondary education in England has been relatively stable over the last couple of years (notwithstanding Covid-related disruption), as the reforms of the previous decade have become embedded. ASCL broadly welcomed the changes made to the national curriculum and to qualifications in 2014. The concept of powerful disciplinary knowledge, alongside transferable life skills and personal development, is key to social mobility and social justice. A majority of secondary schools inspected by Ofsted since the pandemic have been judged as 'good' for the quality of their education.
6. However, the current national curriculum is over-crowded, with not enough time to contextualise or allow for local needs, or other important topics. This is compounded by the key secondary accountability metrics – Progress 8, Attainment 8 and Ebacc entry – which focus on a narrow range of subjects. At a time of considerable financial pressure on schools, this has meant an inevitable narrowing of the curriculum in some settings.
7. GCSEs and other level 2 qualifications work relatively well in enabling many students to demonstrate what they know and can do by the end of secondary education, and in helping schools, colleges and employers ensure students are on the right courses for further study.

8. However, we are deeply concerned about the third of students who do not achieve a Grade 4 'standard pass' in English and maths at the end of secondary school. The chances of these students achieving a pass grade by resitting post-16 is very small. Much greater thought needs to be given to these students. The 'Forgotten Third' inquiry mentioned above proposed a possible way forward.
9. Since the pandemic, the already significant gap between disadvantaged pupils and their wealthier peers has increased: this is now the largest gap in a decade. Regional variability has also increased, and there are growing concerns about provision for students with SEND.
10. Technical qualifications are available in some settings, especially FE colleges which offer 14-16 education. However, many secondary schools are unable to offer a wide range of technical or vocational qualifications for the reasons explained in paragraph 6 above.
11. Funding is essential in providing a high-quality education. There has been no net growth in school funding for 14 years, despite steeply rising costs. This significantly impacts the quality and breadth of education that secondary schools are able to provide.
12. Despite these concerns, there is much that is good about secondary education in England. Any calls for reform or change must be carefully thought through, as change destabilises the system, and creates additional costs and workload for schools.

### **C. Comments on your specific topics of interest**

#### **The range and breadth of subjects covered in the 11-16 curriculum**

13. ASCL is concerned that DfE accountability measures undermine the breadth and balance of subjects in some schools. While the national curriculum demands a broad and balanced range and breadth of subjects, the Ebacc ambition means that the range of subjects schools can afford to offer at KS4 is limited, which in turn can impact KS3 provision.
14. The content of the national curriculum is extensive, meaning there is little capacity for schools following the full national curriculum to contextualise their curriculum or add in additional topics or subjects.
15. ASCL has proposed that all state-funded schools, including academies and free schools, should follow a mandated, slimmed-down national curriculum as a common entitlement for all students. This would be reviewed by an independent body, appointed by government, at semi-regular intervals. This body would consider the range, breadth and affordability of the national curriculum, and make recommendations to government ministers.

#### **The effectiveness of the 11-16 curriculum in equipping young people with the skills they need to progress into post-16 education and employment in a future digital and green economy**

16. The 11-16 curriculum does allow good progression onto post-16 education, with most students staying in education or training post-16. However, certain groups of students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are less likely to progress onto post-16 education and are more at risk of becoming NEET. We would encourage the inquiry to consider whether the 11-16 curriculum is meeting the needs of all students equally.

17. In FE colleges, 14 to 16-year-olds can take a wide variety of subjects, including specialist skills such as engineering and construction. FE colleges are not required to follow the national curriculum, although they must teach English, maths and science to this age group. 14-16s may be full-time students at the college or take part in the college curriculum on a day or more release from their school. If the curriculum is full-time to this age group, the college must work collaboratively with the local authority.
18. There are many examples of 14-16s progressing to full-time 16-19 provision in colleges and then on to higher education and training.

### **The availability and attractiveness of technical and vocational options in the 11-16 phase**

19. Very few secondary schools are able to offer a wide range of technical and vocational subjects due to funding pressures and the impact of secondary accountability measures.
20. The attractiveness of taking these qualifications may decrease in coming years due to the government's misguided decision to defund the majority of level 3 applied general qualifications. Students will increasingly have to choose between taking three or four academic A levels or a single T level, which they may feel restricts the future career options.
21. Many FE colleges provide a day release scheme for 14-16s from their local schools to take skills qualifications at entry, level 1 or level 2. Fewer offer a full-time 14-16 provision.

### **The impact of the 11-16 system on the motivation and confidence of pupils of all abilities**

22. Performance data from KS4 and destination data shows that GCSE attainment varies between students from different backgrounds. In 2022, the gap between disadvantaged students and their wealthier peers was the largest in a decade, as was regional disparity.
23. The focus on academic subjects in the Ebacc may contribute to this, with pupils being compelled to take subjects they do not enjoy or feel motivated by. While Attainment 8 and Progress 8 encourage this take-up in a more nuanced way, the Ebacc itself is restrictive and not the right range of subjects for all young people.

### **The effectiveness of GCSEs as a means of assessing the achievements of all pupils at the end of the 11-16 phase**

24. Most GCSEs are well-designed and delivered. They have a good national and international reputation.
25. We are concerned, however, with the way in which they are used both to hold schools to account and as proxies (in the case of English and maths) for proficiency in literacy and numeracy.
26. As mentioned above, we are particularly concerned about the third of young people who do not achieve a Grade 4 in English and maths, and their routes and qualification choices post-16.

## **Alternative methods of assessment for measuring progress that could be considered either alongside or instead of GCSEs**

27. We would be cautious of making significant changes to GCSE assessment in the short-term, as the reforms made to GCSE in the last decade are only just becoming embedded.
28. However, we think there is a case for the introduction of a new qualification focused on proficiency in the crucial areas of literacy and numeracy, as proposed by the 'Forgotten Third' inquiry.

## **How the school accountability system affects the 11-16 curriculum**

29. The accountability system has a major impact on the 11-16 curriculum.
30. The secondary curriculum is not constructed in a way which enables *all* children and young people to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and to be recognised for this, and the results of students in national assessments play a disproportionate role in how schools and colleges are held to account. It is this accountability that affects the 11-16 curriculum and decisions that are made by schools.
31. It is this significant focus on high-stakes accountability at 11-16 that can lead to a distorting and narrowing of the curriculum.
32. At GCSE, most 16-year-olds undergo more than 30 hours of assessment over a four-week period. It is the emphasis that is placed on these national assessments and qualifications in our accountability system, with its reliance on performance tables which are heavily weighted towards students' performance in these assessments, that can negatively affect the curriculum choices on offer.
33. The government's ambition to achieve, by 2025, 90% of pupils studying the Ebacc performance measure subject combination will result in a reduction of curriculum choice. This accountability measure also fails to recognise the difficulty of finding sufficient teachers to teach the Ebacc subjects, particularly modern foreign languages. This puts significant strain on school leaders – particularly those leading schools in disadvantaged areas, where the teacher recruitment and retention crisis is at its most acute.
34. In ASCL's recent discussion paper on [the future of inspection](#), we welcome the focus in inspection on the curriculum – ensuring, as it does, that inspection is distinct from performance measures. However, we are concerned that curriculum expectations on schools are currently spread across a range of documents – some statutory, some non-statutory. These include the national curriculum itself, the growing number of model subject curricula produced by the DfE, and Ofsted's subject reviews. It is our strong view that the government's expectations on the curriculum should be set out, in their entirety, in the national curriculum, and that neither the government nor Ofsted should attempt to impose additional curriculum requirements or expectations on schools through non-statutory guidance.

## **The role technology can play in education in this phase, including in assessment, the personalisation of learning and reducing teachers' workload**

35. Technology undoubtedly already plays a significant role in secondary education, expedited by schools' responses to the pandemic. Technology should always be seen as tool to enhance learning and the curriculum, and not an end in its own right.

36. The use of technology in most secondary assessments is at a relatively early stage. Many of the exam boards are actively exploring ways of increasing the use of technology, such as the introduction of adaptive assessments that personalise the examining process. We must be mindful, however, that many young people still don't have everyday access to devices or unlimited access to internet data at home, and many schools are not sufficiently resourced to deliver large-scale assessments electronically.
37. ASCL would welcome the government making all educational websites, including schools' websites and intranets, zero-tariff, which would allow students and parents to access them without using data.
38. The use of generative AI has the potential to reduce teacher workload and transform assessment, though schools must always be cautious of how they use data and information about pupils.

### **How the 11-16 system could be adapted to improve the attractiveness of the teaching profession, and the recruitment, training and retention of teachers**

39. The recruitment and retention of teachers, leaders and other staff in schools and colleges is a major current concern. ASCL's [response to the recent Education Select Committee call for evidence](#) on this issue sets out our view on why this is the case, and what needs to happen urgently to improve the situation.
40. There are a number of actions which would, we believe, help to improve the attractiveness of the teaching profession. These actions sit broadly under the following (inter-related) headings:
  - Reverse the decade-long erosion of teacher and leader pay
  - Consider how teachers and leaders can be compensated to recognise the relative lack of flexibility in their roles compared with other professions
  - Focus relentlessly on ways to reduce the excessive hours worked by most teachers and leaders
  - Reduce high-stakes accountability (including through the proposals in our 'future of inspection' paper)
  - Fund schools and colleges sufficiently to deliver the services they provide
  - Re-invest in broader children's services, particularly those focused on mental health, to enable schools to focus on education and teachers to focus on teaching

### **How spending for this phase of education should be prioritised, in the context of the current fiscal climate**

41. Education funding is an essential component of providing high-quality education. Education funding should be seen as an enabler rather than a driver for how education is delivered.
42. The design of the revenue funding model for state schools in England is intended to deliver access to a basic level of education for all pupils, while also providing additional support for those who need it most (known as 'additionality').
43. ASCL welcomed the development of the distribution methodology for mainstream schools towards a national funding formula (NFF), which allocates values across a range of pupil- and school-led factors. However, the NFF works within a fixed quantum of funding and is therefore not a mechanism for securing adequate funding for all

schools. Consequently, budget planning is very often driven by financial constraint and not school improvement.

44. In the context of the national agenda for growth, education spending must be prioritised. According to the [IFS](#), school spending per pupil in England is predicted to return to 2010 levels by 2024. This means there will have been no net growth in education spending per pupil in 14 years.
45. Over the same period, we have [seen pupil:teacher ratios for the 11-16 age group increase from 14.8 to 16.7](#). The result of this is larger class sizes.
46. Available funding should always be used efficiently, in order that as much as possible is targeted at classroom spend and school improvement. However, a level of sufficiency that enables every student access to what they need to succeed should be prioritised.
47. For example, the government has set a minimum per pupil level of funding. This should equate to the basic amount allocated per pupil and not include funding for additionality, as it does in the current distribution model. What this means is that schools with lower levels of deprivation are receiving more top-up funding to achieve the minimum per pupil level than schools with high levels of deprivation. In other words, funding for additionality is subsidising core provision. This creates inequity across the system.
48. The pressure on high-needs funding across the country is now critical. We are in imminent danger of failing our most vulnerable children and young people.
49. The government's recently published SEND and AP improvement plan is welcome, but we must guard against the risk of available funding servicing historic debt, rather than being available to implement change.
50. Three-year rolling budget settlements should be available to optimise strategic financial planning and targeted school improvement.

## **D. Conclusion**

51. ASCL welcomes this wide-ranging inquiry. The scope of the inquiry means that, inevitably, we have only been able to skim over the surface of some of the significant challenges currently facing the 11-16 education system.
52. We would be delighted to expand on any of the points we have made here, and to assist the inquiry in any way that would be helpful.

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