

## The purpose of Education

### Response from the Association of School and College Leaders

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,500 heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL has members in more than 90 per cent of secondary schools and colleges of all types, responsible for the education of more than four million young people. This places the association in a unique position to consider the purpose of education from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges.
2. We want a system in which **all** children and young people achieve. We believe we can have a great education system that delivers **quality and equality** for all learners. This will involve an act of imagination, courage and collective action. Our *Blueprint for a Self-Improving System* sets out a vision for the education system in England. At its heart is capacity building – leadership capacity, pedagogical capacity and the capacity for creativity and action.
3. We welcome the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the purpose of education for children of all ages in England. Many high performing systems in the world have an explicit statement about the purposes of education. This often takes the form of a statement of the desired outcomes of education, or what society expects an educated young person to know, be able to do and to contribute to society. England does not have such a statement. Curriculum, assessment and qualifications should follow from such a statement.

#### The purpose of education for children of all ages in England

4. Our *Blueprint* proposes that the purpose of **education is for the common good**. A good education creates the social conditions that allow children and young people, both as individuals and in groups, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily. A good education system builds character and resilience.
5. An education that is for the common good has four explicit and interrelated desired outcomes:
  - To learn to know/ passing on “the best that has been thought and said”<sup>1</sup>;
  - To learn to do/ use what we know;
  - To learn to live together/ engage with the world;
  - To learn to be/ to live authentically.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. *Super, Culture and Anarchy with Friendship's Garland and Some Literary Essays*, Volume V of *The Complete Works of Matthew Arnold*, The University of Michigan Press, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> These are the 'four pillars' of UNESCO's *International Commission on Education in the 21st Century*. The Canadian Council on Learning used these pillars to create the Composite Learning Index (CLI). The CLI is Canada's annual measure of progress in lifelong learning. It is based on a combination of statistical indicators that reflect the many ways people learn, whether in school, in the home, at work or within the community.

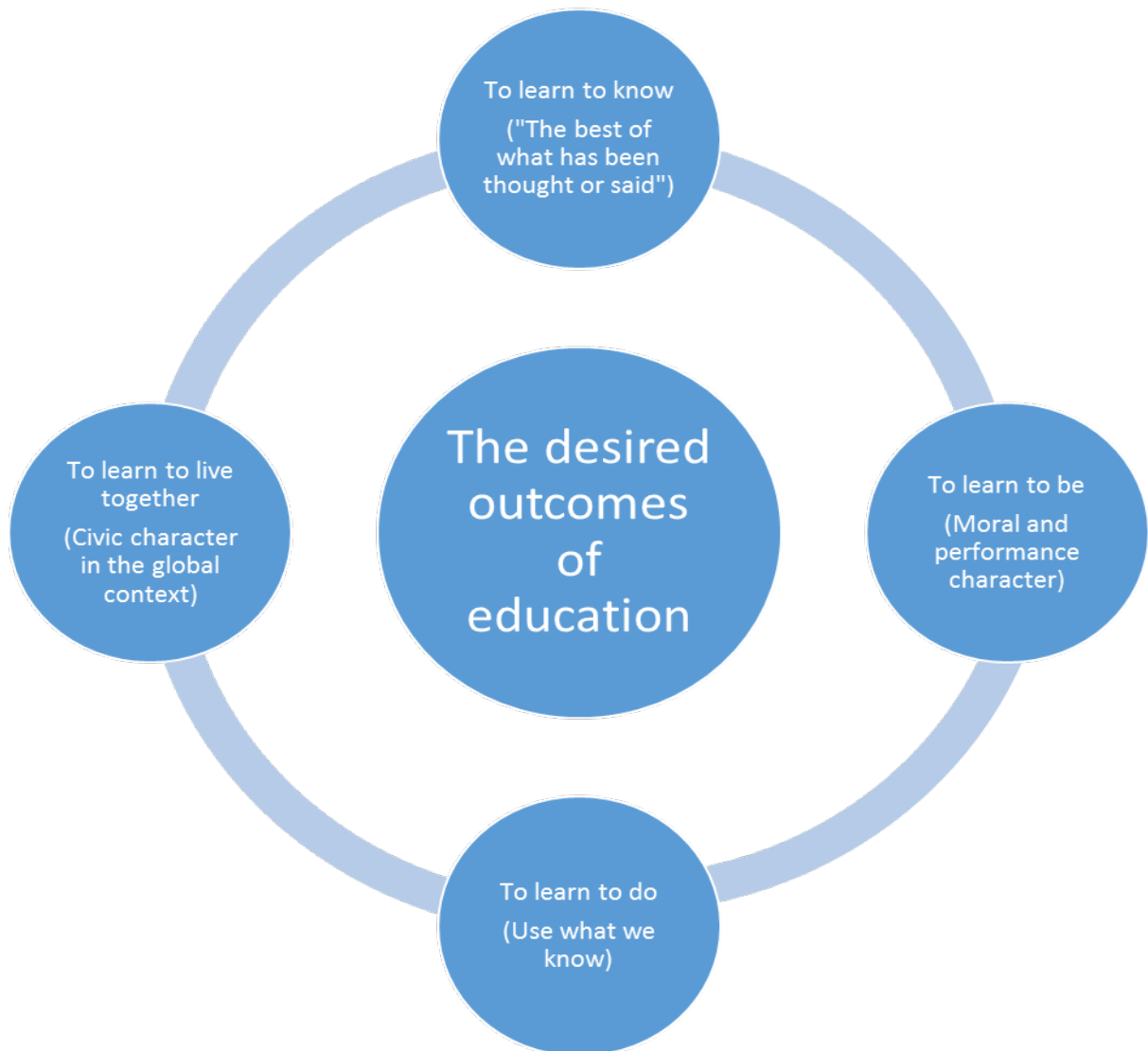
6. Debates about the outcomes of education have historically remained stuck in a sterile knowledge/ skills debate. We fundamentally reject this unhelpful binary opposition. Children do not learn skills in a vacuum. There is now a well-established body of research which shows that human cognition in which general abilities, such as learning, reasoning, problem-solving and concept formation, cannot be studied independently of 'content' or knowledge domains.<sup>3</sup>
7. In addition to what children and young people learn to know and do, schools should also enable children and young people to learn to live together and to live authentically. UNESCO's *International Commission on Education in the 21st Century* states: "There is every reason to place renewed emphasis on the moral and cultural dimensions of education. This process must begin with self-understanding through knowledge, meditation and the practice of self-criticism."
8. To this end, we would draw the committee's attention to the laudable aim of the International Baccalaureate (IB): "to develop internationally minded people who, recognising their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world". ASCL strongly endorses this as a statement of the aims of education, particularly the global focus of the IB which seeks to build intercultural understanding and global engagement.
9. ASCL is developing a profession-led policy statement of the desired outcomes of education. We are also working with Pearson to develop a conceptually systematic approach to character education which will be tested in schools. Our conceptual framework for character education draws on the Jubilee Centre's articulation of civic, moral and performance character virtues. We believe that an education that enables the development of these virtues will support children and young people to learn to live together and to live authentically.
10. The diagram on the following page brings together our thoughts about the purpose of education, the aim of education and the desired outcomes of education. It integrates the UNESCO framework with the Jubilee Centre's character education framework. It draws on the traditions of liberal education, the international dimension of the International Baccalaureate and its stated aim. It focuses on the moral and cultural aspects of education alongside the skills needed to succeed in a global economy. It promotes the values of liberty, mutual respect and tolerance in a desire to create a better world.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Young, M. et al. 2014, *Knowledge and the Future School: Curriculum and Social Justice*, Bloomsbury and Hirsch, E.D. 1988, *Cultural Literacy*, Vintage Books.

### The purpose of education:

Education is for **the common good**. A good education creates the social conditions that allow children and young people, both as individuals and in groups, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily. A good education system builds character and resilience.



### The aim of education:

"To develop internationally minded people who, recognising their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better world."

11. It is however, not sufficient to outline the purpose and desired outcomes of education without articulating a theory of learning. Education has historically been held hostage to theories and ideas about learning that often do not have a strong evidence-base or indeed any evidence base at all. As society would expect a neurosurgeon to be connected to the wider world of neurosurgery, understand the most up-to-date evidence and interrogate constantly their practice, so society must expect the same of teachers. A statement of the purpose of education must exist alongside the latest research from cognitive science related to how students learn, and connect this research to its practical implications for teaching and learning.
12. It is also not sufficient to outline the purpose and outcomes of education but retain a belief in determinism – the view that some children either by virtue of innate intelligence or background will not succeed in our education system. A fundamental principle of our *Blueprint* is that achievement can be realised **at scale** for all children and young people. We reject determinism by social background or by perceived intelligence, and we ask the Education Select Committee to do likewise.

### **Measures to evaluate the quality of education against this purpose**

13. We would like to set out two forms of evaluation. Schools and colleges need to understand their relative performance against others nationally. We also need to understand the relative performance of the English education system by comparing it to the performance of other education systems.
14. Ultimately, if education is for the common good, the final test of the purpose of our education system is the creation of greater equality and social justice.
15. The highest form of accountability is the individual's professional accountability for the quality of his or her own work and to the people who the profession serves. While this is the highest form of accountability, government has a role in defining a **slim, smart and stable public accountability framework** with a small number of ambitious measures linked to the purpose of education, including a nationally determined progress measure to incentivise improvement. Schools need to understand their relative performance nationally.
16. In a self-improving system, governing boards could develop measures for each of the school or group of schools' strategic priorities underpinned by the four outcomes of education. These would include but not be constrained by the government's measures.
17. Governors and leaders should be explicit and eloquent about their vision and the measures that will evidence success. Innovations in the use of open data may help to empower parents and the community. It should be increasingly a parental and community expectation that schools, trusts and federations provide their data in open, accessible and meaningful ways.
18. The accountability framework must be designed in a way that gives school leaders confidence that they can design a curriculum which meets the needs of students rather than one that conforms to misaligned performance measures. Alongside the small, stable core of national measures, school leaders should be able to choose or design appropriate metrics for each of the four outcomes. These would include:

- the 'headline' measures, reflecting national priorities;
  - 'subsidiary' - broader data still collated and published by government but not part of the headline set;
  - 'third party' such as that provided by FFT and other providers; and
  - 'bespoke' reflecting key priorities in the school.
19. Such measures will then be genuinely aligned to what is valued and less prone to distortion because of the range. School leaders should then look at the distributions of all measures, not merely the thresholds.
20. Work is currently being done on whether what the literature refers to as 'non-cognitive skills' can be measured and how strong a predictor these are for a wide range of life outcomes. OECD research cites a "well-accepted taxonomy of non-cognitive skills called the Big Five...: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism."<sup>4</sup> Of these, conscientiousness is described as grit, perseverance, ambition; and agreeableness is defined as empathy, perspective, co-operation etc. The OECD cites Roberts, a leading personality psychologist "who defines personality (non-cognitive) traits (skills) as follows: Personality traits are the relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that reflect the tendency to respond in certain ways under certain circumstances. (Roberts, 2009, 140)."
21. The OECD promotes a "Task-Based Framework" for identifying and measuring these non-cognitive skills. They reflect that results from assessments that rely on self-reporting contain an in-built bias. It is worth considering and evaluating these instruments of assessment in relation to their use in schools. However, we would caution that not everything that counts can be measured. We are definitely not advocating the introduction of national regimes of testing "non-cognitive skills." We are however advocating that schools themselves may want to consider sensitive and proportionate use of assessments that provide evidence of success against their own published vision, aims and desired outcomes.
22. Just as schools and colleges need to understand their relative performance nationally, so we need to understand the relative performance of our education system against other systems. We recognise and accept that no methodology designed to compare countries with completely different cultures and education systems will ever be perfect. International rankings are not exact and are over-used. The use of international rankings needs to take confidence intervals into account and we should use such rankings to build public confidence in the education system, not to erode it. International rankings should never be used to denigrate schools and educators. The deliberate building of public confidence in the education system is in fact a feature of many high performing countries.

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<sup>4</sup> Kautz, T et al., 2015, *Fostering and Measuring Skills: Improving Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skills to Promote Lifetime Success*, OECD.

<b>To learn to know</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A progress measure.</li> <li>• An attainment measure.</li> <li>• Percentage of pupils achieving a C grade or above in English and maths.</li> </ul> <p>Since our young people live in an increasingly global society, we believe these national measures need to sit alongside international measures.</p>
<b>To learn to do</b>	A national destinations measure
<b>To learn to live together</b>	Locally defined by schools/ groups of schools – could include participation in civic character education and international mindedness for example, volunteering, social responsibility projects etc.
<b>To learn to be</b>	Locally defined by schools/ groups of schools – could include assessments of <i>moral and performance character education</i> , for example mental toughness questionnaire, learning through sports and/or culture etc.

### How well the current education system performs

23. The evidence supports a judgement that the English Education system is a **good system on a journey to great** as evidenced by PISA and the McKinsey Report, *How the World's Most Improved School System Keep Getting Better*. However, it is not yet an *excellent* system.
24. A selective analysis of England's performance on the PISA tests administered in 2012 across 34 OECD jurisdictions shows that:
- We are 26th in the table for maths, with confidence intervals between 23 and 31 position – this is average, with no relative or absolute change from 2009;
  - We are also average for reading;
  - We are in line broadly with France, Denmark, Czech Republic, Ireland, New Zealand and Norway;
  - We are above average for science and the proportion of top performers (level 5 or 6) is 11 percent compared to the OECD average of 8 percent;
  - We are above average for attitudes to school and behaviour;
  - 84 percent of our students said they are rarely or never disturbed in maths lessons (OECD average is 78 percent);
  - Our students are more positive about maths than the OECD average;
  - Children of immigrant parents perform better than the OECD average.
25. We would urge the committee not simply to ask how well our current education system performs, but what interventions are needed if we are to aspire to excellence. Performance measures in themselves will not enable the system to improve.

26. The development of a clear statement of purpose supported by the desired outcomes of education that is understood, accepted and promoted by society is a first step. Building public confidence in the education system is a necessary second step. Setting out measures to evaluate the education system against the core purpose and outcomes is third step. All of these are necessary but none are sufficient.
27. We also need to understand the evidence of how systems improve and to use this in our policy making to leverage improvement towards our goals. School-based decision making is already a strong feature of education policy. We are on a journey of shaping professional practice through initial teacher education and professional learning reforms. Our next step is for education policy to emphasise innovation and learning through peers: enabling collaborative practices, decentralising pedagogy, creating career pathways across schools. This is best achieved through groups of schools with hard governance structures. This is the way to unleash greatness in our education system towards the ultimate purpose of the common good.

### **Conclusion**

28. ASCL believes that there should be a national statement about the purpose of education, the aims of education and the desired outcomes of education - what society expects an educated young person to know, be able to do and to contribute to the common good in our global society. This statement should have cross-party political support and outlive the term of parliament. It should be a long-term vision for education in England. Political programmes of reform, in particular curriculum, assessment and qualification reform, should follow from such a statement.
29. ASCL believes that the statement should draw on the traditions of liberal education, the evidence of the impact of the development of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills or character education, on a wide range of life outcomes. We must pay attention to the moral, cultural and character aspects of education alongside the skills needed to succeed in a global economy. We believe that the purpose and aims of education must be underpinned by the values of liberty, mutual respect and tolerance in a desire to create a better world.
30. We would be pleased to work with government to develop such a statement.