Future Perfect Commission – call for evidence

Response of the Confederation of School Trusts

Introduction

The Confederation of School Trusts (CST) is the national organisation and sector body representing 100 percent of the national trusts and twenty percent of all academy schools. This places CST in a strong position to consider the call for evidence from the viewpoint of the system's leaders in self-governing organisations.

We are completely apolitical. We work with political parties and politicians across the spectrum to advance education for the public benefit.

We believe that education has intrinsic value in giving all people access to the common body of knowledge we share. The true value of education is in the inherent worth of what pupils learn and their entitlement to it, regardless of race, class or special needs and anything that might or might not happen to them in the future.

CST welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence. We have constructed our response to describe the status quo and then to set out what we think a Future Perfect system would be like, informed as far as possible by the best evidence we have.

1. Curriculum

Status quo

There is an unhelpful, divisive and ill-tempered argument about knowledge and skills. This debate is driven by personal prejudices and legacy beliefs rather than evidence-informed professional debate. In fact, education institutions (including schools) are the repositories and guardians of our collective knowledge and the intellectual life of a nation.

We would refer the Commission to Michael Young's eloquent articulation of three futures.[1]

Future one: The curriculum is inherited from the 19th Century. Knowledge is treated as 'fixed' – to be transmitted to students capable of acquiring it. In this approach the role of the teacher is the deliverer of static bodies of learning to future generations. Its model is 'compliance' and 'transmission.'

Future two: Future two reacts against this thesis on the basis that it is elitist and removed from the lives of young people today, particularly in the digital age. Advocates of future two believes

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[1] Young, M.; D. Lambert and C. Roberts (2015) *Knowledge and the Future School: Curriculum and Social Justice*, Bloomsbury.

knowledge is changeable and the curriculum should be constructed from and for the experiences of learners in the real world.

Future three: Rejects futures one and two. Knowledge is the creation of specialist communities, bound by epistemic rules. Subjects are the most reliable tools we have for enabling students to acquire knowledge. Rather than treating knowledge as a given, it is understood as fallible, contestable and provisional. The curriculum is therefore the *best knowledge we have*.

Future Perfect

Future three offers a way of aligning the way that teachers make use of strong subject knowledge within their subjects to the idea of powerful knowledge accumulating for students across their experience of the whole curriculum. This model emphasises 'powerful knowledge' – not as a 'given', as with Future one – but as 'fallible and 'always open to change through the debates and research of particular specialist groups.' This model helps pupils develop powerful knowledge by deliberately taking them away from their own experiences by introducing them to powerful knowledge which is also cultural capital.

In Young's analysis, skills are the application of knowledge – it is a serious error to assume that skills can be taught independently of knowledge. One cannot be 'creative' in the absence of thinking about something. For example, "I am unlikely to be able to be creative in mathematics - my mathematical knowledge is simply not secure enough."

In any case, as Irenka Suto has shown,[2] a focus on so-called 21st century skills is entirely misjudged – for a start many of the 'skills' identified are in fact ancient, ubiquitous and enigmatic.

In an uncertain world, it is essential that we equip our young people with the best knowledge we have. Of course we need our young people to be literate and numerate. But this cannot be the sole purpose of education. Education must introduce young people to the joy of the best that has been thought and said - that which has endured - and helps to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement. This entitlement should not be limited on grounds of perceived ability, ethnicity, class or gender.

As Ben Newmark says so beautifully: "Our curriculum should whisper to our children, 'you belong. You did not come from nowhere. You are one of us. All this came before you, and one day you too might add to it.'"[3]

All our children need to hear that whisper.

2. Assessment

Status quo

At the moment we have an assessment system which is used for multiple purposes – to award qualifications, judge schools, tell us whether the system is improving and even drive changes in the education system. There is a tendency for politicians to use assessment and more specifically qualifications to drive change. Our assessment system is therefore associated with high stakes accountability and an increase in regulation and control.

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[2] Suto, I. (2013) '21st Century skills: Ancient, ubiquitous, enigmatic?' Cambridge Assessment, January, available at: https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/130437-21st-century-skills-ancient-ubiquitous-enigmatic-.pdf (Accessed on: 1st August 2019).
[3] Newmark, B. (2019) 'Why Teach?' *Bennewmark Blogpost*, 10th February, available at: https://bennewmark.wordpress.com/ (Accessed on: 1st August 2019).

We are also (at least potentially) over-reliant on technological solutions to assessment. The problem with relying on 'ed tech' is that it is hard to know whether attractive-looking platforms are designed using good assessment principles or are underpinned by an integrated model of design, development, administration and evaluation.

Unlike most developed economies, statutory schooling ends at age 16. It is the case that the statutory participation age was raised to 18, but this requires participation in education, *employment or training*. There is no requirement for young people to remain in school beyond the age of 16. While this is the case, we should not consider ending formal national assessment at age 16. If we did, some young people would leave school with no formal qualifications. This would have a potentially harmful impact on the most disadvantaged.

We would respectfully suggest that the question posed by the Commission about whether assessment fails one in three children is not the right question. Our national assessments do not fail children. Arbitrary thresholds of a 'good pass' mean that a third of children fall below what the government has determined to be an acceptable standard. This is not a failure of the assessment process or the qualification – but rather a consequence of the policy we have designed.

In England, we have arguably reversed the sequence of curriculum – assessment – qualifications. Instead, right now qualifications drive assessment which in turn determines the curriculum. Curriculum must always come first.

Future Perfect

Assessment must be in the service of curriculum aims and the purposes of education. Before we can answer the question of how the assessment system can be improved, we must understand curriculum and the purposes of education.

We must ensure that assessments in our Future Perfect state are both valid and reliable and that they have good explanatory, causal and predictive power. In order for this to happen, we need more educationalists to know and understand assessment. And we need to ensure assessment specialists work with 'ed tech' to ensure technologies of assessment are underpinned by assessment expertise and an integrated model of design, development, administration and evaluation.

We should consider reducing the weight of the multiple purposes we put on our qualifications.

Finally, as Tim Oates exhorts us, let's *flood* the world with good questions.[4] In no small part this will mean young people will not be able to predict which questions are coming up in tests. Let's enable our young people to practice the hard questions - to do *more* physics, chemistry, biology, English, maths, history, geography and so on.

In this way we can enhance assessment. We can improve equity, attainment, enjoyment, progression and labour market mobility.

3. Accountability

Status quo

The term 'middle tier' is a legacy term that is peculiarly ill-defined. Oversight of the school system in England has changed significantly in recent years. Previously, local authorities had oversight of the local school system and, since 2006, powers to intervene in underperforming schools. But the historic roles of local of employer, improver and regulator of maintained schools are in conflict. This

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[4] Oates, T. (2017) 'The future of assessment' *Evidence Based Education Podcast*. 3rd June Available at: https://evidencebased.education/podcast-tim-oates-future-assessment/ Accessed: 1st August 2019.

led to the rather odd situation where the local authority exercised the improvement role and then intervention into itself and its own improvement activity.

2014 saw the introduction of regional school commissioners (RSCs) to exercise oversight over the rapidly growing sector of legally autonomous school trusts. The RSC role was expanded in 2015 to include responsibility for approving the conversion of underperforming-maintained schools into academies and deciding on their sponsors. Local authorities, Ofsted, the RSCs - and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) - now form part of an increasingly complicated and expensive system of oversight, regulation and inspection.

It is therefore necessary to talk about system governance rather than just accountability. The question that we would encourage the commission to ask is not what accountability do we need but what forms of system governance will support an intelligent and self-improving system?

Future Perfect

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. We need leaders who can build the professional capacity of all staff to be accountable for the quality of education and to role model the values and virtues society wants to pass on to our children.[5]

Accountability is not enough. We must do good – in other words we have to be consciously ethical in our professional behaviours.[6]

There *is* a role for the state, simply because of the amount of public money spent, to determine a slim, smart and stable set of accountability measures. These should incentivise the policies and behaviours that contribute to a high-quality education for all.

There is also a clear role for local government, not as a provider of schools but as a democratic body; using their strategic capability and capacity to support the local education system and exercising statutory scrutiny of the local system, similar to the way local government exercises oversight of the local health system.

Particularly in a system of high levels of organisational autonomy, it is essential to have both an independent national inspectorate and regulator. The role of the independent inspectorate, as now, should be to reach a judgement on the quality of education that a school provides at a moment in time. The role of the regulator is to intervene where the quality of education is not good enough.

We must never conflate peer review with independent external inspection. Peer review is an important improvement process – it is not an inspection process.

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[5] Robinson, V. et al (2009*) School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why Best Evidence*, Ministry of Education, New Zealand ; Hitt, D; and P. Tuckett (2016) 'Systematic Review of Key Leader Practices Found to Influence Student Achievement: A Unified Framework' in *Review of Educational Research* 86 (2), pp. 531–569; and Leithwood, K., A. Harris and D. Hopkins (2019) 'Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited' in *School Leadership & Management*.
[6] *Navigating the Educational Moral Maze: The Final Report of the Ethical Leadership Commission* January 2019, ASCL

4. Schools and society

Status quo

Currently, as the most recent report from the Education Policy Institute[7] shows, progress on closing the gap between the most disadvantaged young people and their peers, has stalled. There is too much variation in our system and insufficient attention to evidence.

Collaboration is often loose and ill-defined – both in terms of how its purposes and impact on the substance of education.

Future Perfect

The best way for our education system to enable more equitable outcomes in our diverse country is to ensure that the curriculum is the guarantor of equity, giving everyone what they need to be successful taking children and young people beyond their lived experience. We must move from a mind-set driven purely by 'interventions' to a mind-set driven by the strongest curricula.

Collaboration is essential to improvement. The basis for this must be schools working together in strong and sustainable groups. Evidence is beginning to show that the purposes and impact of collaboration are clearer in hard accountability structures.[8]

5. Policy

Status quo

Policy development and implementation can be improved by changing the relationship between the profession and the state. A mature sector works with the state in a strong strategic relationship to determine policy which focuses on the substance of education. It is not driven by adult or 'producer-interest.'

Policy making should never be removed from politics. In a democracy, parliament and the government of the day have a democratic mandate to set policy and direction. If policy is removed from politics, politicians may lose interest in schools and this could result in poor funding settlements.

We do however need a longer-term plan for education that provides relative stability across democratic cycles. This is achievable not by removing education policy from the political cycle but by building a consensus informed by the evidence and a common understanding of the purposes of education.

Future Perfect

A mature profession builds consensus through evidence-informed policy development. In a Future Perfect state, a strong professional infrastructure should exist in which the unions, sector bodies and professional body work together in a mature relationship with government and parliament.

We should celebrate the uniqueness of our education system and the fact that school trusts, as legally independent entities are well-placed to drive innovation and quality. But this must be

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[7] Hutchinson, J. et al (2019) *Education in England: Annual Report 2019.* Education Policy Institute.
[8] Chapman, C. D. Muijs and J. MacAllister (2011) *A study of the impact of school federation on student outcomes* , National College for School Leadership. And Armstrong, P. (2015) *Effective school partnerships and collaboration for school improvement: a review of the evidence*. Department for Education.

disciplined innovation to ensure that our complex adaptive system of schools in England is both agile and intelligent.

A system can only be self-improving if it is both capable of innovating but also capable of evaluating innovation and scaling up quality. The role of the Education Endowment Foundation needs to become both the guardian of practice trials in relation to what works, and the evaluator of system innovation.

6. Teaching profession

Status quo

Up until recently, we have not agreed on a body of knowledge that supports teaching as a profession. Teacher training has not been underpinned consistently by an agreed body of knowledge and the ethical formation of the teacher as a professional during initial teacher education is under-developed. There is significant variation in the development of teachers post-qualifying and not all teachers have access to the type of activities and processes most likely to impact positively on their practice and pupil outcomes. The publication of the Early Career Framework supported by a body of knowledge and evidence affirmed by the Education Endowment Foundation is a significant step to correct this, as is the establishment of a professional body for teachers.

The concept of teacher autonomy is unhelpful. Professionals cannot and should not act autonomously without regard to the evidence and the body of knowledge that informs current practice.

Professional development in England is misunderstood and largely counter to the international research on effective professional development.

Future Perfect

There should be a well-established body of knowledge which supports initial teacher education, induction and post-qualifying professional development. There should be broad agreement about what teachers should know and be able to do and ambitious curricula through initial training and early career development.

Post-qualifying, schools and trusts should harness the best evidence-informed processes and practices to create professional development curricula in which teachers and leaders learn together. Professional development that is carefully designed and has a strong focus on pupil outcomes has a significant impact on student achievement. Design elements include the duration and rhythm of effective support, alignment of processes, content and activities, collaboration and external facilitation. [9]

An ethical framework should be embedded at all stages of teacher development. A strong professional body should set professional standards.

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[9] Cordingley, P., Higgins, S., Greany, T., Buckler, N., Coles-Jordan, D., Crisp, B., Saunders, L., Coe, R. *Developing Great Teaching: Lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development*. Teacher Development Trust. 2015. And

7. Priorities for the Future Perfect system

Leaders should:

- Build an evidence-informed consensus about curricula that drive equity through lifting children and young people beyond their lived experience and introducing them to powerful knowledge.

- Build the professional capacities of staff (professional development).

- Build instructional leadership to improve the quality of education.

The state should:

- Set the direction.

- Ensure every school is in a strong and sustainable group in a hard governance structure.

- Fund the system in a sufficient, equitable and sustainable way.

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