

Campaign for Real Education

www.cre.org.uk

“Freedom to teach, freedom to learn, freedom to choose”

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Newsletter

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01. Editorial

Nadhim Zahawi, England's new education secretary, had little new to say in his short speech to the Conservative Party Conference of 2021. He was wise to be brief. The position he has taken over has, for decades, been defined by failure. From his standpoint, the less said, the better.

<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/nadhim-zahawi-full-text-of-tory-conference-2021-speech/>

If government departments are judged by their results rather than by their rhetoric, Education stands out as the greatest failure.

The rhetoric, for example, points to ever-improving 'examination' results. The reality, though, is somewhat different.

Year-on-year grade inflation has reached unprecedented levels. Last summer, 45 per cent of A-Level candidates were awarded A* or A grade via teacher assessments.

In contrast, until 1982, 'norm referencing' had kept the top grade pass rate below 10 per cent. Similar grade inflation can be seen at GCSE. The percentage achieving the top grade in 1988 was 8.6 per cent. This has now risen to 28.9 per cent.

The corruption of the examination currency extends, also, to university degrees. Until the mid-1990s around 7 per cent of students were awarded Firsts. This had risen to 30 per cent by 2019.

Judged by these examination outcomes our young people have never been better educated. It allowed Zahawi to assert to his Conference that our teachers are "brilliant".

He also spoke about unleashing the "brilliance of the young people of this country." This shallow rhetoric recalled the claim made by the head of government's examinations' watchdog, Ofqual, to The Sunday Times, that, "All our kids are brilliant."

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/schools-fear-chaos-over-tough-a-levels-twk5q906r>

The most authoritative international measure of pupil attainment – the OECD's triennial PISA tests - comes to a rather different conclusion about the performance of UK pupils. Although slightly improved, on the latest test [2018] our 15-year-olds trail up to three years behind the world's top performing education systems in mathematics and do not make the top ten in any of the three subject areas assessed – Literacy, Mathematics and Science.

Matters may be worse than they seem. The Guardian newspaper has reported possible malpractice in the selection of the UK pupils who are allowed to sit the tests. 9.3 per cent of pupils in Scotland were withdrawn from the most recent tests [2018] compared to an international average of 1.7 per cent.

A parallel filtering out of lower achieving pupils appears to have happened in England and Wales.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/apr/22/maths-scores-in-world-education-rankings-inflated-for-england-and-wales-study>

The new education secretary has a mountain to climb in terms of restoring educational attainment. He has much to learn. Facing up to some realities would be a useful first step. Not all of our teachers are “brilliant” as he claims and, although none should ever be written off, “brilliance” is not a characteristic of all our young people.

His cloak of humility is unconvincing and unnecessary. “With a name like Zahawi,” he told his Conference, “I can’t claim that my ancestors fought at the Battle of Hastings. I was born in Baghdad, in Saddam’s Iraq and grew up there until my parents fled when I was 11.”

He was, in fact, quite a posh boy and benefitted from a privileged private education for most of his school years, before attending the prestigious University College London. Nor was he quite so detached from the Normans and the Battle of Hastings as he suggests.

The Normans played a prominent part in setting up the crusader states of the Middle East. One of these states, the Principality of Antioch, included part of modern day Syria - not so far from Zahawi’s place of birth in Iraq. A dash of Norman DNA would certainly help him in the educational battles that lie ahead.

Chris McGovern
Chairman

02. Whatever Happened to the World's Best Education System?

The question above was asked in December 2021 by the Finnish journalist, Pekka Vanttinen, writing for Euractiv, a pan-European media network.

https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/whatever-happened-to-the-worlds-best-education-system/

He points to a recent survey by the Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health [Soste]. It indicates that Finland “has seen its level of education among young people compared to 38 OECD countries drop to mid-table.”

It seems that the country's education system is in a state of stagnation. Many 20 to 24 year-olds, currently entering the labour market, are at the same educational level as the 60 to 64 age group who are retiring from it.

Both age groups have significant numbers who have not progressed beyond basic compulsory education, concluding at age 16.

In September 2021 the Finnish government responded by extending compulsory schooling to the age of 18. Pupils will choose either an academic or a vocational pathway during these final two years.

The Soste survey results come as something of a surprise. Belief in the excellence of Finnish education is deeply ingrained.

It is widely lauded, not least by the UK's educational establishment, as a beacon of excellence for a fully child-centred approach to schooling. Under this headline, for example, of November 2019:

Top of the class: Labour seeks to emulate Finland's school system

it was described as an education “nirvana” by The Guardian newspaper.

The success of Finnish schools was built, however, on more traditional, teacher-led, classrooms. Over the past couple of decades they have moved to more child-centred, personalised and digitalised learning.

This became entrenched in 2016 when the government decided on a new curriculum and on a full commitment to digital technology. Extra funding was provided to train teachers in how to use it.

The new curriculum introduced phenomenon-based learning strategies. These encourage children to become more responsible for their own learning, partly through group work and discussion. Teachers act as process managers of the learning process.

A study from Helsinki University by Aino Saarinen has concluded that this new approach hinders student learning. It goes some way to explaining the country's decline from the highest reaches of the OECD's PISA tables of educational attainment for 15 year-olds.

In the most recent tests [2018] it fell to 16th position in mathematics. It may also explain why Finland has the widest gender gap in literacy among the 79 participating countries. Girls well out-perform boys.

<https://yle.fi/news/3-10514984>

Saarinen has concluded that her research indicates that Finland's older and more traditional curriculum gave better results but that in our digital age a return to it will not be possible.

That, however, is not the view of the software development Mughals of Silicon Valley in California. They are increasingly sending their own children to Waldorf schools that greatly restrict the use of digital technology.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/06/07/waldorf-schools-teach-without-technology-heres-what-it-is-like.html>

03. The UK - the World's Big-Spenders on Education

The UK is amongst the world's big spenders on education. Using OECD data, Statista, Germany's authoritative data company, reports that in 2018 we disbursed 6.1 per cent of our GDP on education. This was 27 per cent more than the OECD average.

<https://www.statista.com/chart/15434/the-countries-spending-the-most-on-education/>

This slumped to 4.9 per cent in 2019 but was still above the EU 27, on 4.7 per cent.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1073151/education-spending-in-eu-countries/>

Much has been made in recent months of a shortfall in Covid catch-up funding for schools. The government's commitment of an extra £3bn was well below the £15bn demanded by Sir Kevan Collins, the education recovery commissioner for England. It led to his resignation and to howls of protest from the educational establishment.

The CRE has long pointed out, however, that if spending, alone, could solve the problem of educational under-achievement, the problem would have been solved long ago.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, between 1953 and 2009 the UK increased educational expenditure by around 900 per cent in real terms.

<https://ifs.org.uk/bns/bn43.pdf>

Educational attainment, however, went backwards. The OECD has reported that, with the possible exception of the USA, we are the only country in the developed world in which grandparents out-perform their grandchildren in the basic employment skills of literacy and numeracy.

It is extraordinary that, in comparative terms, we achieved a great more when we spent a great deal less.

A per-head decrease in pupil-spending of under 10 per cent in the decade since 2009 was massively off-set by the spending increases of earlier decades.

Even in the middle of the last decade – the period of reduced spending - we were second only to the USA, amongst developed countries, in terms of spending per pupil.

<https://www.statista.com/chart/15404/us-outspends-other-developed-nations-in-the-classroom/>

Rather than calling for large spending increases, Sir Kevin Collins and the educational establishment should be asking why our schooling is so expensive and such poor value for money compared to many other countries around the world.

Within Europe, for example, we spend over 50 per cent more per pupil than Estonia but on the latest OECD PISA tests rankings [2018], we trail a long way behind:

- ◆ Mathematics: UK 17th Estonia 8th
- ◆ Science: UK 15th Estonia 5th
- ◆ Literacy: UK 15th Estonia 5th

<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cmd>

Any extra school funding in the UK should go to support the re-training of teachers in the use of more traditional, didactic, teacher-led, methodologies. Another priority should be the provision of a programme of adult literacy and numeracy.

Too many under-privileged parents are also under-educated adults. If we wish to narrow the post-Covid attainment gap between children of the well-off and children of the poor, we need to do some educational repair work with parents.

04. 'Wear a Skirt to School Day' in Scotland

Castleview Primary School in Edinburgh recently asked its boys to come to school wearing a skirt. This was intended to support Spain's *Wear a Skirt to School Day*.

Last year, a boy in a Spanish school had been expelled for wearing a skirt in defiance of school rules. Castleview stated that its intention is for "our school to be inclusive and promote equality."

One of its teachers explained that pupils had been "learning about the importance of breaking down gender stereotypes" and "we'd love everyone to get involved." The school has claimed, rather disingenuously, that its show of solidarity for events in Spain was pupil-generated.

In a statement quoted in news reports in the UK and in a number of countries overseas, the CRE observed that adults were 'foisting their own anxieties on to children', who should simply be taught to treat others as they would want to be treated themselves.

<https://news-24.fr/lecole-ecossaise-demande-aux-garcons-et-aux-enseignants-de-porter-des-jupes-pendant-une-journee-dessine-flak/>

Neil Oliver, the well-known Scottish TV presenter and journalist, told *The Sunday Times*:

Education standards in Scotland are falling faster than a piano tipped out of a window and yet, rather than focus on giving pupils the skills they need in life, agitators, grifters and troublemakers prefer petty virtue-signalling at children's expense.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: leave the children alone.

05. Michael Rosen, the Guardian & Ofsted's Lack of Humanity

The children's author and poet, Michael Rosen, has a regular slot in the Guardian Newspaper in a section entitled, Letter from a curious parent.

His contribution on December 4th 2021 was headed, "Dear Nadhim Zahawi, please sort out Ofsted's lack of humanity. There's no excuse."

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/dec/04/dear-nadhim-zahawi-please-sort-out-ofsteds-lack-of-humanity-theres-no-excuse>

For all of his saint-like qualities, Rosen can be a bit of a moaner. His latest complaint is about Ofsted which, along with league tables and SATs results, he regards as a triumvirate of oppression.

Here we are, in the midst of two crises threatening humanity: disease and climate change, and the best we can come up with for schools is the authoritarian triumvirate

He seems to have overlooked the fact that, along with GCSEs and A-Levels, SATs were ditched in 2020 and 2021.

Nor was it very fair to attack Ofsted on the basis of grumble from the head of Lancaster Royal Grammar that specific reference to Covid was not made in its recent report on the school. The school's website carries this headline:

"Pupils Flourish at Lancaster Royal Grammar School" Ofsted

Tens of thousands of schools around the country plaster much the same Ofsted report boasting on signs at the school entrance and in their promotional literature.

This is hardly a surprise since, far from being the policing ogre describe by Rosen, Ofsted is, largely, a compliant partner of the educational Blob's propaganda machine.

How else are we to explain the fact that 86 per cent of schools these days are graded 'good' or 'outstanding'?

<https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2020/10/30/ofsted-inspections-illustrate-high-proportion-of-good-or-outstanding-schools/>

Whilst there are always exceptions, the assertions made by Rosen are absurd. The main Ofsted shortcoming is its failure to be tough enough to highlight how the poor attainment of under-privileged children cannot be explained away simply by social background.

There are plenty of impoverished children around the world who out-perform our most privileged. Rosen needs to consider why this is the case.

Any lack of humanity lies not at the door of Ofsted but at the door of an educational establishment that, through self-interest and brain-washing, refuses to open its eyes.

06. Summer 2022 - Does More Examination Chaos Lies Ahead?

It is difficult to imagine that in 2022 the public 'examination' system could be as chaotic as it has been over the past couple of years. The seeds of discord, however, have already been sown. Two years of hyper-grade inflation based, effectively, on teacher predictions – akin to football managers predicting their team's results - has caused damage that cannot be repaired.

The government made a serious error of judgement by deciding that predictions would be certified by the boards as 'examination passes'. They were no such thing. Had there been a shred of honesty or integrity within the system, they would have been certified as what they were – 'teacher predictions'.

Schools spend a lot of time preaching to children the importance of honesty. When, however, as with public 'examinations', honesty is not convenient, it is ditched. This sets a terrible example to young people.

The 2022 cohort of exam pupils are about to pay the price for this dishonesty and for the 2020 and 2021 exam results shenanigans. Will Hazell, education correspondent of *inews*, broke the story in an important 'exclusive' on Dec 3rd 2021.

An exam board source told him that there would be a "pretty significant dial down from the grading in 2021." The DfE had already announced in September, that by 2023 grades will be dialled back to pre-pandemic levels. The number of top A-Level grades, for example, is expected to fall by around 10 per cent this summer.

The boards fear a backlash when pupils see the unfairness of results being based on the year in which an exam was sat. "We are worried about that... we don't know what we'll see on the day. That's something we're very concerned about," *inews* was told.

The genie of grade inflation is out of the bottle and cannot be put back. The only credible way forward is to scrap the current exam system altogether. Through its dishonesty the government has made a rod for its own back. Sir Walter Scott was right:

*Oh what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive*

07. No Comment

SNP ministers have rejected demands to scrap a “creepy and intrusive” school survey that asks children as young as 14 for intimate details about their sex lives.

Daily Telegraph 7.12.2021

Parents cry because they can't provide food.

BBC News 6.11.21

Universities plan a permanent move away from traditional exams after the pandemic in favour of more online assessments, a report reveals.

Daily Mail 29.11.2021

The head of the Ofsted schools inspectorate has said England risks a repeat of cases such as Arthur Labinio-Hughes, the six-year-old abused and murdered in his own home last year, if schools and social services are disrupted by future lockdowns.

The Guardian 7.12.2021

School shooting suspect's parents 'bought him gun for Christmas and ignored warnings'

Mirror 5.12.2021