

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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Editorial

This is the hundredth edition of the CRE newsletter since the organization was set up back in 1987. It was, principally, a concern about the dilution of educational standards that brought us into being. Under the redoubtable leadership of the late Nick Seaton, the Campaign soon took root. It provided a much-needed voice of opposition to fashionable but failing orthodoxies promoted by the educational establishment, the so-called ‘Blob’.

The governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major recognised the CRE as expressing the views of many parents and, in those days, a sizeable group of teachers. A schools’ minister chaired a CRE national conference and a secretary of state for education announced to a CRE fringe meeting at his annual party conference that, ‘Your time has come.’ He was, sadly, mistaken.

Whilst prime minister John Major publicly thanked members of the CRE for the value of their work, the overall direction of travel for education was in another direction. As resistance fighters the CRE has over the decades been able to expose the tide of educational self-destruction, but it has been unable to halt it. If you seek a monument to the success of the educational Blob, look around you.

Here, for example, is the most up-to-date information from the authoritative OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). New data is due in December.

It shows the performance of UK 15-year-olds position internationally (bearing in mind some increase in the number of participating countries):

	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2015
Literacy	8	10	16	23	21	22
Maths	no test	17	23	26	24	27
Science	no test	no test	13	14	19	15

The unequivocal, if relative, decline in standards of achievement is as stark as it is regrettable. The educational establishment, however, wants us to believe that, for all that it claims to be starved of funds, standards have never been higher. It is aided and abetted by politicians who point to public examination results and Ofsted inspection reports as proof that standards are superior to what they have ever been.

In his recent speech to the Conservative Party Conference the Education Secretary, Gavin Williams, boasted of ‘an incredible story to tell about what we are doing for young people.’ He is new in the job but already, self-evidently, he has been captured by DfE officials. The truly ‘incredible story’, and the one he did chose not to mention, was the pitifully low ‘pass’ mark required to ‘pass’ public exams these days – just 14% percent for GCSE mathematics. In more successful education systems around the world such marks would be seen as verifying incompetence rather than competence in a subject.

The DfE now appears to back where it was in 2011 when Boris Johnson’s current chief advisor, Dominic Cummings, entered it as special advisor to education secretary Michael Gove. Cummings described the department as ‘a basket case... It was beyond parody. Dysfunctional was not the word, bedlam was the word.’

Gove and Cummings, with the backing of schools minister, Nick Gibb, were, at least, able to push through the restoration of synthetic phonics in the teaching of reading. The CRE has, since its foundation, been at the centre of the battle to bring phonics back into the classroom in a meaningful way. It is possible that now, as a consequence, literacy standards in primary schools are beginning to improve.

Not that school standards in recent years are as much to boast about as Williamson and his puppet-masters at the DfE would have us believe. In 2016 the World Economic Forum Report noted: “England’s teenagers have the worst levels of literacy [amongst developed countries], coming in last place, with more than one in five having a low level of literacy. The country doesn’t fare much better in numeracy.”

Where is it all going wrong? The Blob, of course, blames any failures it may occasionally admit to, on a lack of funding. It will not face up to the reality that educational spending increased by around 900 percent between 1953 and 2009 (Institute of Fiscal Studies). True, the past decade has seen a real terms reduction in school budgets but we remain amongst the world’s big spenders on education. Politicians and educationalists dare not ask why our school system is so much more expensive to run than other more successful systems around across the globe.

Our schools need to stop blaming their problems on a lack of money and to explain where all the money is going. How many parents are aware, for example, that over half of staff in schools (53 per cent) are not actually teachers? Teaching methods have become more and more “child-centred” with the consequent demand for more and more classroom assistants and other ancillary staff.

This approach is the opposite of the teacher-led lessons that are the norm in the educational superstar states of Asia-Pacific. They were also the norm in the UK when today’s grandparents were at school. Is it any coincidence that we are the only country in the developed world where grandparents outperform their grandchildren in basic skills?

Some classroom assistants are necessary, of course. A minority of children certainly do need extra support. If, however, we were to reduce the number of assistants by around 50 per cent, it would require teachers to use those more effective whole class teacher-led lessons that are the norm in most high-performing education systems. It would also free-up the budget to allow substantial pay rises for able teachers.

The OECD has made it clear that beyond a basic level, educational attainment is not related to spending. Our European neighbours Estonia, for example, spends not much more than half of what the UK spends per pupil but is a long, long way ahead of us in terms of attainment.

Make no mistake, though, the architect of what we see around us in our schools today was as much the Tories’ Ken Baker in the 1980s as any Labour education secretary or hard-Left agitator. It was Baker who brought in the all-ability and discredited GCSE exam to replace the O-Level - an exam that we continue to export to Singapore, the world’s most high attaining school system according to the OECD. It was, also, Baker who inflicted a compulsory, dumbed-down and flawed National Curriculum on our schools.

The grave concerns of the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, concerning Baker is made clear in Charles Moore’s recently published and ‘authorised biography’. He records her worries that Baker was too ‘centralist’, even ‘socialist’ (p62).

The damage he caused to schooling is still with us. The genius of Conservative governments has been to cover up his role and the connivance of subsequent Tory education secretaries. We do, at least, know where we stand with the current shadow education secretary, Angela Rayner. She is honest and open about her personal achievements at school – nothing higher than grade D at GCSE

Her latest plan, to close down Ofsted, has more to do with schools avoiding independent scrutiny, with covering up failure, than with acting in the best interests of children and parents. It illustrates just how self-seeking and protectionist the Blob can be.

Ofsted was set up in 1992 to put right the abject failure of politicised local authority inspections and declining standards in schools. It has many deficiencies but it is all parents have in terms of a non-insider's assessment of a school.

Labour's new plan to close down independent schools is equally reckless. It is an assault on excellence that is, self-evidently, being driven by raw and revolutionary emotion rather than by good sense. The party is masquerading behind a skewed notion of how to improve social justice. Its call to arms over education reflects a spirit that permeates many staffrooms up and down the country. 'Conservatives' from across the party political spectrum lost the battle with the Blob over schooling some years ago, even if they remain blind to this reality.

In the contest for hearts and minds in our schools the Labour Party has, in recent years, been triumphant. According to the TES only a paltry 8 (sic) percent of teachers support the Tories. What is more, the Conservative vote amongst pupils stood at only 15 percent in school mock elections at the time of the last general election. 76 percent supported Labour. Expect a pro-Eu surge in pupil support for the Lib/Dem in the next round of mock elections.

With regard to schools, for the Tories, the game is well and truly up. Boris Johnson's belated promise to pour even more money into the black hole of school spending is akin to throwing good money after bad. He arm has, sadly been forced. He is recognising political reality. The Blob has successfully panicked parents over school funding and it is the votes of mums and dads and grandparents that could, shortly, decide who runs the country. Political expediency trumps inconvenient truths about education.

One hundred newsletters on and thirty-two years since its foundation, the resistance provided by the CRE to the educational Blob and to the political sheep in parliament that back it, has never been more necessary.

Chris McGovern
Chairman

Educational vandalism

Labour's attack on independent schools

Former private school pupil John McDonnell, Labour's shadow chancellor, is flag-waving for the abolition of schools like the one that he used to attend.

As the son of a bus driver and trade unionist, he does not fall into the 'posh kid' category too often associated with fee-paying schools. Like a substantial minority of private school pupils today, he was nevertheless able to take advantage of an independent school education.

What is more, he was a grammar school pupil before taking his place at an independent, fee-paying boarding school. Because he had declared a desire to join the priesthood, the Catholic Church was happy to cough up the funding for him to attend St Joseph's College in Ipswich. By the age of 16, though, McDonnell claims he discovered girls. He dropped the religious vocation and moved into unskilled employment.

His formal education eventually continued with A-Levels passed at Burnley Technical College followed by a bachelor's degree in government and politics at Brunel University. A master's degree followed in politics and sociology at Birkbeck, University of London.

It did not take McDonnell long to work out that becoming a trade unionist and politician was a quicker way to sainthood than anything on offer from Rome. So, up the greasy pole he has climbed to become a Labour MP and shadow chancellor. Along the way he has acquired impeccable Left-wing credentials and has become a darling of his party.

At the Labour Party's recent conference in Brighton he made clear his support for the educational wreckers in an 'Abolish Eton' debate. Anti-independent school fanatics and their camp followers from the 'Blob' of the educational establishment were metaphorically baying for blood. Ultimately, nothing but the extermination and eradication of private schooling will do.

A group calling itself Labour Against Private Schools (Laps) presented a motion to conference that flouts our international human rights obligations and called for the integration of private schools into the state system with seizure of their assets. It was easily carried. In a piece for the Guardian, Melissa Benn, sister of a viscount, captured the frenzied excitement of revolution. Like a prophetess of old, and quoting the social historian David Kynaston, she foresees the collapse of a 'morally rotten' bastion of privilege and the advent of 'a long overdue historic moment'. More appropriately, Benn might have quoted from *The Second Coming* by W B Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

The fevered attack on independent schools that is now unfolding is delusional, ignorant and vengeful. Against the shadowy backdrop of so much of our under-achieving school system, independent schools offer a shining light.

According to the OECD, 15-year-olds in the Asia-Pacific super-star education systems are up to three years ahead of ours. How remarkable, then, that many of the wealthiest parents in Shanghai, Singapore and Hong Kong send their children to UK independent schools or, indeed, to satellites of these schools in their own countries! Worldwide, when it comes to schooling, UK private schooling is seen as the provider of greatest excellence.

The Labour Party is moving to destroy this excellence for the simple reason that it cannot be matched by a sufficient number of state schools. 'Exterminate! Exterminate!' was seen as the only solution to this 'problem' by some Dalek delegates in Brighton. Education has become a brutal political battlefield with many of our best schools in line to fill the casualty list.

Last year, a teaching assistant delegate told the Labour conference: 'If we give [children] a proper education ... we'll probably not have any Tories because we will have brought up our kids properly.'

In state schools, Labour's takeover is almost complete. At the time of the last general election in 2017 the TES reported that, in mock polls held in schools around the country, 75 per cent of pupils voted for Jeremy Corbyn. It also discovered that only 8 per cent of teachers vote Tory while 68 per cent back Labour.

The misplaced hysteria over school budgets whipped up by vote-seeking politicians from across the parties has fuelled the politicisation of schooling, the near 900 percent real terms increase in spending since the 1950s notwithstanding.

The truth about our failing school system is too unbearable for most politicians across the spectrum to confront. David Cameron told his party conference in 2015 that 'Britain has the lowest social mobility in the developed world'. He failed to point out that this is the crowning achievement of comprehensivisation.

The Labour Party conference was barking up the wrong tree with its attack on private schooling. The real social division in Britain is access to good schools, whether they be in the private or in the state sector.

In 2016 the Social Mobility Commission, chaired by Labour's Alan Milburn, reported that a child living in one of England's most disadvantaged areas was 27 times more likely to go to an inadequate school than a child living in one of the least disadvantaged.

To prosper in the 21st century global economy the UK needs excellent schools. Our independent sector has never done more to support and work with the state sector and to help the less privileged. Our comprehensive school system is not failing because of the availability of private education. It is failing because of its own inadequacies. It is time that political parties of whatever persuasion faced up to them.

Cultural capital in schools – Stormzy v Mozart

The Guardian ‘newspaper’ has sounded an alarm bell, intended it seems, to panic its readership. A storming photograph of Stormzy at Glastonbury, emerging dramatically through illuminated smoke, heads the article. He is clad in a Union Jack stab-proof vest that was paint-sprayed by Banksy on the front with a black and white Union Jack. The caption accompanying the hard copy of the newspaper – the staffroom copy - quotes what ‘One teacher wrote’:

‘Cultural capital suggests white middle-class paternalism... looking down at Stormzy in favour of Mozart’

The online version of the newspaper beefs up the authority and the authenticity of this opinion by moving from the singular ‘one teacher’, to the plural ‘teachers’:

‘Cultural capitalism can’t be measured, say teachers. Students bring their own – such as rapper Stormzy - and teachers can learn from them.’

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/sep/03/ofsted-plan-inspect-cultural-capital-schools-attacked-as-elitist>

What, you may ask, is all the fuss about? Why is there any need to set Stormzy,

up against Mozart? The answer lies in Ofsted’s new inspection framework. It requires inspectors to report on how far schools build pupils’ ‘cultural capital’.

The American educationalist, E.D. Hirsch, took up the cause in the late 1980s under the banner of ‘cultural literacy’ (Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know 1988). As education secretary (2010-14), Michael Gove embraced Hirsch’s view. He wanted children from less privileged backgrounds to access the same cultural landmarks and knowledge as the middle classes.

The Guardian has set the tone for the debate over ‘cultural capital’. It quotes John Yandell, an associate professor of English at UCL Institute of Education, as opining that the very notion of Ofsted reporting on the ‘cultural capital’ added by schools in order to enhance social mobility is ‘extraordinarily naïve’. He laments any misplaced message given to pupils, ‘about what is and what isn’t valuable: Jane Austen is, Chinua Achebe or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, not so much’.

Cambridge education professor, Diane Reay, chips in with a description of the new reporting requirement as, ‘a crude, reductionist model of learning, both authoritarian and elitist.’ Michael Young, professor of education at University College London, throws in his two pennies’ worth with an observation that, ‘education cannot compensate for society’.

And just in case Guardian readers do not get the message, children’s author Juliet Mickelburgh, is quoted as expressing a concern that ‘middle-class art forms, such as classical music, could be over-emphasised at the expense of, say, rap music.’ ‘Is there a danger,’ she asks, ‘that working-class culture could be seen as inferior to middle-class culture?’

Stormzy may be talented and, in many ways admirable but, unlike Mozart, he is not a genius and I suspect that he would agree. In our educational world of value-relativism, however, Stormzy does, indeed, match Mozart.

There is little differentiation in the arts and in the literature taught in schools these days between the great and the good, the good and the mediocre, the mediocre and the abysmal. All is relative. All opinions are equally valid. This philosophy becomes positively dangerous when it extends into classroom discussion on matters such as terrorism. Terrorists and their enemies have different but equally valid views.

Ofsted, along with our security services, has a duty to eradicate value-relativism in whatever form it appears but, currently, both are a long, long way from even understanding the full extent of the problem. We are in the middle of a ‘kulturkampf’ and the momentum is with Stormzy not with Mozart.

GCSE results 2019

GCSE results are out and the pass rates and top grades are up. Even the overall pass rate - grades 1/G or above – was unchanged on 98.3 percent; a statistic on which it would be difficult to improve.

Here we have an examination that, if the truth were admitted, fails everyone. Grade inflation, around 60 percent since its introduction in 1988, was for years explained away as the result of rising standards.

When he became education secretary in 2010, Michael Gove, to his credit, came clean. He admitted that the qualifications currency had become devalued and needed an overhaul. An under-cover Daily Telegraph film of examiners admitting to ‘cheating’ rather clinched the point for Gove.

A new, tougher generation of GCSEs was ordered. Course work, well recognised as susceptible to malpractice, was mostly removed and syllabuses were made a bit more rigorous. A BBC had revealed that a GCSE Mathematics examination of the Welsh board (WJEC) but sat across the UK, was set at the level expected of primary school pupils in South Korea.

The first of the new, ‘tougher’ GCSEs – Mathematics and English - were sat in 2017. To distinguish them from the previous generation a 9 to 1 grading system replaced the previous A* to G system. Most subjects are now ‘new GCSEs’. A handful of minority ancient and foreign languages remain to complete the transition to ‘new GCSEs’ next year.

So, a ‘tougher’ exam brings even better results. Was the government’s exam regulator boss largely correct, then, when she told The Sunday Times that, ‘All our kids are brilliant.’

Sadly, her giddy vanity was misplaced. The CRE does not, in any way, wish to denigrate the efforts of GCSE candidates. They can only sit the exam paper that is put in front of them. Reaching the finishing line after doing the best one can is something worth celebrating. Most of us, though, including most young people, would prefer to hear the truth rather than PR propaganda from the Blob.

Not all young people are brilliant and most are not brilliant at all, and certainly not in an academic sense. They are wasting their lives away on GCSE courses. Far better for them and for the country would be a vocational pathway from the age of fourteen. And by that age, in current terminology, they should have already reached a GCSE ‘pass’ standard. This was set at 15 [sic] percent when the first new and tougher GCSE Maths appeared in 2017. It rose to 21 per cent in 2018 but was down to 14 [sic] percent this year.

The secret of the high pass rate has little to do with candidate performance. The baseline for setting grade boundaries for the new GCSE is the inflated pass rate of the old GCSE. The government calls this maintenance of grade pass percentages, ‘comparable outcomes’. It would be more accurately described as manipulating the figures. And the exam board that provides the best pass rate attracts more candidates and more income in the future – a race to the bottom in terms of standards.

With regard to grading there is a simple way out of the dreadful mess and blatant dishonesty in which we now find ourselves. We should return to the pre-GCSE, O-Level system of norm referencing. Quite simply it would mean that each year the same percentage of candidates would be awarded a specific grade. There would be a normal statistical curve. Employers and universities would then know the broad ranking of a GCSE grade within a cohort of 16 year-olds.

Imperfect as this system might be, it is better than the current alternative.

It would, also, would restore some integrity to the examination system.

Be brave, America!

T. S. Eliot judged it to be a ‘masterpiece’. Hemingway concluded that, ‘It’s the best book we’ve had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.’ They were referring, of course, to Mark Twain’s ‘Adventures of Huckleberry Finn’. This anti-slavery classic of American literature is, sadly, also one of its most-banned books on school and college campuses across the United States.

A recent newsletter, from Michigan's prestigiously conservative Hillsdale College and addressed to fellow Americans, reminds us how tightly by the throat the dogma of political correctness now holds the U.S.A. True, the message comes with a sales-pitch but it is one that is unapologetically aimed at restoring some balance in the longstanding row over whether Twain's anti-racist novel should be on, what amounts to, an index of forbidden books in state institutions of education. <https://www.golifa.com/american-classic-huckleberry-finn/>

In backing Mark Twain, Hillsdale is attempting to live in accordance with the liberal identity of its founders. The college was set up by a group of anti-slavery Baptists back in 1844 but these days does not have any religious affiliation. Amongst notable campus speakers was, on two occasions, the famous black ex-slave and an abolitionist leader, Frederick Douglass. Edward Everett, who spoke at Gettysburg alongside Abraham Lincoln, was another Hillsdale speaker.

And when the Civil War broke out, Hillsdale provided more volunteers for the abolitionist Union Army than any other college in the state of Michigan. Sixty of them made the ultimate sacrifice. Nor are Hillsdale's anti-racist credentials confined to the Civil War period. It was one of the first US colleges to ban discrimination on the grounds of religion, race or sex. Memorably, in 1956, the college pulled out of an important American football match in Florida because of discrimination against black players.

How ironical it is, then, that since 2007 Hillsdale has had to withdraw from state funding in order to preserve its commitment to the liberal values set out in its charter. Public funding of education in the US these days is tied to strict compliance with what government declare is acceptable and unacceptable. In academic terms this boils down to a politically-correct iron fist ensuring that the West's Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian identity is, at best, diluted and at worst placed in the dock for condemnation as racist, sexist and homophobic.

The story of 'Huckleberry Finn' is the story of a shared humanity between different races. Huckleberry and the escaped slave, Jim, are both friends and equals in the narrative. They display loyalty to each other and exhibit fundamental virtues that expose the hypocrisy of the society in which they live. The moral degradation of a society that permits, even cherishes, slavery is also on display.

It is often overlooked that 'Huckleberry Finn' is an historical novel looking back several decades so to the pre-abolition South. At the time of its US publication in 1885 the Jim Crow laws were already undermining the Emancipation Proclamation. Mark Twain was, is and should continue to be a central part of the conscience of America.

'Huckleberry Finn' requires the reader to ponder, sometimes obliquely but often directly, the sin and absurdity of man's inhumanity to man. In the years immediately following publication it was banned by some institutions on what I would consider absurd but, at least, legitimate grounds.

In 1885 the Concorde Public Library cited the novel's 'systematic use of bad grammar and an employment of inelegant expression,' as reason for a ban. Twain's use of Southern dialect and expression, clearly, did not win its approval. In 1902, the Brooklyn Public Library justified its ban in a statement that noted: 'Huck not only itched but scratched,' and added that he said 'sweat' when he should have referred to 'perspiration'.

Daft? Yes, but understandable. Today's widespread ban across most publicly funded schools and colleges in the US, on the grounds that the word 'nigger' is part of the book's common vocabulary, is less innocently short-sighted. The word litters the novel because it was common parlance at the time and did not have the taboo status it has today. Closing down great anti-racist literature for being true to the past is both senseless and tragic.

In her autobiography, Victorian 'nurse', Crimean War heroine and Jamaican, Mary Seacole, also uses the n***** word with reference to black people. In the context of her time she uses rather more intentionally racist language with reference to the likes of the Turks whom she describes as 'degenerate Arabs' who, her opinion, are 'worse than fleas'.

Has this brought a Mark Twain style ban down on her head? Far from it. In the UK she has been voted Number 1 amongst Great Black Britons and a statue of her was unveiled opposite the Houses of Parliament in 2106. Her story is widely taught in UK schools. Rather than placing a ban on 'Huckleberry Finn' it is time the for the USA to follow suit. Place Mark Twain's novel on a compulsory reading list for American youngsters to help in the battle against racism, wherever it exists. Erect a statue of Jim and Huck opposite the Capitol building. Be brave, America!

No Comment

I promise ... to make technical and vocational education the first choice for anybody with the aptitude, desire and interest to pursue it.

Gavin Williamson, Education Secretary, Conservative Party Conference Speech 30th September 2019

Gender-neutral toilets in schools have left girls feeling unsafe and even put their health at risk, parents and teachers have warned.

Daily Mail 7th October 2019

Teacher who quit his £39,000-a-year job last term to dedicate more time to the Extinction Rebellion movement is urging others to join him - and calls on pupils 'to go on strike' and refuse to sit GCSEs and A levels

TES 8th October 2019

Thousands of migrant children in the UK translate for their families every day... some as young as seven

BBC News 9th October 2019

The department (for Education) was a basket case... Dysfunction was not the word, bedlam was the word. Dominic Cummings on his time as special advisor to Michael Gove at the DfE.

The Times 16th June 2014

This won't do at all. Better not have a core curriculum than one based on this. Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher's written comment on a paper about national curriculum history from her education secretary, Kenneth Baker. 'Margaret Thatcher – an authorised biography'

Charles Moore October 2019