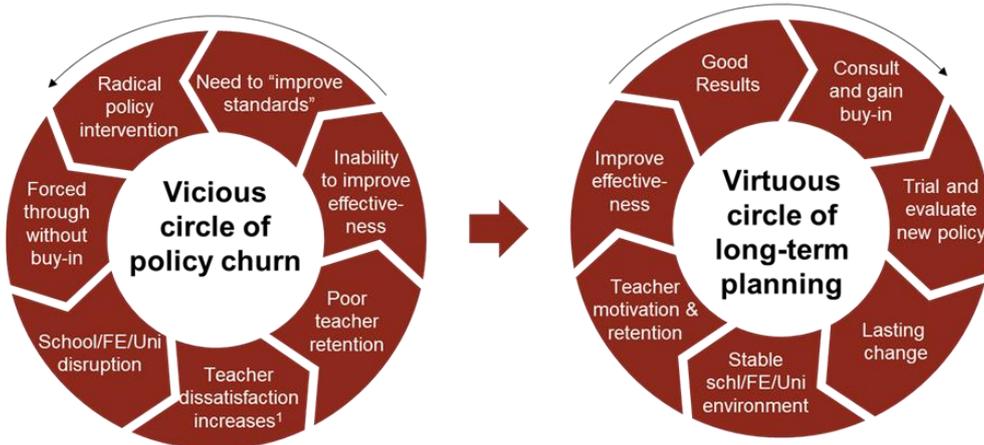


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Foundations for a long-term plan



Building the foundations of a long-term plan for English Education

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Overview

To improve England's education system, policy making should operate within a long-term plan. The last thirty years have seen important progress, but also an unnecessary amount of 'policy churn'. This has been far more abundant in education than in other departments, often replacing policies that have not been thought-through, nor implemented properly. These relatively short-term interventions have disrupted the rhythm of schools, and colleges; demotivated teachers and lecturers - negatively affecting their retention; created an incoherent system, where policies fight against each other and overall, have done little to improve a general feeling of distrust between practitioners and policy makers.

There is a better path and in part, it can be evidenced in other countries around the world. At best, these alternative methods show us how to unite key stakeholders behind a coherent long-term vision and purpose; how successive governments can follow a ten to twenty-year plan; how to empower schools and colleges; select, retain and motivate excellent teachers and achieve success that is measurable, accountable and admired around the world. By looking at best practice within and without its borders, England can create a system that is dynamic - but also stable, predictable and inclusive.

England's ad-hoc approach to policy making

England's approach to policy making is quite singular and an outlier compared to other countries with education success. England's education policy making is ad-hoc, that is, there is no consistent approach to the origination, evaluation, selection and implementation of new policy. For example, the reform of fundamental 'instruments' like curriculum or assessment is highly variable; attitudes to consultation likewise; the use of research is sporadic; the contribution of the DfE to policy making is inconsistent and policy is constructed, declared and forgotten at an incredibly fast pace.

There are of course, factors that account for England's singular approach – it is adversarial and lacking in trust; makes little use of policy evidence; has fragmented institutions and for policy making, is overly centralised. There is also a mistaken belief that we continue to be guided by a long-standing narrative arc and this compensates for other dysfunctional elements. These characteristics need to be explored and addressed, in order to create foundations for long-term planning.

Adversarial and lacking in trust

The English system is particularly adversarial and lacking in trust. This can lead to frequent remaking of policy, lack of consistency and resistance to implementation. Adversary is partly due to history and culture: the nature of first past the post politics; the winner takes all consequences and the form of parliamentary debate. In critical areas like pensions, political parties have worked cooperatively for the greater good. However, this is more difficult in education: because of its important political and public profile and because the education debate is largely driven by opinion - rather than science or evidence. As a result, come election time, we still see markedly different manifesto commitments. In education

there is also a heightened level of distrust. People distrust each other's personal motives; there is a popular distrust about the character of teachers; there is a distrust about the educational background of policy makers; there is distrust of actions that have taken place in times of conflict, sometimes stretching back decades.

Fragmented institutions

The English education system is attended by fragmented institutions. They are easily divided, selectively engaged and frequently provide a contradictory commentary on policy. At the heart of the policy making process, the DfE could make a more effective contribution to policy making, (notwithstanding the many factors working against it). Compared to other government departments, arm's length bodies are few, national institutions almost non-existent and professional, sector and representative bodies are highly fragmented. This is in stark contrast to successful education countries elsewhere. In England, the lack of strong, long-standing institutions has been driven by government policy: directly, through the abolition of most quangos and indirectly, because of England's orientation to markets and competition. There are over 300 organisations vying for government and education policy attention.

A centralised system

English education policy is highly centralised. The great levers of the ERA prescribe curriculum, assessment and accountability across England. Although not necessarily by design, their interplay provides very little opportunity for school or college autonomy. This may or may not be right. What cannot be helpful, is the extent to which policies can be replaced and reinvented by Secretaries of State with an average tenure of two years, Junior Ministers with an average of eighteen months tenure and a DfE that is compromised and burdened by centralised implementation and system maintenance. Centralised curriculum has hindered the alignment of skills planning with regional strategies. Centralised power has squeezed out local power and with it reduced local initiative, empowerment and cooperation.

The myth of the narrative arc

There is a widely held belief that the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) established a narrative arc and this provides enough structure to compensate for deficiencies elsewhere. Undoubtedly, the 1988 ERA established ground-breaking instruments, but many have become totems that cannot be questioned. As a result, there is unresolved conflict. Policy debate is still polarised (e.g. GCSE v Rethinking Assessment v EBacc); pressing issues are unanswered (e.g. academisation for Primaries; 30% of children "failing") and important policy areas resist reform (e.g. deferred decisions on Tomlinson and SATs). The architect of the ERA, Kenneth Baker, and the main implementor, Ken Clarke, both disagree with important aspects of today's English education, from the narrowness of the curriculum, through the failure of the skills agenda, to the lack of autonomy for teachers and schools.

The shortcomings of an over centralised system are amplified by the factors listed above: no shared vision or purpose; cross-party conflict; mistrust and weak institutions. This combines to create an unstable environment that reduces system performance.

Foundations for a long-term plan

The foundations for a long-term plan must address the factors that create an unstable policymaking environment. To recreate a narrative arc, purpose and vision should be revisited; to increase cooperation and trust, the use of process and evidence should be agreed; to support better decision making, institutions must be strengthened. All of these will improve decision making and act as balancing capabilities alongside central government. But there also needs to be a loosening of central control, so that school, college, community and regional initiatives can better contribute to policy development.

A new narrative arc based on a shared vision and purpose

A long-term plan starts with a shared vision of the future and an agreed purpose for education. The pace of digital change, the UK's independent future, changes in skills requirements, changes in geo-politics, and the heightened anxiety from Covid: all of these factors present an opportunity to re-evaluate. To create a narrative arc, the vision and purpose should consider a 15 to 20-year time span, be clear enough to help set priorities and comprehensive enough to balance the trade-offs that exist in system development. It should be an essential starting point to understand the interrelationship between policy instruments and the coherence of the whole education system.

The review of vision and purpose should be acknowledged as a fundamental exercise. The review process must ensure the support of current and future policy makers. Wide participation in defining vision and purpose is essential in order to gain buy-in and support. The process must be comprehensive enough to capture all relevant stakeholder contributions and feedback - as well as tying these back to needs that will cover many areas (economic, employment, personal development, wellbeing etc). At the outset, success criteria should be agreed, so that the process can settle upon a limited number of vision and purpose statements and with pre-agreement on how to finally arbitrate.

Trust and cooperation based on a shared process

Adversary and mistrust are hard to break-down, so before arguing about issues, a good starting point is to agree on process and the use of evidence. For policies to survive successive governments, there must be agreement between major political parties. This is the greatest challenge and it is worth exploring other nations' experience. Agreement between parties is easier if a) there is first an agreed vision and plan b) there is acceptance that success can be achieved regardless of the political starting point (coherence trumps ideology).

Long-range planning must incorporate all of the principle levers in the education system, including: the main instruments of macro-policy (curriculum, assessment, measurement, accountability); lines of responsibility and autonomy; system management structures; departmental demarcation and coordination; response to whole child's needs at a local level; funding distribution; the role of school and college assets, etc. The approach to each (and its part in the whole education system) requires a framework on who participates; how to deliberate (see Institutions below); with what support and with what authority.

As an example, curriculum and assessment must be changed with care and only when clearly necessary. The justification for change should pass a high (and defined) threshold,

because there is a system cost to change. To agree a policy making process, a range of issues must be unbundled and reconciled. These include: the frequency of review in the key policy areas; the primacy of political authority; the relative importance of stakeholders (e.g. practitioners, parents and carers, children, employers etc); the extent (if any) of delegated authority; the status of subject matter expertise; the role and means of consultation; the value (if any) placed on consensus; the impact on school/college and teacher/lecturer accountability; the ability of the system to absorb more change; the interplay with other policy leavers. As far as practical, all of this must be agreed in advance and again, across political parties.

The Early Career Framework is held up as a good example of thoughtful policy change. It followed a plan, run by a DfE team supported by experienced educationalists; there was an inclusive consultation process, piloting and feedback. There is some promise that this is now being built into a wider set of system reforms for ongoing teacher support and development. These include the development of revised National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) and the new specialist versions of these. Combined with a network of newly designated Teaching School Hubs, as a comprehensive delivery vehicle these developments represent the potential coherence and long term strategy we need to see replicated across the system.

From a point of efficiency, a starting point would be to agree a list of fundamental issues in macro-education policy. The relative importance of these could be defined by the vision and purpose. Ranking the current system, in these fundamental areas, versus an ideal would generate a list of priority areas for policy review.

Trust and cooperation based on evidence

Any macro-policy change should be based on evidence. There is no need to step into the unknown, particularly as the risks of getting things wrong are immense. It is important to distinguish between evidence for policy making and evidence for practice. The latter is increasingly well catered for (EEF) etc; the former is not. Of the £100 million spent on education research per year in England, we estimate less than 5% is relevant to policy makers. What is available is hard to access, fragmented and very little addresses system level macro-policy. Improvement requires agreement on fundamental areas of research interest and for those areas, synthesis and mediation - so there is a shared and respected body of evidence that is accessible by all.

Evidence must be more widely defined and not limited to academic and expert institutional research from home nations. With the Research Schools Network there is an opportunity to rigorously include more local experience and the many exciting initiatives that already take place “on the ground”. These can all contribute to macro-policy areas (as an essential part of long-term planning) through the process of pilots, post-evaluation and regional rollouts. There is also a need to rigorously understand experience in other jurisdictions.

System change typically has unintended consequences and decision makers should be duty bound to fully understand all corresponding policy practice from around the world. Finally, the use of evidence should not be confined to new initiatives. Far more time and

understanding should be given to existing macro-policies – how well do they work, and could they improve?

Strengthened institutions to strengthen policy making

Long-term planning requires institutional reform, within and without of government. Most successful nations rely on strong, national institutions. While this might be advisable, in England there is lingering suspicion of large education bodies. Nevertheless, helpful reform could take place within the existing landscape.

DfE policy making is hampered by many factors (e.g. short cycle times; poor institutional memory; the promotion of generalists; a fragmented research capability; loss of experience; lack of diversity; ad-hoc consultation etc). Some DfE reform is needed to become more effective. Further, compared to other departments, the DfE and ministers are poorly supported by arms-length bodies (due to a concern that they are often ‘captured’). This could be addressed if there was cross-party agreement to allow a balanced rotation of members.

Long-term planning requires the representation of many non-governmental groups in an environment that supports objectivity and cooperation. However, there is no such forum and non-governmental institutions are often weak and generally fragmented. The system within and without of government encourages self-interest and competition - so alliances wax and wane. Greater cooperation between organisations could lead to an agreed ‘education policy architecture’ and this could help in the formulation and prioritising of new policy. Potentially, a body that represents the views of major institutions could become a mechanism that ‘stands between the government and educational institutions, acting as both a buffer and conduit’. This could be formally or informally constituted. The question remains as to who should take responsibility for this coordination.

Forums for evidence review and debate, amongst experts and stakeholders of all types are lacking. ‘Policy Boards’ that look at particular challenges, are one mechanism to facilitate this process. Review of support from national institutions also seems sensible. When compared to other nations, there is a material deficit in England. This excludes a huge amount of expertise.

One initiative likely to have a lasting effect is to create an organisation that can make evidence available to everyone interested in macro-education policy. It would review, assess and synthesise evidence and present it around key policy areas (both for and against and without recommendations). This would ensure all participants in key policy debates can have a shared understanding of the best research, experiences and consequences of education policy matters, from UK nations and other jurisdictions around the world.

Making space for local responsibility and initiative

The foundation for a long-term plan must define the relationship between national government, local government and other local actors (including schools and colleges). Top-down policy has limitations. Behavioural and institutional change at the heart of government will be limited, but there is general recognition that central government has accumulated too many powers and delegation of some power should be considered.

If a vision anticipates greater empowerment for providers and stakeholders, then delegation is a logical next step - smaller, local and regional structures enable trust and accountability. In this manner, education can be 'a stronger catalyst for building economically successful communities with education, business and government becoming even more fully connected'. Greater empowerment can harness local initiatives, new eco-systems can be encouraged, and the best can be scaled for wider benefit. This dynamic behaviour can be seen in many other successful countries around the world, particularly, but not limited to Federal governments. It also chimes with successive governments desire for a school-led system.

Finally, the governance and management of long-range planning itself must be defined. How far should this be technocratic, what is the shape of legislative and political control? A cross-party accord is necessary – how formally should this be agreed? Is a plan agreed in statute or is it advisory? Are governmental and non-governmental bodies voluntarily assembled or promulgated?

Conclusion

A long-term plan will enable change to happen in a strategic, structured and cohesive manner. This will improve outcomes for England's education system, increase the motivation and retention of teachers and lecturers and provide a corner stone for society's progress in the years ahead. Success will only be achieved on the foundations of an agreed vision and purpose for education, and through improved cooperation and trust. These ambitious objectives require significant improvement in process, evidence and institutions, and some delegation of central government control.