

“This report deals with the most important part of the UK’s long-term growth strategy – improving education. As our work sets out, the potential economic gain from getting this right is enormous, yet today we have a system where a large minority of our young people fall behind early and never catch up. This cannot be acceptable.”

**John Cridland CBI Director General**

Note: This summary focuses on the overview and recommendations in the report, which can be downloaded in full from the CBI website.

## Executive summary (page 6ff)

### Overview

This report launches the CBI’s education campaign. It sets out businesses’ views on school reform based on a substantial review conducted this summer of what works in the UK and globally. It was commissioned to identify the key issues facing the UK’s schools and the approaches that will help to address them. Based on these examples, evidence shows that the best systems:

- Have a clear sense of what they wish to deliver in terms of knowledge and behaviour and align school accountability frameworks to this
- Use parental and community engagement (especially in early years), effective devolution of power to schools, and a culture and ethos of rigour in everything a school does – including assessment – to deliver the goal.

Successive governments have introduced education reforms designed to improve performance in the UK, but because they have only been partial in their aim (trying to deliver improvement through the exam system or through specific programmes) and have judged success through narrow metrics, they have met with only partial success. For instance, setting targets for just 60% to reach expected levels in English and maths at the end of primary education or for 40% to achieve five or more ‘good’ GCSEs A\*-C, says little about the wider achievement and preparation of those who make the standard and accepts a substantial rate of failure. This has been the pattern of reform across the whole UK – a series of individual changes aimed at improving performance rather than a more co-ordinated approach. The result of this – despite gently rising average performance – is a system that tolerates a large degree of failure, including some grade inflation, and in which there is confusion about overall purpose.

Current reforms in England in particular offer an excellent opportunity to address this issue. They rightly acknowledge the vital role of returning power to school leaders, rigour in the system and lessening prescription from the centre. But unless all reforms are aligned to a clear set of outcomes across academic performance and the behaviours young people need to move on in life – which we task our schools with and rigorously score them against – there is a risk that a tougher exam system will simply lead to higher failure rates. We need a ‘whole system’ approach to educational improvement. The Westminster government’s reform agenda moves us in the right direction on this, as does the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, but there is more that needs to be done to ensure success. We set out this approach – which we call rigour-plus – in this report.

### Recommendations:

- Development of a clear, widely-owned and stable statement of the outcome that all schools are asked to deliver. This should go beyond the merely academic, into the behaviours and attitudes schools should foster in everything they do. It should be the basis on which we judge all new policy ideas, schools and the structures we set up to monitor them
- Once developed, Ofsted (and equivalent bodies in devolved nations) should be asked to steward the delivery of these outcomes, judging primary and secondary schools on their performance. This implies resourcing these bodies to develop an approach based on a wider range of measures and assessments than are currently in use, and to support inspectors to use them. The outcome of this will be better and more relevant narrative reports that cover both academic and behavioural development, and the use of these for assessment of

schools rather than exam result league tables.

- Greater focus of early years spending on parenting support and structured childcare provision in areas where educational performance is low – government must accept an element of differential funding and target the budget on provision in the most disadvantaged communities
- Raising the standard of childcare through adoption of the Nutbrown review’s recommendations on improving early education quality, in particular staff competence and qualification, and building on the work of the Childcare Commission to review ratios, the structure of tax support for families and the pattern of nursery provision to make this step affordable
- Adoption by schools of a strategy for fostering parental engagement and wider community involvement, including links with business
- A new commitment for a strategic, systematic and long-term engagement by business to a needs-led school programme, focusing on raising aspiration and attainment.
- The Department for Education should accelerate its programme of decentralisation of control for all schools in England. This should be extended to schools in other parts of the UK, freeing headteachers to deliver real improvements
- Use decentralisation to give teachers greater freedom to tailor their teaching and structure the learning each child does
- Support for professional development of teachers and heads should be enhanced to ensure they can effectively take on this challenge
- In return, headteachers should be expected to be rigorous managers of their staff and accepted as such by teachers. Performance assessment, reward, improvement plans and, where necessary, dismissal should be tools available to and used by headteachers.
- Removal of the currently over-specified and repetitive national curriculum from primary schools in favour of clearly defined goals on literacy, numeracy, science and computer science. These targets should be more stretching than the current national curriculum sets out, and would be judged by Ofsted
- Addressing the performance drift between the ages of seven and 12 through teaching quality improvement at primary school and development of a new approach on handling the school transfer age based on a review of what works in the best systems in the UK and globally
- Move the focus of our exam system to 18 and develop clearly rigorous and stretching standards for both academic and vocational A-levels, with maths and English retained until 18 for both
- A move from GCSEs in the middle of this decade, but the development of a more rigorous and diverse assessment approach that helps better decision-making by young people at the key points of age 14, 16 and 18 rather than simply substituting GCSEs with a more rigorous exam at 16
- A study of the routes taken by young people from age 14 should be commissioned to advise on the right balance of timing and the

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