ASCL Association of School and College Leaders

A GREAT EDUCATION FOR EVERY CHILD

The ASCL Blueprint for a Fairer Education System

www.ascl.org.uk/blueprint

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To push for excellence today without continuing to push for access for less privileged students is to undermine the crucial but incomplete gains that have been made. Equity and excellence cannot be divided.

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INTRODUCTION

500 YEARS TO CLOSE THE GAP?

It will take over 500 years to close the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers. This stark statistic, from the Education Policy Institute's 2019 annual report, *Education in England*[1], was the catalyst for our *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System*. Based on a comparison of the GCSE English and maths results for pupils eligible for the pupil premium and their peers, the report's authors found that disadvantaged young people were 18 months behind at the end of secondary. And they estimated that the gap between the two groups would not close until 2581 – or in about twenty generations.

Since the publication of this report in July 2019, the situation has become even worse. Updated figures in EPI's August 2020 annual report[2] led to an even more extreme conclusion: the gap is not closing. In other words, we have moved from a period in which the disadvantage gap was narrowing, albeit glacially slowly, into one in which we can no longer be confident that it will ever close.

And this bleak picture has been exacerbated, of course, by the Covid-19 pandemic. The growing bank of evidence on the impact of the pandemic on pupil attainment[3] suggests that the progress and attainment of almost all pupils has been affected by the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, and that the impact has been particularly felt by children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It has never been more urgent or important to consider why this stubborn gap persists in England, and what can be done to address it.

In 2015, ASCL published a *Blueprint for a Self-Improving System*[4]. This set out our vision for an education system that delivers quality and equality for all children and young people. Our *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System* builds on that vision, considering where we are six years later. It focuses particularly on how we can ensure our most disadvantaged children and young people can flourish and thrive as we begin to emerge from one of the most difficult periods most of us have ever experienced.

This is the full version of the Blueprint. A summary version is available via www.ascl.org.uk/blueprintsum

WHY DOES EQUITY MATTER?

There is, of course, a strong argument for social equity based on intrinsic fairness. Few people would argue, in the 21st century, that our opportunities and successes in life should be determined by our parental background.

But there is an equally persuasive argument for equity based on 'harder' measures of productivity and national performance. In their influential book *The Spirit Level*, epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett map an extraordinary degree of correlation between countries with high income inequality (including the UK) and a range of undesirable outcomes. These include high levels of mental illness, low life expectancy, obesity, poor educational performance, teenage births and high imprisonment rates.

Societies with increased levels of these undesirable outcomes, argue Wilkinson and Pickett, are worse for *everyone*, not just those at the bottom of the pile. While high imprisonment rates may disproportionately impact those people drawn into criminal activity, we all benefit from living in a society with lower crime rates. While obesity may be more prevalent among lower socio-economic groups, we all pay the price of the increased healthcare costs to which it leads. And while poor educational performance is more likely among disadvantaged children, we are all worse off when talented people are unable to reach their potential[5].

1 https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2019

2 https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020

3 See the Education Endowment Foundation's useful summary of research https://bit.ly/3i50kN3

4 www.ascl.org.uk/blueprintselfimproving

5 See also www.eif.org.uk/report/the-cost-of-late-intervention-eif-analysis-2016 for more on the societal and fiscal costs of failing vulnerable children and families.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

It would be a mistake, of course, to suggest that education alone can address the problem of poverty and inequity in today's society. Indeed, the central argument of *The Spirit Level* is that policymakers who try to address inequity in one area, such as education or health, are doomed to failure if they don't also tackle the root causes of income inequality across a population.

In other words, improving the educational performance of disadvantaged children and young people can't be done solely by changing what happens inside the school gates. However, it is equally true that education can have a transformative effect on the lives and life chances of many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Good exam results open doors to opportunities which can lead young people out of poverty. Strong personal, social and health education helps young people to navigate the complex world in which they live, and to make choices with long-term implications for their future wellbeing. Wide-ranging extra-curricular activities enrich children's lives, and help provide social and cultural capital on which they can draw in the future.

Education matters – and it matters particularly to children and young people in disadvantage.

PRINCIPLE, DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE

Our work on our *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System* starts from the overarching principle that a wealthy, democratic country in the 21st century should support all its citizens to succeed. It should be committed to ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education.

It should also recognise that children have different starts in life, and that the support they need may vary. For this reason, we have chosen to use the term 'equity' rather than 'equality'. We define 'equality' as the belief that everyone should be treated the same, and 'equity' as the need to provide each individual with what they need to be successful. We have used the term 'fair' interchangeably with 'equitable'.

We have also considered what we mean by 'disadvantage'. Clearly there are many ways in which an individual can be advantaged or disadvantaged in comparison with their peers – based on characteristics such as race, sex and disability. We have chosen here to focus on socio-economic disadvantage – and, for pragmatic reasons, to use the Department for Education's definition of disadvantaged pupils as those eligible for pupil premium funding due to deprivation[6]. Our view, however, is that the proposals and recommendations we make as a result of this work would, if implemented, benefit children living with many types of disadvantage and marginalisation – or none.

We have also grappled with what we mean when we talk about 'success'. Official analyses of the disadvantage gap, such as that in the Education in England report mentioned above, are generally based on measures which are relatively straightforward to quantify, such as attainment in national tests and exams. Such markers of attainment are hugely important – and indeed our previous work on the 'forgotten third'[7] used precisely this definition. We should never underestimate the importance of being able to demonstrate attainment in nationally recognised qualifications for all young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, neither should we fall into the trap of assuming that attainment in a small number of academic subjects is all that matters in terms of improving children's life chances. A good education prepares people for their future lives in myriad ways – academic, cultural, moral, social and physical. Young people have different aspirations, and some have additional needs which make measuring their success in terms of attainment against standardised academic norms entirely inappropriate.

6 https://bit.ly/371QTYq

7 www.ascl.org.uk/forgottenthird

So in this report, while we reference and value research which looks at the disadvantage gap in terms of academic attainment, we have also tried to be mindful of other, less easily quantifiable, ways in which a strong education can improve children's life chances.

Finally, the focus of the *Blueprint* is on England. While many of the principles here will be equally applicable to the other countries of the UK – and indeed more widely – the analysis and proposed actions here are made in the context of the English system. And we focus mainly on schools and colleges. We strongly support voices calling for more investment in the early years (where the disadvantage gap first appears), in higher education, and in lifelong learning. In this document, though, we focus on the part of the system where we – and our members – have the most experience and expertise.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

This report has been developed over the last two years through discussions with ASCL Council, input from our research partners (the Education Policy Institute, the National Foundation for Educational Research, and Public First), responses to the call for evidence, and roundtable discussions with external experts.

These discussions were based around five broad questions, the answers to which helped to focus and structure our thinking. Those questions were – in a society committed to social equity:

- what and how should children and young people be taught?
- how should teachers and leaders be identified, developed and supported?
- how should the education system be structured?
- how should the education system be funded?
- how should we judge if the system is doing what we want it to?

KEY THEMES

A number of key themes began to emerge during these discussions. We have drawn on these themes in developing the aims, building blocks and recommendations which follow. They are:

- Excellence and equity should not be seen as conflicting aspirations. A system which is better for disadvantaged children and young people is better for everyone.
- Schools and colleges can't solve deep-seated social and economic inequality – but they can and do play a role in reducing its impact.
- System change is disruptive. It takes time, effort and energy for students, teachers and leaders to adapt to change – all of which risks distracting them from their core job of teaching and learning. Major changes should therefore only happen if we are confident that the benefits we will achieve are worth the disruption. Sometimes less is more.
- There are no quick fixes. Meaningful and sustainable change takes time and commitment.
- Change needs to be driven at a range of different points across the system. Some needs to be led by government, some regionally, and some in individual schools, colleges and trusts. This requires a shared commitment to a common goal, and an appropriate devolution of responsibility.
- None of this can be done on the cheap. Funding for our schools and colleges must be sufficient to ensure all children and young people receive the education they deserve, whilst also being targeted towards pupils, schools and colleges with the greatest challenges.

ASCL will use what follows to drive and guide our work over the next few years – our engagement with policymakers, our support for members, and our professional development arm. We hope that others will find it helpful, and that we can build a broad coalition of support behind the principles and suggested changes in the *Blueprint*.

AIM AND BUILDING BLOCKS

Throughout this work, we have tried to balance vision and pragmatism. The aim and building blocks below are based on principles which we believe are universal, and should guide our thinking about the education system in the long term. The specific changes we call for in each of the following sections are intended to move us closer to the system we want to see in the next five years.

Most of the changes we are calling for would, we believe, improve our education system for all children and young people. Despite the focus of the *Blueprint* on disadvantage, we make no apology for that. As the first theme above makes clear, we see no conflict between excellence and equity. Creating a high-quality education system is the right thing to do for everyone – and will, we believe, particularly benefit those children and young people who have less social and cultural capital than their peers.

However, if we are truly aiming for equity (providing each individual with what they need to be successful) rather than just equality (treating everyone the same), it's important to consider what additional support some children and young people might need to succeed, above and beyond the resources and approaches put in place for everyone. Underpinning the five building blocks set out below, then, is the need to recognise that some children and young people will need more support to achieve the same goals and standards as others – and that schools and colleges which serve communities with disproportionately high numbers of such children and young people will need additional support to do so. Suggestions of how this additional support should be provided are woven throughout the sections on the five building blocks below.

AIM

All children and young people receive a high-quality, broad and challenging education. No child or young person receives a lower standard of education as a result of their background or where they live. Schools and colleges are supported to do everything they can to counteract the socio-economic disadvantages faced by some children and young people.

BUILDING BLOCKS TO ACHIEVE THIS AIM

1

CURRICULUM

A core national curriculum, mandatory for all state schools until the age of 16, focused on what we collectively agree are the most important things children and young people should know and do. This is relatively stable, with regular but infrequent opportunities for review. Young people can branch off into different pathways as they get older. These pathways are all of a high quality, and can be combined and moved between.

2

TEACHERS AND LEADERS

Leaders, teachers and support staff in every school and college who have the expertise and capacity to develop and expand the core national curriculum into a high-quality local curriculum, and to provide the broader support children and young people need. This expertise is developed through strong initial teacher education, ongoing and effective professional development, and the sharing of knowledge and effective practice.

3

ASSESSMENTS AND QUALIFICATIONS

National assessments and qualifications which link seamlessly to the core curriculum and post-16 pathways. These are constructed in a way which enables all children and young people to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and to be recognised for this. Students' results in national assessments play a proportionate role in how schools and colleges are held to account.

4

RESOURCES

Sufficient resources for all schools and colleges to deliver the education to which we have agreed all children and young people are entitled.

5

STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

Structures and systems which support and reward schools and colleges for providing all children and young people with a high-quality, broad and challenging education. These structures and systems encourage and enable everyone working in schools and colleges to act for the good of all children and young people, not just those in their own institutions.

Underpinning the five building blocks is the need to recognise that some children and young people will need more support to achieve the same goals and standards as others, and that some schools and colleges serve communities with disproportionately high numbers of such children and young people. Mechanisms are in place to provide that additional support.

BUILDING BLOCK 1
CURRICULUM

A core national curriculum, mandatory for all state schools until the age of 16, focused on what we collectively agree are the most important things children and young people should know and do. This is relatively stable, with regular but infrequent opportunities for review. Young people can branch off into different pathways as they get older. These pathways are all of a high quality, and can be combined and moved between.

WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

The national curriculum for early years, primary and secondary is reviewed on a cyclical basis, approximately every ten years. The review body includes school leaders, governors, teachers, parents, researchers, industry representatives and politicians from all major parties. The review body is expected to consult widely and meaningfully with a broad range of stakeholders. Sufficient implementation time is built into the cycle to ensure schools and colleges are able to plan and prepare for changes well in advance.

The remit of this review body is to determine a national curriculum focused on a relatively small number of carefully sequenced key concepts, with each phase building on the last. The national curriculum focuses on fewer things in greater depth, prioritising aspects of learning which are particularly important for future success, such as reading and language development. It sets high expectations for all children and young people, including that every pupil should be given the opportunity and support to engage with broad and challenging content. It balances the need to ensure pupils can engage with "the best that has been thought and said" with the importance of recognising the diverse backgrounds, experiences and aspirations of today's young people. It leaves time and space for individual, or groups of, schools to develop their own local curricula around the core national curriculum.

There are clear national expectations for children and young people who are unable to access the core curriculum, but are nevertheless equally entitled to a high-quality curriculum, suited to their needs.

The national curriculum is mandatory for all state schools, for students up to the age 16. A small amount of specialisation is permitted from Year 9 or 10, to enable students to start to pursue particular interests, but all students should still be expected to follow a broad and challenging curriculum up to 16, including a range of academic and vocational subjects. The curriculum review body determines which subjects must be studied until 16, and which could be optional from Year 9 or 10.

At 16, students are able to pursue different routes. These could be exclusively 'academic', exclusively 'vocational', or a combination of the two. All routes are of a high quality. Students receive high-quality careers advice and guidance throughout their education, and particularly when determining their post-16 pathway.

HOW CLOSE ARE WE TO ACHIEVING THIS?

The last couple of years have seen a period of relative curriculum stability (Covid-related disruption notwithstanding), after an extensive period of reform. This is enabling those reforms to bed in, and is starting to give schools and colleges time to think reflectively, rather than simply trying to keep up.

However, we lack a national consensus around the content of the current national curriculum, and any agreed mechanism for review. This leaves stakeholders who have concerns about the current curriculum with no clear avenue to express those concerns and advocate for change. It also compromises stability, with little to discourage policymakers from instigating major change when they come into power.

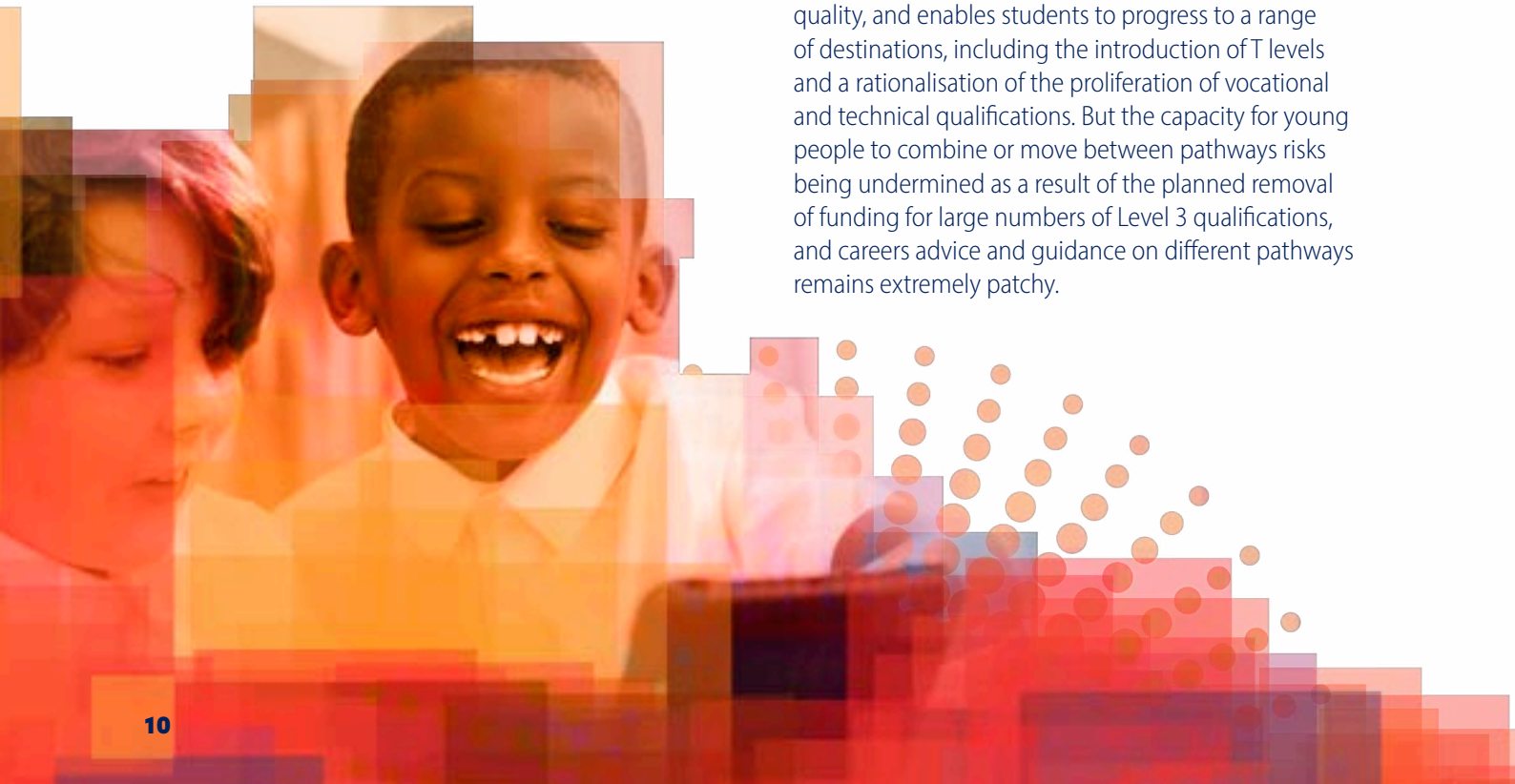
The current national curriculum is crowded, with equal weight given to aspects of learning which are crucial to future success, and those which are more peripheral. This (together with the impact of assessment and accountability – see building blocks 3 and 5 below) can lead to an overfocus on 'curriculum coverage' to the detriment of deep learning, and a lack of time to ensure that crucial knowledge and skills, such as those involved in reading and language development, are mastered. This is particularly damaging for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, who are less likely to acquire such knowledge and skills outside of school, and can lock them into a downward spiral as they increasingly struggle to engage with the curriculum.

We also lack a clear sense of national expectations for children and young people who are unable to access the national curriculum.

The current curriculum lacks coherence between early years and primary, and between primary and secondary. This limits the progress pupils make, and can lead to a lack of engagement.

The fact that the national curriculum is not compulsory in academies creates a two-tier system. While, to a significant extent, the curriculum is driven by national assessments at primary and qualification specifications at secondary (a problem in itself – see building block 3) and therefore major deviation from the national curriculum is unlikely, it remains problematic that more than half of pupils in England attend schools which are not formally required to follow the national curriculum.

There is an entrenched undervaluing of vocational and technical education in England, and an unhelpful elevation of the 'academic' over the 'vocational'. Welcome steps have been taken over the last few years to ensure that vocational and technical education is of a high quality, and enables students to progress to a range of destinations, including the introduction of T levels and a rationalisation of the proliferation of vocational and technical qualifications. But the capacity for young people to combine or move between pathways risks being undermined as a result of the planned removal of funding for large numbers of Level 3 qualifications, and careers advice and guidance on different pathways remains extremely patchy.



WHAT CHANGES WOULD WE LIKE TO SEE HAPPEN IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS TO CREATE OR STRENGTHEN THIS BUILDING BLOCK?

1 **A cross-party consensus behind a carefully planned, long-term approach to curriculum review, based on a ten-year cycle.**
A curriculum review body should be established which includes school leaders, governors, teachers, subject experts, parents, researchers, industry representatives, and politicians from all major parties. Its remit should be to determine a core national curriculum for early years, primary and secondary, focused on a relatively small number of carefully sequenced key concepts, with each phase building on the last. It should also set clear national expectations for children and young people who are unable to access the core curriculum, but are nevertheless equally entitled to a high-quality curriculum, suited to their needs.

2 **An agreement that the core national curriculum developed by this review body should be mandatory for all state schools for students up to the age of 16, with an agreed amount of specialism permitted from Year 9 or 10**.
This should include academies, in order to set a truly national expectation for the core education children and young people are entitled to receive.
There should be time and space around the core national curriculum for all schools, or groups of schools, to develop their own local curricula, to suit their context.

3 **Ongoing reform of vocational and technical education which prioritises quality and 'permeability' between vocational/technical and academic pathways, and enables students to progress to a wide range of destinations**.
This should include a rethink of current proposals to remove the funding for a large number of applied general qualifications (which, unlike T levels, can be studied alongside A levels), and an encouragement to higher education providers to include T levels and other high quality vocational and technical qualifications in their entry criteria.

4 **Improved funding, training and support for schools and colleges to provide high quality careers advice and guidance, particularly for young people from less advantaged backgrounds**.
This should take place at an appropriate level throughout primary, secondary and post-16 education, to open children's eyes to different possibilities, guide their choices, and ensure a wide range of options remain open to them for as long as possible. It should build on what we know makes a difference to young people's decision-making, such as having dedicated careers professionals working across a group of schools and colleges, the availability of high-quality online resources, opportunities for young people to be mentored by people in different roles beyond the school or college, and the involvement of parents and carers.

BUILDING BLOCK 2
TEACHERS AND LEADERS

Leaders, teachers and support staff in every school and college who have the expertise and capacity to develop and expand the core national curriculum into a high-quality local curriculum, and to provide the broader support children and young people need. This expertise is developed through strong initial teacher education, ongoing and effective professional development, and the sharing of knowledge and effective practice.

WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Teaching is seen as a prestigious and highly respected profession. All school and college staff are appropriately remunerated. The role of business leaders and other support staff is clearly recognised and valued.

All school and college staff are effectively supported, with appropriate and manageable workloads, commitments, and responsibilities. Teachers are not over-burdened with administrative responsibilities, to ensure they can focus on their core role.

Flexible approaches enable people to enter or remain in teaching and leadership whatever their personal circumstances. There are clear career structures in place for everyone working in our schools and colleges.

There is a national commitment to ensuring teachers and leaders can continue to develop their knowledge, skills and practice throughout their careers. For teachers, this includes the time and capacity to engage in research and development around curriculum design and implementation.

All teachers and other staff are able to work effectively with colleagues within and beyond their school or college. Everyone has the opportunity to plan collaboratively, and to share knowledge and expertise.

There are no disincentives to working in less advantaged schools or areas. On the contrary, the greater challenges involved in working in some schools or areas are fully recognised, and people taking on this challenge are incentivised and supported to do so.

HOW CLOSE ARE WE TO ACHIEVING THIS?

Teaching is not seen as a prestigious profession in England[8]. This lack of prestige has a number of problematic consequences. It makes teaching a less attractive career to high-performing graduates – particularly in maths and sciences. It diminishes teachers' self-esteem and professional identity. And it can lead to government over-reach – emboldening politicians to direct education practice at a level of detail that would be inconceivable in other professions, such as medicine or law.

The problem of prestige is compounded by long-term issues related to the pay and workload of teachers and leaders. The government's commitment to increasing the teacher starting salary to £30,000 is welcome, but its delayed implementation as a result of the public sector

8 The OECD's most recent Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) https://bit.ly/2VeJSBc reported that only 29% of teachers in England 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement that their profession is valued in society. While this number is marginally higher than the average across participating countries (26%), it has been falling over the five years preceding this study.

pay freeze is extremely disappointing. We also continue to have a damaging disparity in the pay, conditions, and recognition of business leaders, for whom seniority is too often not accompanied by commensurate pay[9]. And issues related to workload and stress for all teachers and leaders continue to be a major concern[10].

Until recently, England had experienced a progressively worsening teacher recruitment and retention crisis. Teacher training applications had dropped, targets had been missed, and teacher exit rates had increased, particularly early in teachers' careers. Worrying numbers of headteachers and other school and college leaders are leaving the profession after only a few years in post. The number of teachers leaving after around five to seven years is particularly concerning, as this is just when many are thinking of moving into middle leadership.

The pandemic has affected teacher and leader recruitment, retention, and workload in a number of different and complex ways. The resulting recession is leading to more people entering and staying in the teaching profession. And the Covid crisis may (despite what has too often felt like a barrage of negative messages from government and the media) have led to a greater recognition of the role and importance of teachers and other staff in our schools and colleges. But it's also possible that the increased stress associated with working in schools and colleges over this period may lead to more teachers and leaders leaving[11].

There have, however, been a number of extremely welcome recent initiatives to tackle some of these deep-rooted issues. The establishment of the Chartered College of Teaching as the professional body for teachers has the potential to raise the status of the profession (although it is still relatively new, and its long-term impact as yet unknown). We strongly welcome the introduction of the Early Career Framework, reformed National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), and emerging thinking about the development of a coherent professional development ladder for teachers and leaders. And we hope that the new Teaching School Hubs will evolve into effective mechanisms for encouraging collaborative development and the sharing of expertise.

But there remains far too little recognition in the English education system of the additional challenge of working in some schools than others. On the contrary, our accountability system actively rewards teachers and leaders working in more advantaged areas and penalises those working in more deprived areas[12]. This makes it harder to recruit teachers and leaders in disadvantaged areas, meaning disadvantaged children are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers, or teachers who aren't specialists in the subject taught, or in larger classes.

WHAT CHANGES WOULD WE LIKE TO SEE HAPPEN IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS TO CREATE OR STRENGTHEN THIS BUILDING BLOCK?

5 **An increased commitment to ensuring all teachers and leaders have access to, and time to engage in, high-quality professional development**.
This should be achieved through ongoing support to enable all schools and colleges to embed the Early Career Framework, ongoing investment in the development of NPQs, and encouragement for every school and college to have at least one member of staff who has undertaken the new NPQ in leading teacher development.

9 See Layout 1 ISBL https://bit.ly/3x41sF6 and Survey of School Business Professionals, 2019 https://bit.ly/377sFMs

10 The TALIS study cited above found that teachers in England reported significantly higher levels of stress than those in most other participating countries. Teachers in England also report spending significantly longer on administrative tasks than those in many other countries.

11 A recent ASCL survey, for example, found that over 50% of headteachers, deputy heads and assistant heads are considering leaving their role, with 28% of heads considering leaving education for either a role outside education or early retirement. 71% of respondents reported working additional hours than pre-Covid, and that this was a contributory factor to their desire to step down.

12 See Our latest statistics: a first look at the EIF - Ofsted blog: schools, early years, further education and skills https://bit.ly/3iXRG2j

We would also like to see the implementation of a pilot to ring-fence 20% of staff time for collaborative planning, coaching and CPD, to investigate the impact of this on pupil performance and teacher recruitment and retention, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged areas.

6 **An acceleration in the development of clear career pathways for teachers and leaders**.
This should include a framework and accompanying support for new leaders, to mirror the Early Career Framework for new teachers (including for business leaders transferring between phases and structures, or from outside of education). These pathways should include a strong focus on coaching and mentoring. It should also recognise, and seek to address, the additional barriers faced by some aspiring leaders, including women and those from BAME and LGBT communities.

7 **The honouring of the government's manifesto commitment to raise the teacher starting salary to £30,000, and for this to be matched across all pay ranges to maintain the current differentials between points and ranges**.
This should include a review of business leaders' pay to ensure their crucial role is appropriately recognised and remunerated. It should also include a review of pay levels in FE colleges, which are often significantly lower than in schools. As a principle, the government should commit to ensuring the pay of all staff in schools and colleges at least keeps pace with inflation.

8 **A shared commitment, across government and the profession, to support and encourage more flexible working practices in schools and colleges**.
This should include strategies to make teaching and leadership more attractive to people with young families or other caring responsibilities, to those nearing the end of their career, and to those considering moving into education from other careers. It should include research into how more flexible working can be introduced with no negative impact on pupils.

(Changes related to minimising teachers' administrative burden, reducing teachers' and leaders' stress, increasing collaboration and the sharing of expertise, and encouraging strong teachers and leaders to work in challenging schools are included in building blocks 4 and 5.)

BUILDING BLOCK 3
ASSESSMENTS AND QUALIFICATIONS

National assessments and qualifications which link seamlessly to the core curriculum and post-16 pathways. These are constructed in a way which enables all children and young people to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and to be recognised for this. Students' results in national assessments play a proportionate role in how schools and colleges are held to account.

WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

National assessments and qualifications at both primary and secondary are based on the core national curriculum, determined (as set out in building block 1) by a curriculum review body on a ten-year cycle. This means that they will, by default, be based on those aspects of learning which we have collectively determined are most important for future success.

Any significant changes to the content of national assessments and qualifications take place in response to changes to the national curriculum.

National assessments take place at carefully planned points during a child's education. This includes an end-of-primary assessment in Year 6, a more streamlined set of GCSEs at age 16, and appropriate post-16 assessments depending on the pathway a student chooses.

There is an appropriate balance between terminal exams and more modular assessments. The approach taken varies between subjects.

Developments in technology increasingly enable us to refine and improve our approach to assessment. Adaptive approaches mean that assessment can be more intelligent and personalised, enabling all children and young people to demonstrate what they can do, and reducing the amount of time pupils need to spend on national assessments to provide that evidence.

The system used to allocate grades to students in national qualifications is fair. It insulates young people from the natural dip in the performance of a cohort of students, through no fault of their own, when qualifications change. But it also ensures that no artificial ceilings are put on students' attainment – that there is no actual or perceived sense that, as the contributors to ASCL's *Forgotten Third* commission[13] so eloquently put it, some young people must fail so that others can pass.

The performance of a school or college's students in national assessments plays a proportionate role in how they are held to account, as part of a 'dashboard' of measures (see building block 5). The fact that they are only one measure among many limits the extent to which they distort the curriculum.

HOW CLOSE ARE WE TO ACHIEVING THIS?

National assessments and qualifications have undergone significant reform over the last six years. These reforms had been starting to bed down, although the pandemic has led to an entirely different approach needing to be adopted in 2020 and 2021, and will necessitate some changes in 2022 and potentially beyond.

13 ASCL - The Forgotten Third www.ascl.org.uk/forgottenthird

National assessments and qualifications currently significantly distort the curriculum, and put students, teachers and leaders under considerable stress. This is partly to do with the sheer weight of assessment, particularly at GCSE, where most 16-year-olds undergo more than 30 hours of assessment[14] over a four-week period. But it is particularly driven by the emphasis placed on national assessments and qualifications in our accountability system, with its reliance on performance tables which are heavily weighted towards students' performance in these assessments.

The number of assessment points at primary has gradually crept up over the last few years. Pupils now undertake national assessments in Reception, Year 1, Year 2 (if they don't reach the expected standard in the phonics check in Year 1), Year 4 and Year 6. In other words, only Years 3 and 5 are completely free of national assessments.

Most GCSEs and A levels are now based entirely on terminal exams, with no opportunity for any form of ongoing assessment, and no role for teacher assessment.

Most national assessments and exams are 'one-size-fits-all' paper-based tests. Beyond the option of foundation tier papers in GCSE maths, science and modern foreign languages, there is little adaptation of assessments to enable all pupils to demonstrate what they can do, or to reduce the burden of assessment by focusing on questions and tasks which align with the level at which a pupil is working.

The current approach to grading GCSEs, AS and A levels, based on 'comparable outcomes', protects students from the negative impact of qualification change. Exam boards control for the impact of qualification change by, essentially, setting grade boundaries to ensure that the numbers of students who achieve a particular grade each year is similar to previous years. However, this can also restrict the capacity for all students to demonstrate and be recognised for what they can do. It also makes it more difficult to demonstrate improvement (or, indeed, decline) at a national level. The national reference test provides a mechanism by which standards can rise, but this can only happen in a limited way. In the meantime, this approach is contributing to the 'forgotten third' of young people frustrated at not being recognised for what they can do, and perceiving themselves as failures.

WHAT CHANGES WOULD WE LIKE TO SEE HAPPEN IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS TO CREATE OR STRENGTHEN THIS BUILDING BLOCK?

9 **A reduction in statutory primary assessments to two key points: a phonics check in Year 1 and an end-of-primary assessment in Year 6.**
The phonics check has had a positive impact on the teaching of reading in primary schools, and should be retained. The end-of-primary assessment should focus on those aspects of learning which we have collectively agreed are the most important for future success, as determined by the curriculum review body. The current Key Stage 2 SATs should be replaced with adaptive assessments, which make much greater use of technology to ensure they are more intelligent and personalised, and enable all children to demonstrate what they can do.

The results of these two statutory assessments should form part of an 'accountability dashboard' against which primary schools are held to account, as one part of a wide range of measures (see change 20 below). Between these two statutory assessment points, schools should be free to determine their own approaches to ongoing assessment.

10 **A reduction in the burden of assessment at 16.**
This could include the reintroduction of more ongoing assessment over the course of a qualification, and potentially a 'stage not age' approach for some subjects, as advocated by the 'Forgotten Third' commission[15]. As at primary,

14 Pupils will spend eight hours extra sitting exams under new GCSEs | Tes News https://bit.ly/376H8bx

15 ASCL - The Forgotten Third www.ascl.org.uk/forgottenthird

it should also include a much greater use of technology, particularly adaptive approaches, to make assessment more targeted, reduce bureaucracy and costs, increase the accuracy of grading, and enable more young people to demonstrate and be recognised for what they can do.

11 **A review of the current comparable outcomes-based approach to grading GCSEs, AS and A levels**. This should include consideration of the pros and cons of the use of comparable outcomes in the system we wish to see – one based on a longer, carefully planned cycle of curriculum and assessment reform. It should also recognise that it will not be possible to compare the results of GCSEs and A levels in 2020, 2021 and (potentially) 2022 with other years, given the very different approach needed to be taken for those cohorts.

(Changes related to vocational and technical qualifications are included in building block 1 above. Changes to the role of national assessments and qualifications in accountability are included in building block 5.)

BUILDING BLOCK 4
RESOURCES

Sufficient resources for all schools and colleges to deliver the education to which we have agreed all children and young people are entitled.

WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

All schools and colleges have sufficient funding to ensure that children and young people receive the education to which they are entitled. This funding is based on a detailed, 'bottom up' analysis of what is required at each phase, taking into account the core national curriculum, the need for schools to supplement this with their own local curriculum, and the broader support, services and extra-curricular activities that schools and colleges provide to their pupils.

All schools and colleges have access to sufficient capital funding to properly maintain and develop their buildings and grounds. This enables them to meet the needs of the curriculum (including the provision of appropriate technology), ensure compliance with health and safety standards, and effectively address evolving environmental and sustainability issues.

The additional challenges faced by schools and colleges serving more deprived communities are appropriately recognised in their funding allocations.

Funding for children and young people with SEND encourages and enables early intervention and high-quality provision.

Funding allocations are sufficient to enable schools and colleges to recruit enough administrative staff to relieve teachers of some of the administration they currently undertake.

School and college funding is devolved to the level at which is it most effective, and doesn't require institutions to bid for disaggregated 'pots' of money to fund school improvement.

Broader social services for children and families, essential to ensuring children can succeed in their education, are also adequately funded. Schools and colleges are not expected to provide these broader services themselves, but in many cases local areas make a collective decision to co-locate services on school or college sites, to improve access and coherence.

HOW CLOSE ARE WE TO ACHIEVING THIS?

The introduction of national funding formulae for early years, schools, post-16 and high needs was a significant step. ASCL has long campaigned for a national funding formula, and we continue to believe that this is essential to ensuring schools and colleges are equitably funded.

However, we have significant concerns about the way in which these formulae work. The high needs formula in particular is not flexible enough to changes in local

needs (due to the historical funding weighting), not based around what we know about what predicts educational vulnerability, and not based on the real costs of the interventions required.

We welcome the promised increase of £7.1 billion to the schools budget by 2022-23, and the extra £400 million for 16-19-year-old education provided in 2020-21. We also welcome the additional funding the government has already provided to support schools and colleges with post-pandemic recovery, and look forward to further funding for education recovery over the coming months and years.

This additional funding, however, comes after years of underinvestment in education. UK spending on education has fallen in real terms by 8% since 2010. And the promised additional funding will largely need to be spent on the cost of the increased teacher starting salary. This is right and proper, but leaves little extra funding to be spent on anything else.

Additional funding will also, due to the methodology that the government has chosen to 'level up' investment in education, go disproportionately to schools and colleges with less deprivation[16].

Access to capital funding is inconsistent across different age ranges and types of school and college. The current distribution methodology lacks coherence[17].

We are particularly concerned about the impact of insufficient funding for SEND, which is leading to disastrous scenarios. The Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP), which should be the scaffold for planning and progress of individuals with complex learning profiles, has instead become the 'ticket' to funding, meaning early intervention opportunities are missed – particularly as EHCPs are so difficult to obtain. The significant overlap between children and young people with SEND and those from disadvantaged backgrounds means that insufficient high-needs funding hits them particularly hard.

The pupil premium serves a valuable purpose in supplementing the budgets of schools in direct proportion to the numbers of disadvantaged children they educate, ring-fencing an amount of money for those children, and holding schools account for how effectively they spend that money. The premium is, however, a fairly blunt tool, which makes no distinction between children who have only recently become eligible and those who have lived in persistent poverty for many years.

Too much of the funding for schools, particularly that aimed at school improvement funding, is fragmented, with schools and colleges having to bid for specific 'pots' of money. Struggling schools and colleges, which are disproportionately likely to be in deprived areas, are less likely to have the capacity and resources to do this.

Finally, cuts to wider social service budgets have particularly affected vulnerable families. This makes it harder for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds to learn, and means that schools and colleges often end up spending a significant proportion of their own stretched budgets on providing that wider support to children and families.

WHAT CHANGES WOULD WE LIKE TO SEE HAPPEN IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS TO CREATE OR STRENGTHEN THIS BUILDING BLOCK?

12 **The development of the national funding formulae into a clear, consistent approach to 0-19 funding, based on a detailed analysis of what every child and young person needs to succeed**.
This should align with the core national curriculum. It needs to be both sufficient overall, and appropriately distributed. It should include a refocusing of the current approach to 'levelling up', which too often serves to advantage the already advantaged. It should include sufficient funding to enable schools

16 See The National Funding Formula: consideration of better targeting to disadvantaged pupils - Education Policy Institute https://bit.ly/3xdCHGq

17 See www.gov.uk/guidance/school-capital-funding and https://bit.ly/3DVNYjA

and colleges to recruit enough administrative staff to relieve teachers of some of the administrative tasks they currently undertake, and consolidate the many different 'pots' to which schools can apply for funding.

13 **An increase in the amount of capital funding available to schools and colleges, and an improvement in the way in which this is allocated**.
Capital funding should be allocated on a needs-led basis, using reliable and current data on current and future numbers of pupils in schools and colleges, the condition of their buildings and their current information technology infrastructure. The total capital allocation must be set at a level that ensures sufficient capacity to meet any projected increases in pupil numbers and to replace or refurbish the school and college estate as required. The process for accessing funding for capital projects should be transparent.

14 **A reform to the pupil premium to include 16-19 year olds and to weight it towards pupils in persistent poverty**.
Schools should continue to receive the premium for all children who are currently eligible, and it should be extended to include 16-19 year olds. Children and young people in persistent poverty (those on free school meals for at least 80% of their time in school or college) should attract a higher premium, to recognise the additional challenges they face.

15 **A reformed approach to SEND funding, which moves away from the current deficit model (based on waiting for something to 'go wrong' and then trying to 'fix' it)**.
Currently, a lack of resources to support effective early intervention is leading to an over-reliance on obtaining EHCPs as the route to additional funding for children and young people with SEND. These are difficult and time-consuming to obtain, and often unnecessarily costly. Instead, the high needs formula should be sufficient to enable all schools and colleges to plan for and deliver outstanding education and support for children and young people with SEND, with no requirement for schools and colleges to meet some of these additional costs out of their core budget before additional funding is provided. The funding that individual schools and colleges are allocated through the formula should be based on predicted local needs, drawing on demographic data.

16 **Stronger pastoral and health support for children and young people funded and delivered beyond the school gate to reduce the burden on schools and colleges, and enable teachers to focus on teaching**.
This should include funding for social workers, youth and family workers, and mental health support. These services could be co-located with schools, but not provided by them.

BUILDING BLOCK 5
STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

Structures and systems which support and reward schools and colleges for providing all children and young people with a high-quality, broad and challenging education. These structures and systems encourage and enable everyone working in schools and colleges to act for the good of all children and young people, not just those in their own institutions.

WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

All schools and colleges are part of strong, supportive partnerships, in which every institution is both a 'giver' and a 'taker'. Staff in these partnerships work together collaboratively, and actively seek ways to share knowledge, expertise and resources. They are a key mechanism for supporting struggling schools to improve, and for the development and dissemination of high quality teaching and learning. They consider themselves collectively responsible for all the children and young people in the partnership, and work closely with other local education providers to ensure a joined-up approach across a local area.

The system is evolving towards a partnership model based on strong multi-academy trusts; this evolution is taking place at an appropriate pace, and with the support of schools and colleges of all types. But there continues to be a role for other forms of strong legal partnership, with shared governance, such as 'hard' federations of maintained schools, as well as looser collaborations between schools. These include partnerships between independent and state schools.

High-quality specialist provision, including alternative provision, is available in every area, and specialist providers are an integral part of local partnerships.

There is clarity and consistency around the role of different bodies, particularly 'middle tier' organisations such as local authorities and Regional Schools Commissioners. System governance, as well as the governance of individual schools, colleges and trusts, is strong.

Admissions processes to all schools are fair and easy to understand. They seek to prioritise children and young people from less advantaged backgrounds.

Schools and colleges are held to account in a proportionate, intelligent, supportive way. The accountability system recognises the different contexts in which different schools and colleges operate, and seeks to minimise potentially distorting effects or unintended consequences. It actively encourages organisations to work collaboratively for the good of all children and young people in a local area.

Schools are held to account against the national curriculum, and against a slim and intelligent set of nationally agreed measures which go beyond academic performance. There is also capacity for individual schools or colleges, or groups of schools and colleges, to determine additional measures against which they want to hold themselves to account.

Schools and colleges which serve more challenging communities are given greater support to enable their pupils to achieve the highest possible standards.

HOW CLOSE ARE WE TO ACHIEVING THIS?

Many schools now work together in effective collaborative structures, and our collective understanding is growing about the types of structures and approaches which are most likely to lead to genuine improvements in educational outcomes. The pandemic has required and incentivised schools and colleges to forge new partnerships, which could bring long-term benefits.

However, we lack a clear, shared vision for the overall structure within which schools and colleges should operate. There have been some heavy-handed attempts to coerce schools into becoming academies and joining multi-academy trusts, which have left some schools feeling resentful and unappreciated, and hampered attempts to create a more streamlined system. This somewhat chaotic approach to system reform has also led to the failure of some academy trusts (with serious ramifications for their communities), left some schools isolated and struggling to find effective support and challenge, and made it harder for strong schools to collaborate effectively and share good practice.

Access to high quality specialist provision, including alternative provision, is patchy, with some children and young people having to travel significant distances, or not being able to access appropriate provision at all.

The 'middle tier' between central government and individual schools, colleges and trusts is complex and confusing, with the roles of different bodies too often unclear or overlapping. One of the most pernicious effects of this is that it makes school support and improvement more difficult and less effective.

The school admissions code, rightly, requires schools to prioritise our most disadvantaged children and young people – those who are looked after or have previously been looked after – but there is little incentive for schools to prioritise other disadvantaged children in their admissions policies.

This lack of an incentive to inclusivity is exacerbated by England's high-stakes accountability system. This also leads to increased workload and stress for teachers and leaders (contributing to our issues with retention), a narrowing of the curriculum, and a tendency to pit schools and colleges against each other rather than encouraging collaboration.

Financial accountability can be equally high stakes, with the collapse of some trusts and re-brokering of individual or groups of schools, and the issuing of financial notices to improve to many others. Company law and financial accountability measures under which academies have to work have increased transparency in this part of the sector, but also create a discrepancy between academies and maintained schools.

Current accountability metrics, including Ofsted grades, correlate closely with factors outside of a school or college's control[18]. This makes it extremely difficult for schools to succeed in a system which sets one school against another, and doesn't provide sufficient additional support to schools and colleges serving more deprived communities. The impact of this is to actively discourage leaders and teachers from working in more disadvantaged areas.

WHAT CHANGES WOULD WE LIKE TO SEE HAPPEN IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS TO CREATE OR STRENGTHEN THIS BUILDING BLOCK?

17 **Opportunities and support for all schools and colleges to be part of a strong, sustainable group, in which every school or college both gives and receives support**.
The government should recognise that, while many of these groups will be multi-academy trusts, there

18 See *Our latest statistics: a first look at the EIF* (Ofsted blog: schools, early years, further education and skills) https://bit.ly/3xcvk2j

continues to be a role for other forms of strong legal partnership, with shared governance, such as 'hard' federations of maintained schools. Schools should be encouraged to form effective partnerships which suit their needs and contexts, with struggling schools strongly encouraged to join these partnerships in order to receive the support they need to improve.

Specialist and alternative provision should be an integral part of local partnerships. Independent schools should be enabled and encouraged to join or work closely with these partnerships.

18 **The evolution of the current, rather messy, 'middle tier' (including local authorities and Regional Schools Commissioners) into a clearer, more effective set of enabling organisations**.
We see merit in the proposals put forward by Matt Hood and Laura McInerney[19], and by the EDSK think tank[20], to streamline and clarify the middle tier. These propose slightly different models, but both involve the creation of a single structure with appropriate local democratic oversight and coordination.

19 **A review of the school admissions code to require all schools to do more to prioritise disadvantaged children**.
This review should consider the potential benefits of requiring all schools to prioritise all children eligible for the pupil premium, or all children in persistent poverty, in the same way as they are already required to prioritise looked after children and previously looked after children.

20 **The introduction of an 'accountability dashboard' or 'balanced scorecard' as the key accountability mechanism for all schools or groups of schools**.
This should include some nationally determined measures, based on the core curriculum, but also other measures that are nationally or locally considered important. Measures could include information on pupil outcomes (e.g. attainment measures, progress measures, destination data), on curriculum provision (e.g. subjects available, time allocations for different subjects), on staff development (e.g. teacher retention, time allocation for professional development), on inclusion (e.g. attendance rates, exclusion rates), and on the school or college's impact on and engagement with the broader education landscape.

Evaluation of a school or college's performance against the measures in this dashboard should form the core of the inspection process. In the immediate future, these measures will need to take into account the changes to statutory assessments and examinations during the pandemic. They should also reflect what we, both nationally and in individual schools and colleges, believe children and young people most need in order to recover from the impact of the pandemic.

21 **The introduction of a window of time between a leader taking on a new school, and that school being inspected**.
Improving a school, particularly one serving more disadvantaged communities, takes time. If we want to encourage strong leaders to lead challenging schools, they need to feel supported to do so. Many of the changes we call for in the Blueprint would, if implemented, encourage leaders to take on this challenge. Alongside these, we would also like to see an explicit agreement that, unless there are safeguarding concerns or a school explicitly requests an inspection, a school would not be inspected within two years of a new headteacher taking up post.

22 **The ability for Ofsted to inspect formal groups of schools**.
As more and more schools join multi-academy trusts and other formal partnerships, it is becoming increasingly anachronistic that the inspection regime remains predicated on a model of single, standalone schools. Currently, Ofsted can only carry out summary evaluations of the quality of education provided by a MAT by inspecting a sample of their

19 The Hoodinerney model or 'How to fix the school system' https://bit.ly/2VjypA2

20 TRUST ISSUES - reforming the state school system in England www.edsk.org/publications/trust-issues

schools, despite a MAT being a single legal entity. Careful consideration needs to be given to the framework under which MATs would be inspected, who would carry out those inspections, and how those individuals would be trained. This is, however, a nettle that needs to be grasped if we are to properly evaluate the impact of a system which increasingly relies on the ability of trusts to drive school improvement.

A FINAL WORD
ON EDUCATION RECOVERY

While we have, inevitably, referenced the impact of the pandemic throughout this document, this is not an education 'recovery plan'. Serious issues in how our system supports our most disadvantaged children and young people existed long before the pandemic. We must be more ambitious than simply putting together plans which enable us to 'recover' to the position we were in pre-pandemic. Our aim here has been to set out a long-term vision for our education system, together with a series of changes that we believe would take us closer to that vision.

It's impossible to ignore, however, the fact that the pandemic has affected disadvantaged children and young people to a much greater extent than their peers. They were less likely to have access to suitable devices on which to work during the lockdowns, less likely to have a quiet space in which to work, less likely to have parents who could support them effectively with their school work, more likely to have parents who lost their jobs or were furloughed at lower salaries, and more likely to have lost family members to the pandemic[21].

It's too soon yet to fully understand the impact of this on the already yawning disadvantage gap, but emerging research suggests it will be substantial and far-reaching[22]. This makes the need to implement the actions set out here even more crucial. Addressing the specific damage wrought by the pandemic on the life chances of children and young people will undoubtedly also require additional measures, above and beyond those included here. We have not attempted to specify those in this report, but will continue to work with the government and other organisations to do whatever it takes to help this generation of children and young people to recover and thrive.

CONCLUSION
AND NEXT STEPS

In our *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System* we have set out a vision for a system in which all children and young people receive a high-quality, broad and challenging education; in which no child or young person receives a lower standard of education as a result of their background or where they live; and in which schools and colleges are supported to do everything they can to counteract the socio-economic disadvantages faced by some children and young people. We have proposed five building blocks towards this vision, and set out a series of changes we think need to happen to create those building blocks.

Not everyone will agree with all of our proposals. And many of the changes we suggest need a great deal of thought and consideration before they are implemented. But we hope that this document can help to build a broad consensus around the principles for a stronger and fairer system, and encourage and inspire others to contribute to building that system.

For our part, we will do everything we can to drive the changes we want to see. We will use the plan set out in this document to guide our work with government and other organisations over the next five years. We will bring together groups of like-minded colleagues to help take forward these changes, and support other groups working towards similar aims.

We look forward to working with members, friends and colleagues on this journey.

21 See Schools responses to Covid-19: The challenges facing schools and pupils in September 2020 - NFER https://bit.ly/3BNAmWt

22 Best evidence on impact of Covid-19 on pupil attainment | Education Endowment Foundation | EEF https://bit.ly/3y8eRxc

ABOUT ASCL

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a professional association and trade union for all school and college leaders. We are proud to support and represent over 21,000 school and college leaders of primary, secondary and post-16 education from across the UK.

Our members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people, in both the state and independent sectors. We work to shape national education policy, provide advice and support to our members and deliver first-class professional development.

We speak on behalf of members and act on behalf of children and young people.

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ASCL Association of School and College Leaders

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Sam Twiselton
Elena Wilson

“

That which is not good for the swarm, neither is it good for the bee.

MARCUS AURELIUS

”

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