

A New Manifesto for Education

This updated Manifesto addresses what the SEA believes to be wrong with England's education system in 2026 - and how we think it could be put right.

There is much to be done. We recognise, however, that the damaging effects of fifteen years of austerity and Conservative reforms cannot be undone immediately and will take more than one parliament to complete. But there are many quick and relatively easy policy tweaks that could be introduced in the remaining period of this parliament.

Therefore, at the end of most sections we suggest some 'first steps' which, if implemented, would indicate to education workers and other stakeholders that the Labour government is genuinely committed to making a difference.

SOCIALIST EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION
SEA

Preface

In his 2026 Makerfield by-election campaign and first Commons address as Prime Minister, Andy Burnham spoke about Britain having taken a wrong turning in the 1980s. He described political power as becoming centralised, and economic power as becoming privatised.

Education represents one area where both things have been central to the changes since the 1980s, wreaking damage not only on the system itself but also to learners' lives and wider society. Across the last forty years a succession of governments has promoted the marketisation of universities, colleges, nurseries and even schools, resulting in fragmentation and the removal of education services from democratic oversight.

Around half of England's state schools are now controlled by 'multi-academy trusts' (MATs), unaccountable to communities or local authorities, leaving the control of these assets and state-funded school budgets in private hands. Over 80% of Early Years nursery provision is in private hands too. Because local authorities were prevented from opening schools of any kind themselves, specialist and alternative provision for children with the most challenging additional needs has been outsourced to the profit-making private sector. Many special schools are now in the hands



of off-shore private equity, with the result that local authorities (LAs) are now paying over £2bn every year to such private providers.

Furthermore, leading figures from those same MATs have gradually assumed influence over the supporting infrastructure of education, including inspection, teacher education and even government-funded initiatives to produce teaching resources.

In many ways government has lost the levers by which to effect beneficial change in the school and Further Education (FE) college system. With local authorities weakened and removed from a provider role, government is dependent on the profit motive of the private sector and the unwieldy bureaucracies of the academy sector. The Curriculum and Assessment Review (2025) and the SEND White Paper (2026) both identify problems in the system, but are incapable of addressing them effectively unless these core problems are dealt with too.

And the state-school system is hugely wasteful of resources. Unless the average size of a MAT is greater than that of an LA, the economies of scale are lost, even before we talk of the huge costs of MAT central bureaucracies. Much public money is bleeding off into the profits of investment funds and other private businesses.

Both Andy Burnham and Lucy Powell are absolutely correct to identify many of the school reforms introduced by the Tory administrations from 2010 onwards as having had a profoundly negative effect overall. The evidence is overwhelming: England has the unhappiest teenagers in Europe, a widening attainment gap for the disadvantaged, rising school absence figures, a curriculum and assessment system not fit for purpose and over one million young people not in education, employment or training ('NEETs').

Meanwhile, England's further education (FE) colleges - also removed from local authority control and no longer the community assets they once were - have been starved of funds and become reliant on casualised labour. British universities are likewise beset by multiple crises. Around 40% of universities reported deficit budgets in 2024-25 resulting in the cutting of courses and loss of 10,000 jobs across the sector. According to the Office for Students an estimated 24 higher education (HE) institutions are at risk of insolvency/closure within the next 12 months. Students in England graduate with by far the highest rate of debt in Europe.

Andy Burnham has identified devolution and public control as key policy drivers to address forty years of wrong direction. This updated Manifesto offers policy answers as to what these mean for education, and how they can be deployed to address the increasing crises in the system.



Overarching Principles

The SEA believes that:

• Education is a **universal right not a privilege** and that educational opportunities should be available throughout a person's life whatever their background, from early years provision through to adult education. Education which is accessible throughout people's lives **enhances the well-being** and **capacity of individuals to enjoy life,** supports intergenerational aspiration and adds value to communities and workplaces.

• Education should be **free at the point of use.**

• A Labour government should regard education, at whatever stage or age, as a **public good** – as an **investment** contributing to future economic growth and social cohesion.

• **Equality, inclusion and social justice** are values that should underpin the development of all government policy relating to education.

• Educational institutions should **share knowledge and skills,** be **accountable to learners and society,** whilst being **rooted in their local communities.**

• At every level, education involves a **partnership between teachers and learners.** Learners are not empty vessels to be filled with whatever the state or institution deems permissible; they come to schools, colleges and universities with valuable cultural and life experiences, as well as with their own creativity and aptitudes.

• Education **trade unions and service users** should have a meaningful voice in the development of education policy, both national and local.

• Working alongside educationalists, **high-quality youth services** should be publicly recognised for their vital role in enabling all young people to achieve their full potential.

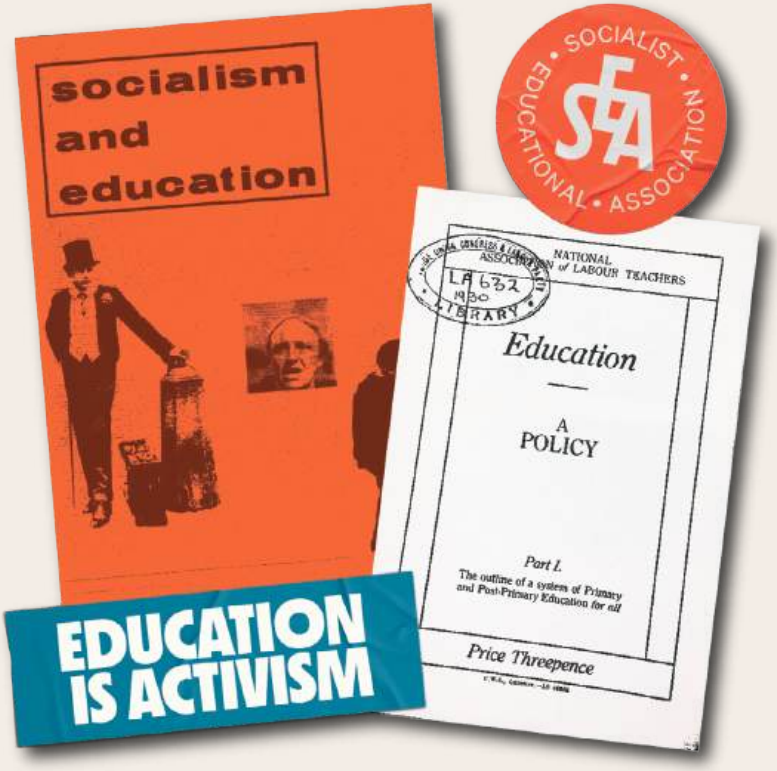


Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunity

Tackling child poverty

The SEA welcomes the Labour government's introduction of breakfast clubs and the expansion of free school meals eligibility criteria. However, we believe these policies could and should go much further. Therefore, as part of its broader child poverty strategy, ***the Labour government should:***

- Ensure nourishing free school meals are available to all primary school pupils, working towards the longer-term aim of offering free school meals for all pupils in compulsory state education.
- Provide all secondary pupils with devices to access school on-line resources, the internet and store their work.
- Reintroduce maintenance grants to support learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who wish to continue in full-time education post-16.



Building an Inclusive Education Service

Principles

The SEA believes that:

- The education of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) should not be treated as an add-on; inclusion must be planned as an integral part of the whole education system at whatever level.

- Partnership between providers, parents/carers and learners is necessary at all levels of the service.

- Local authorities' use of profit-making private schools, at a cost of more than £1 billion a year, must be phased out and replaced by planned local provision.

- For inclusion to be effective, every provider in an area must contribute, and specialist units should be established, wherever possible, within or attached to mainstream schools, and post-16 colleges where appropriate.

The SEA welcomes the Labour government's commitment to building an inclusive education service in which mainstream schools become the default providers for children with special educational needs and disabilities as stated in the SEND White Paper (2026).

In order to make this possible, the Labour government must provide the structures and adequate resources necessary to support a genuinely inclusive school system. The £1.6 billion to be allocated to schools over three years is nowhere near enough. It is merely equivalent to £14,000 per average primary school (insufficient to employ a teaching or admin assistant) and £48,000 per average secondary school.

As well as providing interventions and support staff, schools are to be tasked with writing bespoke individual plans for all SEND pupils and agreeing them with parents – meaning that an average secondary school SENCO (special needs coordinator) would be writing and monitoring around 200 plans. To avoid SENCOs sinking under a sea of bureaucracy funding for admin support is essential.

The conditions for change must be built deliberately and resourced honestly. A system shaped by decades of deficit thinking, adversarial processes and chronic underfunding cannot be transformed by new documentation frameworks, however well designed. Investing in relationships, in empowered SENCOs, and in genuinely co-produced support is not a distraction from inclusion but how we achieve it.

Therefore we believe ***the Labour government needs to:***

Inclusion and mainstream provision

- Grant and delegate greater powers to LAs over the opening and closing of schools, changing admissions, exclusions and the care of vulnerable and SEND learners.

• Ensure the 'Experts at Hand' panels are in place along with adequate CAMHS capacity before restrictions on ECHPs are imposed.

• Ensure local SEND strategic plans, co-produced with all stakeholders (including parents/carers), apply to all providers. These plans should incorporate the provision of leisure and social life for learners with SEND, and must recognise issues related to providing for complex special needs.

Funding

• Adequately resource schools to implement the reforms up front. Over time, savings will be made through the need for fewer EHCPs, ending private school fees and diverting a tranche of the higher needs budget directly to schools.

• Establish mechanisms for LAs to hold all providers to account for how SEND funding is spent.

• Significantly increase investment in SEND expertise in post-16 and further education settings to aid transition planning and support learners into work.

Workforce and training

• Reduce class sizes and increase staff ratios to create greater accessibility for neurodivergent pupils as part of the increase in school funding we recommend.

• Require that teacher education and training for all educators embraces inclusion and the Equality Act as a core professional requirement not a specialist add-on.



• Formally recognise and resource the SENCO role as a strategic leadership position in every school. SLT membership with protected non-contact time proportionate to SEND caseload, administrative support and a reinstated high-level mandatory qualification are prerequisites - not aspirations.

• Involve universities systematically as knowledge and training partners in SEND reform, not just as providers of initial teacher education.

Specialist services and early support

The SEA welcomes Labour's emphasis on early identification and support (eg., speech and language therapy). However, ***the government also needs to:***

• Recruit more educational psychologists and other specialists by reviewing their pay so that it matches that of privately commissioned work.

• Ensure that schools have ready access to support while awaiting outcomes of formal assessment and diagnosis. Providing early expert support for the 800,000 UK children with lifelong speech and language challenges, for example, would transform lives and save an estimated £8 billion annually.

Behaviour, exclusion and wellbeing

• Initiate a national strategy to work towards ending permanent exclusion, emphasising positive humane relationships and restorative justice, rather than 'Zero Tolerance' style behaviour policies.

• Set up a mechanism for scrutinising and monitoring school suspensions in each local authority to ensure that behavioural and exclusion policies are not impacting disproportionately on specific groups of students.

• Establish whole-school mental health and relational wellbeing as a system-level responsibility, not a bolt-on programme.

• In education policy-making, recognise that relationships are foundational to learning, not incidental.

First Steps:

• Capitalise on the current period of falling school rolls in order to reduce class sizes across all years of compulsory schooling.

• Set up training programmes for teachers and support assistants and grant schools extra training days specifically for SEND INSET.



Devolution and Regaining Public Control

Restoring funding

Labour should:

• Aim to bring compulsory-years education spending back to 6% of GDP in order to rejuvenate the service.

• Restore teachers, FE lecturers and support staff salaries in line with 2010 levels.

• Fund local authorities to provide central education services.

• Devise a new funding formula which allocates additional funding to bring local authorities in poorer regions up to the levels of funding elsewhere. Pupil numbers should be a much smaller element of the formula and actual staffing costs should be taken into account. This formula must not penalise schools with higher than average numbers of pupils with SEND.



• Commit to a schools building programme, devolving finance to local authorities.

Ending academisation, selection and returning schools to local democratic oversight

Labour should:

• Hand power back to communities as envisaged by Andy Burnham's devolution reforms, including by giving communities oversight over their schools and colleges and a voice in how they might best serve their locality.

• Acknowledge that there is no evidence that academisation and multi academy trusts lead to improved outcomes for learners. Labour must end this experiment and return schools to local democratic oversight.

• Abolish the Regional School Commissioners.

• Restore governing bodies with delegated powers to all schools and colleges. These should contain elected staff, parent/carer and student members. (NB: students would not be present for discussion of confidential items.)

• Impose an expectation on all schools and FE colleges to set up age-appropriate student councils and other forms of democratic engagement for learners, particularly important in the light of lowering the voting age to 16 years



• Give local authorities control over school admissions, including in-year or casual admissions. Enable them to plan overall provision in their areas, intervene with struggling schools, oversee SEND provision, and provide central services, such as - but not exclusively - supply staff, HR, and legal services for schools, as well as coordinating professional development programmes. This should be done in partnership with local FE colleges and other relevant stakeholders.

• Require LAs to widen the representation on school forums to include education trade unions, local employers, as well as parents/carers, ensuring more marginalised groups in the community are represented. Forums should have a voice on curriculum matters, school planning, SEND provision and equalities.

• Establish local forums for students, too, to discuss local education issues.

• Include the voices of parents and carers of children with SEND in formal, mandatory governance structures in schools and local authorities.

• End academic selection whether by ability or aptitude at all levels of state schooling 5-16. The remaining grammar schools should be integrated into the comprehensive system.

• Commission a working group to review how institutions select students for further study post-16 with a view to establishing a more level playing field and making schools directly responsible for the onward progression of their students.

First Step:

Withdraw the commitment included in the SEND White Paper to establish an all-trust schools system.

Youth services

Labour should ensure Local Authorities have a local offer which includes:

• Access to high quality youth work for every young person in their community. This includes open access provision as well as targeted opportunities that engage groups and individuals with specific needs.

• A youth work offer which is clearly educational and which provides young people with opportunities to engage locally, nationally and internationally with others face to face and/or through social media.

• The opportunity for young people to be involved and to take ownership of the local offer at every level. They should have the opportunity to influence the decision-making processes in the organisations that deliver services to them and in local democratic structures.

Inspection and Accountability

The Labour government should:

• Ensure schools and colleges are accountable for the safety and well-being of the young people in their care, by setting up a new NGO with powers to enter schools/colleges, including those in the private sector, to monitor and ensure children's safety and wellbeing, plus compliance with legislation including the Equalities Act.

• Give the new NGO the role of 'parent advocate' particularly in the case of disadvantaged parents/carers, refugees, and non-English speakers. It should also be the last port of call when complaints from parents/carers and learners have not been resolved.

• Abolish OFSTED and cease the practice of inspecting schools with ever-changing frameworks which create excessive workload and pressure on staff.

• Set up an independent peer review process for schools in the mould of the Challenge Partners organisation where staff from member schools review each other's provision led by an experienced external reviewer.

• Ensure reports on what the school does well and what it could improve are available to parents.

• Identify schools' areas of excellence (eg., teaching maths, inclusion, student voice etc) through the review process so that practice can be shared with other schools.

• Set up a similar review process for teacher education.

• Abolish the publication of school league tables. These do not account for the nature of a school's intake and provide a perverse incentive for excluding, off-rolling and refusing or delaying admission to children whose particular needs or circumstances mean their academic progress is likely to be slower than average.



First Steps:

• *Explore alternative mechanisms by which schools can be monitored and held accountable for their educational provision with a view to replacing Ofsted.*

• *Involve education unions, including those which represent classroom teachers and support staff, in all such discussions and at every stage of the review process.*

Restoring Teachers' and Educators' Professional Autonomy and the Integrity of Teacher Education

The Labour government should:

- Reaffirm their commitment to teaching as a graduate-only profession (including via the teaching apprenticeship route), promote undergraduate routes into teaching such as the three year B.Ed (including fast track routes for late joiners), provide bursaries for all PGCE students and support for Masters' courses to help overcome teacher shortages and the very low retention of early career teachers.

- Recognise the importance of restoring teachers' professional autonomy (eg., in matters of curriculum design, assessment and pedagogy) as a key factor in improving teacher retention rates.

- Abandon the 'market reforms' introduced by the last government, by abolishing the National Institute of Teaching and returning teacher education back to university education departments working in conjunction with schools.

- Remove the problematic Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework as a compulsory element of teacher education. The ITT ECF is widely considered burdensome and inflexible; it promotes a narrow view of teaching and pedagogy (eg., it is steeped in the 'knowledge rich' approach emphasising memorisation at the expense of developing creativity and critical thinking).

- Develop a set of statutary national professional and training standards for teaching assistants and support staff.

- Provide bursaries for training teaching assistants to national standards.

- Involve educators at all levels of school and college provision in discussions about the introduction of new technologies including AI, particularly in relation to packages designed to support learning, assessment and a range of administrative tasks.

First Steps:

- *Encourage recruitment of high quality entrants to the teaching profession by reintroducing ITE training bursaries for all subjects and phases.*

- *Abolish the National Institute of Teaching quango and return provision of teacher education to university education departments working within nationally agreed regulatory frameworks and standards (similar to the system pre-2022).*

- *Wind down the Oak Academy quango and instead provide adequate time and resources to support school staff implementing the revised national curriculum and assessment systems so that they can develop their own approaches and materials within the context of their specific learners and institutional contexts.*

Early Years

The dire state of the Early Years sector in England is characterised by the profit motive, privatisation, under-funding, short-termism, poor staff retention, unsuitable accommodation, under-trained staff, poor regulation and ineffective oversight.

In England the private sector runs 84% of nurseries as compared with only 2-3% in France and Germany (37% in Scotland). England has one of the lowest qualified Early Years workforces in the developed world, requiring only level 3 qualifications for nursery managers, and level 2 for at least 50% of other staff. Around 10% of staff have no qualifications at all. Staff wages can therefore be kept low – and profits high.

Principles

The SEA believes that:

- Children's well being and development should be the prime focus and driver of Early Years policy (rather than getting parents/carers back into the workforce).

- The longterm benefits of high quality EY provision are considerable in terms of better educational and mental health outcomes for young people.

- A high quality service depends upon a well-paid, well-qualified workforce and sufficient state funding to achieve this.

Whilst the SEA welcomes the Labour government's £1 billion increase in spending on Early Years education and care, the IFS states that due to rising costs, per hour funding rates have remained largely flat. The UK still spends only 0.4% of GDP on the sector compared with Germany at 1.1%. Likewise, Labour's policy to increase EY provision by expanding some school nurseries to accommodate 2-year olds falls short of its aims without the requirement that staff specially trained to work with this age-group be employed.

The Labour government should:

- Increase funding levels by £3 billion (as estimated by the IFS) in order to move towards a universal early years-service from 9 months old, which effectively combines both education and child-care roles.

- Ensure a career and qualification structure for Early Years practitioners up to degree level is in place and that the status of well-qualified staff is recognised through commensurate salaries.

- Reverse the changes to staffing ratios implemented by the Tory government.

- Enable and encourage early identification of children who may have additional needs and facilitate access to the relevant external services.

- Establish a new Early Years NGO which will put children first, with powers to develop and impose stronger regulations (e.g., access to outdoor space, number of babies per room), as well as inspect provision.

- Fund LAs to develop their own Early Years services and where neccessary take over inadequate provision.

• Move away from funding profit-making private sector providers to local authority run provision integrated into the rest of the education service.

The Early Years Framework

The current Early Years Framework is outcomes-based, designed to prepare children for formal education as from age 5 (the KS1 national curriculum). This framework is out of kilter with successful jurisdictions such as the Republic of Ireland, Finland and Estonia where the early years phase finishes at age 7 (age 8 in Scotland). In the English framework play is regarded merely as a 'teaching approach', not as an essential component or overarching principle as in other jurisdictions.

The SEA is concerned by the current government's decision to retain emphasis on the formal teaching of synthetic phonics in Reception, increasing the target to 90% pass rate in the screening check. This will lead to pupils who struggle with phonics spending more time in formal activities and less in play and social development.

Therefore, the ***Labour government should*** replace the current Early Years Framework and extend the Early Years phase up to age 7. It should commission a new Early Years Framework which:

• Is based on process rather than outcomes.

• Emphasises social development, imaginative play and communication.

• Operates holistically to meet the needs of the whole child.

• Incorporates guided play as integral to learning.

• Encourages children's creativity and curiosity.

• Recognises that Early Years child development is also the responsibility of parents/carers, the health service, and community organisations.

• Promotes equal opportunities and inclusion, whilst promptly identifying the need for early intervention.

• Uses assessment formatively as part of the learning process and produces a report at the end of the phase to support teachers in the next phase.

First Steps:

• *Increase funding in order to return staffing ratios back to 2022 levels.*

• *Start the process of removing responsibility for Early Years from OFSTED and setting up a new specialised NGO for the sector.*

• *Set up a review of the Early Years Framework with the aim of emphasising the role of play, social development and communication in early years education.*



Overhauling the National Curriculum 5-18

Principles

The SEA believes that a National Curriculum Framework should:

- Meet the needs of a democratic and diverse society.
- Enable understanding, build cross-curricular connections and ensure learners have the skills they need to thrive in the world, as well as acquire a body of subject-specific knowledge.
- Support learners in gaining an understanding of ways to foster social cohesion, reduce inequality, mitigate the effects of climate crisis and war, so that they have the skills to make a positive contribution to society in the future.
- Prepare all learners for the world of work.
- Respect the knowledge, languages and cultural experiences learners bring to education.
- Enable learners to recognise that the economy and society are open to change.
- Develop a high level of key skills including literacy, oracy, numeracy and the ability to engage with the digital world, understanding the drawbacks as well as the potential of AI.
- Foster imagination and a genuine joy in learning across all key stages.
- Encourage critical thinking about the media, including social media and the use of AI, as well as creativity and problem solving.
- Include a grounding in science and scientific method, an understanding of how human society is organised, has evolved and interacts with the physical environment.
- Introduce learners to the creative and artistic achievements of people now and in the past.
- Equip learners with the skills and knowledge to express themselves effectively by means of a wide range of communicative modes (including the spoken and written word, non-verbal communication etc), as well as through the arts.
- Affirm education's intrinsic value and allow learners to pursue their own interests and goals.
- Have inclusion at its heart so that all pupils can achieve their potential.

The SEA welcomes the Labour government's stated commitment to:

- Delivering digital literacy (which should include the benefits and drawbacks of AI in learning).
- Expanding climate and sustainability education.
- Improving arts education (although it should be noted that the reduction of funding for arts courses in higher education is likely to contribute to the shortage of teachers in this area).
- Introducing an oracy framework (but we would warn that the prevalence of written exams and tests across the age range, including the recommen-

dation for new tests in year 8, is likely to render oracy of lesser importance to school leaders).

• Developing technical and vocational courses post-14 that have equivalence in status with academic subjects.

Whilst we welcome the incoming Labour government's recognition that England's curriculum and assessment systems required revision, in our view the Francis Review (2025) unfortunately accepts too much of the status quo and misses the opportunity for much-needed radical change.

Therefore ***the Labour government should also:***

• Explicitly challenge - rather than accept as the Francis Review does - the narrow 'knowledge rich' approach of the current education establishment which emphasises memorising facts and procedures at the expense of exploration and deep understanding.

• Recognise that factual knowledge can be acquired in a range of ways, both inside and outside of formal education.

• Replace the current over-full national curriculum in England as soon as possible with a more flexible national framework, similar to those in the highest performing jurisdictions and the rest of the UK. The framework should leave room for both local communities and individual schools to customise the curriculum for their learners.

• Build a new primary curriculum which provides opportunities for learners to play, explore, create and



exercise curiosity. The new curriculum should be based on broad areas of learning with porous subject boundaries as recommended in recent reviews in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, as well as recommended by the 2009 Cambridge Review.

• Conduct an unbiased research-informed review into synthetic phonics as the only permissable approach to learning to read, and act upon its findings.

• Fund time for collaboration between school-based educators to develop curriculum projects and materials. Defund the Oak Academy model of centrally-produced, pedagogically narrow lesson templates.

• Ensure that any new curriculum features the history and achievements of our diverse communities. The curriculum should affirm the experiences of learners from all backgrounds and cover the record of the British Empire and its impact on those colonised.

• Abolish the EBacc which acts to maintain the primacy of certain forms of academic knowledge over the arts and vocational/technical skills, thereby creating a barrier to those learners from less affluent backgrounds. Arts education must be an entitlement for all learners, not just consigned to after-school activities.

• Introduce a 14-19 diploma framework which, alongside a core offer, would include a project, work-based learning, citizenship activities etc. and enable the development of a range of options. The latter would include academic, vocational, technical and creative courses. FE colleges should be given a role in providing some pre-16 technical courses.

• Abolish the requirement for collective daily worship, and for compulsory religious education post-14.

• Ensure that any further review of the national curriculum includes representatives of the teaching profession, professional subject associations, universities and relevant trade unions.

First Steps

• *Reduce the external assessment burden on schools (see assessment section below) so that time is made available for more creative and holistic curriculum approaches.*

• *Shift funding to school and area-based curriculum projects rather than the Oak Academy quango.*

• *Abolish the EBacc in its entirety.*

• *Set up a 14-19 working group.*



Introducing Fair Assessment and New Qualifications 5-19

One of the glaring omissions of the Francis Review is that assessment remains largely unchanged with continued reliance on high-stakes exams. The Review offers insufficient exploration of alternative assessment methods, such as project-based learning, portfolios, or moderated teacher assessments, which could provide a more holistic view of student achievement and reduce exam-related stress. Reform in this area is crucial if curriculum content and assessment are to support a broader range of achievement, skills and learning styles.

Principles

A renewed emphasis should be placed on formative assessment which:

- Is an integral part of a quality learning process.
- Emphasises teacher judgements translated into actionable feedback.
- Involves the learner directly in reviewing their own progress.

National External Assessment and Qualifications 5-19

Labour should:

- Endorse the More than a Score Campaign and abolish primary SATs together with the phonics and multiplication tables check. These should be replaced by moderated teacher assessment alongside use of standardised tests where appropriate. The current primary school SATs distort the curriculum in years 5 and 6 where test practice dominates, thereby preventing the development of a new, more fluid and exciting primary curriculum.



• Support the development of a model of assessment for qualifications which should involve a wider range of assessment methods including an online learner profile, modular assessments, practical tasks, projects and examinations.

• Move away from all forms of norm-referencing which ensure around one-third of each GCSE cohort fails to achieve a 'pass' grade – presenting another barrier to opportunity. Commit to ensuring that a grade reflects an individual learner's achievement against criteria regardless of what other learners achieve.

• Introduce a 14-19 baccalaureate/diploma style qualification, similar to the model being explored in Manchester and re-visit the Tomlinson Report (2004) to incorporate and/or replace GCSEs, A levels, BTECs, and T levels. The qualification should recognise different levels of achievement rather than stigmatise failure. Assessments should be taken when students are ready. Learners should be able to pick vocational, technical and academic elements which will be of equivalent value and be able to switch institutions at 16.

• Ensure guidance is provided so that that decisions taken at 14 do not close future career opportunities for young people.

• Give all young people access to expert and neutral careers advice and guidance including full information about all post-14 opportunities. Simplify the process of applying for post-16 courses, including making it easier for students to move between institutions at that age.

First steps:

• End primary school SATs and other externally-set tests up to and including those being proposed at Key Stage 3.

• Relax the restrictions imposed on exam boards in order to encourage the development of modular assessments, projects, and practicals combined with terminal examinations.

• Establish an 'Assessment Reform Working Group' involving education academics, education unions and others, as well as drawing on work previously carried out on assessment for learning by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA).



Improving Further Education, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning

General principles

The Labour government should:

- Encourage individuals to study at universities, colleges, in adult education and evening classes on programmes that meet their needs, provide opportunities to develop new interests and gain further and higher education qualifications, including higher level and degree apprenticeships.
- Turn the clock back on the marketisation and free-market principles that have been applied to universities, colleges and life-long learning.
- Introduce radical new policy and funding arrangements to support aspiration, co-operation, and collaboration in teaching, learning and research and ensure that further and higher education institutions receive adequate public funding to support teaching, learning and research.
- Follow the example of the Labour Government in Wales and introduce improved student support systems.
- Restore maintenance grants for full and part-time students, with accessibility to loans for the latter commencing at a study threshold of 25%.
- Invest in further, higher, and adult education as part of local and national growth strategies, bringing monetised and non-monetised benefits to individuals, the economy and wider community, and progressing the green prosperity agenda to which Labour should be committed.
- Encourage universities and FE colleges to end the casualisation of all types of staff (teaching, research, academic-related and professional services) working in HE and FE, awarding them decent pay and working conditions.

Further and Higher Education and the climate emergency

Labour should:

- Ensure that addressing the climate emergency is central to the mission of further and higher education in order to develop a workforce able to meet the challenges in transitioning to net zero.
- Develop in students an understanding of issues around climate change, including its international dimension and the importance of worldwide climate justice.
- Ensure that all trainee teachers are equipped to explore climate action with all learners across all subject areas.
- Support universities and colleges in divesting from fossil fuels, minimising the carbon footprint of their estates and working towards challenging targets to achieve net zero.

Further Education

The Labour government should:

- Devolve decision making and funding for local skills strategies, the provision of post-16 and adult education, job centres, return to work programmes and the monitoring/oversight of all providers to local democratically accountable bodies in collaboration with employers, unions, HE and training providers.

- Reverse cuts to post-16 education and training made since 2010. Ensure funding can support pay comparability between FE staff and the school sector, increased security of tenure for FE staff, improved conditions of service and the recruitment and upskilling of staff to meet the changing needs of the economy.

- Increase funding to allow for enhanced contact time for all students, a common broad wrap-around curriculum, and a third post-16 year for those who need it.

- Ensure that the further and adult education system can meet the skill demands of the transition to net zero.

- Reintroduce the Education Maintenance Allowance for 16-19 year olds, including support for those undertaking apprenticeships in the same age group.

- Provide free tuition for first-time students aged 19 years and over to study for Level 3 qualifications.

- Learn from the Welsh Labour government's student support initiatives.

- Ensure that benefit rules are not an obstacle to adults seeking to retrain.

- Ensure there is good provision and adequate in-college support for all groups of vulnerable students including those with disabilities, those who are care experienced, young carers, teenage parents, benefit recipients, refugees and asylum seekers.

- Implement the proposals for curriculum and qualification reform set out in the curriculum section of the SEA manifesto. End the defunding of applied general (BTEC) courses until a new diploma/baccalaureate is in place.

- Bring back the governance of FE Colleges to local democratic oversight.

First Steps:

- *Abolish Skills England in favour of devolved, regional governance.*

- *Significantly increase pay for staff working in FE with a view to addressing the pay gap between FE and school teachers (estimated on average to be around £10,000 a year).*

- *Reintroduce the Education Maintenance Allowance for 16-19 year olds, including support for those undertaking apprenticeships in that age group.*



Higher Education

The Labour government should:

- Ensure that promoting access, participation and success is matched by a funding system which supports students during and after their studies, rather than pushing them into debts that will never be repaid in full.

- Bring England into line with Scotland and other jurisdictions in Europe by providing free or low-cost tuition for undergraduate courses for first time students.

- Ensure that postgraduate students have access to loans and student support.

- Introduce a student debt relief scheme for students and graduates for whom the Coalition and Conservative Governments tripled tuition fees from 2012 onwards.

- Introduce new and more equitable funding regimes aimed to support the sector more broadly, but in particular those universities struggling financially in the context of a competitively skewed market.

- Replace the Office for Students with a Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC). This should be an arm's length body with responsibility for the allocation of teaching grant, widening participation in all regions and holding universities and colleges providing higher education to account in respect of their governance, the investment of public resources and the terms and conditions on which they employ both academic, other professional and support staff.

- Abolish the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which in its latest incarnation has become a tool of OfS compliance and will adversely affect those institutions with a more inclusive student profile. Instead, re-establish the QAA in England.

- Unlike in Scotland and Wales, the weakening of criteria by which institutions can be awarded university title and/or their students entitled to student support, has resulted in over 400 higher education providers being registered by the OfS in England, around a quarter of which are for-profit providers.

Therefore, the SEA also recommends that the Labour Government:

- Reviews the criteria for university title in England.

- Ensures that institutions accessing public resources via student support and teaching grant are not-for-profit organisations.

Research

The SEA welcomes the Labour government's reinstatement of the Horizon research programme. Labour should also introduce a more equitable research funding system which:

- Ensures that all not-for-profit universities with degree-awarding powers receive research funding.

- Promotes collaboration and the joint use of research facilities.

- Supports regional needs, innovation, and applied research.

• Addresses the casualisation of the academic workforce.

Arts and humanities

The Labour government's emphasis on technical and vocational education should not be at the expense of arts and humanities courses. Equal access to the study of the arts and humanities is crucial to a more equal society. The creative industries make a greater contribution to the UK's GDP than the pharmaceutical sector and the media trope of 'mickey mouse' degrees is inaccurate and misplaced.

The Labour Government should:

• Abolish the Tories' flawed definition of 'quality' degree courses.

• Reverse recent government cuts to the funding of arts and humanities and make clear that their study is valuable for its own sake.

• Ensure that study of the arts and humanities is affordable and accessible for all, whatever a student's background.

• Restore the teaching grant, recognising that higher education is a public benefit rather than a commodity to be funded by individuals.

Internationalism

Trans-national education programmes and the study by international students in the UK enrich our universities as institutions and their students socially and intellectually. While the SEA congratulates the Labour government on its successful renegotiation of the Erasmus programme, Labour should now go further in supporting student mobility and expanding opportunities for international students to study in the UK and UK students to study overseas.

The SEA recommends:

• Removing international students from the immigration figures, reviewing the cost and complexity of student visa requirements and reversing the levy on international student fees.

• Ending the implementation of hostile environment immigration policies in higher education, which create a climate of fear and inequality between home and international students.

• Introducing support schemes which help UK students to study for some of their course overseas.

First Steps:

• Abolish or radically reform the costly and overly-bureaucratic Office for Students (OfS).

• Abolish the TEF (the Teaching Excellence Framework) and re-establish the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) which formerly operated in England and continues to operate in Wales and Scotland.

• Reduce the debt burden for graduates (eg., the re-introduction of maintenance grants, the reduction of interest charged on existing loans and increase the hosuehold income threshold for student support).

• Reverse cuts to the funding of arts, humanities and nursing degrees.

• Regulate the allocation of student numbers across HE institutions.

Lifelong Learning

Qualifications should all fit into the national qualifications framework so that learners can return to formal and informal education at any time in their lives. They should also be able to move across the framework to courses in areas which are new to them. The SEA believes that the academic vs technical and vocational debate is a false divide which diverts attention from what is really required to deliver Labour's green prosperity agenda, namely:

- Investment in all qualifications whatever their level with credit transfer built into funding regimes.
- Student support systems which are accessible to potential students including those already in the work-force.
- Funding to develop new provision to increase participation at levels 4/5 and foundation years.
- Incentives to encourage collaboration with employers.
- Further relaxation of Equivalent Level Qualification (ELQ) rules which generally require students to self-fund study for courses which are at the same or lower level to qualifications which they have already obtained.
- Provision of free access for adults to courses up to and including Level 3 including the right to retrain in new skills.



First Steps:

• Investigate the implementation of a more joined-up approach that enables young people not in education, employment or training ('NEETs') and vulnerable adults to access available programmes of training or study.

Access to programmes not leading to qualifications

Not all lifelong learning need or can lead to qualifications. There is a huge need for programmes that aim at personal growth, cultural and artistic development, citizen involvement, community engagement, parent and family education, and more. In order to promote non-qualification oriented learning, we call for:

- A wide range of daytime and evening courses accessible to all regardless of where they live, physical impairment, income, or previous educational experience.
- Childcare support for learners and teachers.
- Courses devised in conjunction with community organisations designed to meet local demands.
- A de-casualised workforce with access to career development opportunities.
- Employment of professional staff to foster programme and curriculum development within colleges or free-standing adult/community education establishments.

Apprenticeships

It is right that a Labour Government should have an ambitious strategy to promote, but also re-establish apprenticeships as a primary route to secure, paid employment for school and college leavers. Apprenticeship availability and entitlement should be a fundamental part of the Youth Guarantee (2024 Labour Party Manifesto).

In order to achieve this, ***Labour must:***

- Significantly increase spending on apprenticeships.
- Reform the levy to ensure adequate and equitable funding is provided by large employers.
- Commit additional resources to ensure smaller and medium size enterprises (SMEs) are able to cover all apprenticeship training costs, but also benefit from employment subsidies if and when necessary.
- Ensure that public sector targets for the employment of apprentices are properly implemented.
- Ensure that private contractors providing major services for government are required to recruit apprentices.
- Ensure that apprenticeship training and availability is integral to Labour's plans for new green jobs.
- Create and develop apprenticeship training boards for major economic sectors.
- Ensure that local authorities, employers, trade unions and, in particular, colleges and universities (rather than private training providers) are involved in the development of apprenticeships at local level.
- Support Level 2 and 3 apprentices with funding for travel and other costs associated with their apprenticeship.



First Steps:

- *Set up monitoring mechanisms to ensure that public sector organisations are employing the appropriate number of apprentices.*
- *Provide Level 2 and 3 apprentices with funding to cover travel and other incidental costs.*

Another Education Service is Possible

Lucy Powell, Secretary of State for Education in Andy Burnham's government, has pledged to 'rewire the entire education system to give young people from all backgrounds the chance to thrive.' We wholeheartedly support this aim – but we know that it will require significant political will to make it happen. We therefore urge Labour ministers to face down the loud voices of those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo, and start the process of creating an education service which genuinely breaks down barriers for the majority of learners.

Further Reading

SEA publications

For short articles covering many of the issues addressed in this Manifesto, see the SEA blog, available at https://educationpolitics.substack.com/

For a more detailed critique of the 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review ('The Francis Review') see the SEA publication available from Manifesto Press:

Coles, J., Barter, D., Bolt, J., Duckett, I. & Whiting, J. (eds.) (2026) *After the Review: Reimagining Curriculum and Assessment.* SEA/Manifesto Press.

Useful reports (this is not a comprehensive list)

APPG Education (2025) *Inquiry into 'the loss of the love of learning'.* https://educationappg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/APPG-LoL-Report.pdf

APPG SEND (2025) *Reforming the SEND System in England.* https://www.naht.org.uk/about-us/organisations-we-support/all-party-parliamentary-group-on-send

The Cambridge Primary Review (2009): https://web.archive.org/web/20120201215116/http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/CPR_revised_booklet.pdf

14-19 *Curriculum and Qualifications Reform* (AKA 'The Tomlinson Report', 2004): https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20050301194752/http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/documents/Final%20Report.pdf

Who can join?

SEA membership is open to all Labour Party members and anyone who is not a member of another political party.

Teachers, students, parents, MPs. local councillors, school governors and anyone interested in education and learning can join our movement.

We have a branch for you, whether you are in Croydon or Cardiff, so get involved today.

Why should I join?

As a member you'll be able to:

- Take action campaigns to build a socialist programme for education.
- Influence Labour Party policies.
- Read and contribute to our fortnightly blog.
- Receive an annual journal and any other publications.
- Attend free SEA events, from fringe events at Labour Party conference to our annual general meeting and Caroline Benn memorial lecture.



2026

Join the movement today

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Graphics by Small Axe Communications

Design layout by PrintHub