Impetus

Impetus Submission to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

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Impetus is the leading impact funder. We exist to help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve meaningful outcomes: engagement in learning, passing key GCSEs in English and maths, and getting a job. These outcomes are the best predictors of young people growing up to get a good job and have a good life.

Our model centres around building strong organisations that are delivering the most promising interventions to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. We do this by giving portfolio partners three essential ingredients for making real impact:

- Long term unrestricted funding for sustainability and growth
- Years of hands on, intensive support from our team and other partners to focus
- their mission, understand their impact and develop their leadership team
- A policy platform to build the case for large scale government intervention through research, media profile and building coalitions for change

In 2023/24, we reached almost 400,000 young people and delivered £7.6 million of value, including grants, expertise provided by our pro bono partners and the hands-on support from our Investment team.

Over the past 5 years, our partner organisations. have worked with 1.4 million young people cumulatively, through funding interventions in schools or in partnership with schools, driving outcomes1 for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Because we partner with organisations working at the coalface to tackle the most pressing challenges around school attainment, engagement and employment, we are able to combine their valuable insight with our own research. Using this, we have set out our views in relation to the government's review of the existing national curriculum and statutory assessment system in England, to ensure they are fit for purpose and meeting the needs of young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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Introduction

The Curriculum and Assessment Review was set up in 2024 to review the national curriculum and statutory assessment system in England. Based on the belief that our national curriculum should be "cutting edge, fit for purpose and meeting the needs of children and young people to support their future life and work", the Review will seek to address the key barriers to achievement in the current curriculum and assessment system

Context

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have worse outcomes at every stage in the journey from school to work.

Out of the whole school population, 24% of children are currently in receipt of Free School Meals (2.1 million children). But in 2022/23 they made up 55% of suspensions from school (787,000 suspensions). And in March 2024 more than 1 third of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds missed more than 10% of their lessons.

If you struggle to engage with school then you cannot learn, which risks holding this group of young people even further back, when currently only 43% of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds pass their GCSE English and maths exams, compared to 73% of their better off peers.

As a result, the gap in employment outcomes for this group isn't getting narrower either. 978,000 18-24 year olds are currently out of education, training or employment (NEET), and young people disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to be NEET as their better off peers.

Impetus transforms the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds by investing in the best education and employment non-profit organisations. We give them long-term funding, pro-bono support and our strategic expertise, and influence policy to deliver systemic change, so that more young people get the education, qualifications, and opportunities they need for a fulfilling life.

Having supported organisations working at the coalface for over two decades, we wanted to spotlight their impactful work, which is driving real change. Here, we share what we know works to get young people back into the classroom, to achieve key qualifications like GCSE English and Maths and to ensure they are either learning or earning.

12. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

Social and Emotional Skills

Only 43% of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds pass GCSE English and maths, compared to 73% of their better off peers.

This disadvantage gap is mirrored, and potentially exacerbated by a social and emotional skills (SES) gap. The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) on social and emotional competencies found while children with families in the highest fifth of household income have a 5% chance of having emotional issues, this increases to 20% for those in the lowest fifth. Meanwhile, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and poverty, are related to lower social- emotional competency.

Our recent research2 in partnership with ImpactEd has found that children eligible for Free School Meals/Pupil Premium have lower baseline levels of SES compared to children not eligible. We also found the following:

1. a relationship between lower SEL scores, lower attendance, and higher exclusion rates
2. a fairly strong relationship between higher attendance and higher SEL scores against all five scales, with motivation appearing to show the strongest correlation.
3. a relationship between higher scores in self-efficacy and a higher final GCSE grade in English and maths (though this dataset is small)

England's education policies have, in recent years, shifted away from policies that aim to develop SES explicitly, prioritising an academic focus instead. Our work with the Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) found this approach doesn't align with evidence on what works. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are at the sharp end of these changes in policy. Not only do they score worse on SES, but also have fewer opportunities to access them in comparison to their more advantaged peers.

Oracy

A further barrier for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is poor language development. At school entry, spoken language development for children from disadvantaged backgrounds is significantly lower than their more advantaged peers who are, on average, 19 months ahead. This gap widens as students move through school. There is strong evidence to suggest the critical role of early language in

children's life chances, with language at age five the most important predictor of literacy at age 11. At secondary school, students' GCSE results (at age fifteen) can be strongly predicted by their vocabulary at age thirteen.

In partnership with our portfolio partner, Voice 21, Impetus supported the work of the Oracy Education Commission (OEC), which published its report in September 2024, drawing on 94 submissions of written evidence; 58 submissions of oral evidence and a number of expert roundtables. The Commission defined oracy as "Articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication" and made a series of recommendations on how it could best be implemented.

While the current National Curriculum does include statutory requirements for the teaching of spoken language - both in English programmes of study and for particular subjects such as science and maths - there are a number of barriers to its successful implementation, as outlined by the Oracy Education Commission:

1. Firstly, there is a gap between the ambition of the current National Curriculum and how it is enacted in schools.
2. The role of spoken language been 'downgraded' in favour of a greater focus on 'Reading' and 'Writing.'
3. The curriculum's approach to spoken language heavily emphasises traditional models, such as presentational talk, poetry recitation, and 'standard English'. The focus on 'standard English' risks devaluing other 'non-standard' dialects of English.

The OEC found the National Curriculum currently "signals to schools and teachers that spoken language is less important than reading and writing" and doesn't provide sufficient guidance for how spoken language ambitions can be achieved. Indeed, when giving evidence to the Commission, Robin Alexander stated "'85 pages of the current National Curriculum Framework Document are devoted to reading and writing, spoken language has just three!"

The deprioritisation of oracy education is a barrier to securing better outcomes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who stand to benefit from it most.

18. To what extent does the content of the a) English and b) maths national curriculum at secondary level (key stages 3 and 4) equip pupils with the knowledge and skills they need for life and further study? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim?

The link between oracy and English is well established. Statutory requirements for the teaching of spoken language are outlined in the English programmes of study. In terms of the mutual benefit of oracy and English, the Ofsted review recently found 'a strong command of the spoken word is a crucial outcome of English education.

As outlined by the OEC's report, it is common to use complex literary or disciplinary texts to introduce students to subject-specific arguments, narratives, or formal reports. This approach supports the development of young people's vocabulary, understanding of idiomatic expressions, and their ability to structure an argument effectively. Oral interaction is also used to help students engage with and respond to texts.

In their report, the OEC suggested three separate dimensions which make up the conceptual framework for oracy education

1. Learning to talk: To develop effective speaking, listening, and communication skills, young people must be taught to communicate in various contexts. The Oracy Framework outlines four interrelated strands of oracy skills: physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social-emotional.
2. Learning through talk: Oracy is also a key pedagogical tool that involves strategic use of talk to enhance learning. Through productive discussions—whether whole- class, group, or one-to-one—students can share, develop, and critically engage with ideas, deepening their understanding. Research supports the effectiveness of dialogic teaching, with implications for student engagement, attainment, and curriculum knowledge, especially in subjects like English, maths, and science. Additionally, talk offers an efficient way for teachers to assess understanding and address misconceptions.
3. Learning about talk: Young people need to learn about spoken language to make informed communication choices, understand language diversity, and recognise communication needs, such as using sign language. This helps them challenge language discrimination and develop critical awareness.

Using this framework, the OEC offers examples of where oracy education may be embedded into the curriculum and specific subjects such as English:

- Learning through talk:

"In English, students use group discussion to examine how a writer's choices affect the reader. They use examples from novels and poetry to support their ideas and listen attentively to others' reasoning to develop their own critical responses."

- Learning about talk:

  "In English, history, and geography, pupils explore patterns of language change over time, examining how regional diversity develops and how the relationship between language and culture shapes the unique human stories that define a place."

  "In English, students consider how language works in society through conducting an investigation into spoken language in a specific context such as the school, home, work"

19. To what extent do the current maths and English qualifications at a) pre-16 and b) 16-19 support pupils and learners to gain, and adequately demonstrate that they have achieved, the skills and knowledge they need? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support these outcomes?

Our Youth Jobs Gap project found each step up the qualifications ladder halves your chances of being NEET. Yet, only 44% of young people on free school meals pass English and maths GCSEs, compared with 72% of all other pupils. Worse still, our Life After School: Confronting the crisis research report found only a minority of young people who miss out on a grade 4 or above by age 16 have secured the crucial grade by age 19, with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds less likely to catch up than their better off peers.

We believe with the right support all young people can succeed and that our education system should be focused around ensuring they are able to achieve these crucial English and maths qualifications.

Many FE students are taking other Level 2 English and maths catch-up courses, commonly Functional Skills, rather than GCSEs. These qualifications, while increasing in recognition, are still relatively unheard of. There is little evidence they translate to better outcomes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, little data available measuring their progression potential and they lack the currency amongst employers that GCSEs hold.

Oracy

The GCSE Spoken Language Controlled Assessment previously required students to explore both their own and others' spoken language, including examples from the media and mixed forms of communication e.g. internet messaging services. This component allowed students to investigate the nuances of spoken language in various real-life contexts, fostering a deeper understanding of how language functions in society.

Since the removal of the Spoken Language Controlled Assessment from the English Language GCSE in 2014, opportunities for students to study spoken language have become limited. The content of the secondary English language curriculum and the GCSE qualification is now widely regarded as inadequate in providing students with meaningful engagement with spoken language.

Barbara Bleiman, in her evidence submission to the OEC stated: “GCSE Spoken Language Controlled Assessment had a fundamental impact [on teaching about talk

and listening]. It was loved by teachers and students. They had to come up with their own spoken language investigation and then write it up. As a result of that, lots of English teachers learnt more about language because they were doing so much work around spoken language. It also fed really well into English Language A Level because children got enthused by it. Teachers also felt empowered [... to teach about spoken language and listening] at Key Stage 3 because they were preparing for GCSE."

Since the change of spoken language to an endorsement rather than a requirement, oracy has had no direct place in the examination and accountability system, except in Modern Foreign Languages. This has contributed to the marginalisation of spoken language within the broader curriculum, despite its central role in communication and critical thinking. The shift has left a gap in formal recognition of oracy skills in the secondary education system.

There is a growing consensus that the English Language GCSE is no longer fit for purpose, with many calling for a revision. The current curriculum lacks distinction and depth, especially in terms of its focus on the disciplinary nature of language. As proposed in the OEC's report, we call for a revised English Language GCSE which reintroduces the study of spoken language, empowering students to better appreciate their own language identities and develop the critical skills needed to navigate today's complex linguistic landscape.

26. In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this? This includes both qualifications where the government sets content nationally, and anywhere the content is currently set by awarding organisations.

GCSE English and maths at grade 4 and above are crucial qualifications that all young people need to access further study and better jobs and remain one of the strongest predictors of these further outcomes. In our report The road most travelled? we compared the 16-19 journey through education and training compared young people who got five good GCSE passes but missed at least one of English or maths, with young people who did pass those subjects but didn't get 5 good GCSEs overall. We found that without English and maths – even having got a grade 4 or above in five subjects – you were more likely to be unemployed.

Any reform to the curriculum must therefore ensure young people – particularly those who are at highest risk of not achieving these qualifications (e.g. from disadvantaged backgrounds, with SEND etc) – are supported to achieve these qualifications. We outline the most effective interventions to support these young people below.

Oracy

Oracy is a well evidenced intervention which drives attainment outcomes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, and has been found to lead to up to 6 months' additional progress. Apart from attainment, verbal communication skills are known to be increasingly desirable to employers, while oracy is associated with better employment prospects and even improved mental health. The findings of the Oracy Education Commission reiterated that oracy is essential for both life and further study.

However, the OEC's report also noted sentiment amongst teachers that oracy is not sufficiently valued in the curriculum. While the National Curriculum addresses spoken language, it has been downgraded in favour of a greater focus on reading and writing. The emphasis on traditional models like presentational talk and standard English risks marginalising non-standard dialects. As a result, spoken language is seen as less important, with only a quarter of secondary teachers confident in their understanding of its requirements.

Apart from calling for oracy to become the "fourth R" - on par with reading, writing and

arithmetic - the Commission recommended that the following changes be made to the curriculum:

a) Adopting a broad and expansive definition of oracy that encompasses learning to, through and about speaking, listening and communication and embed this throughout the detailed curriculum requirements, rather than just in the overarching aims at every phase.
b) Introducing an oracy entitlement throughout the primary and secondary National Curriculum outlining the experiences, skills and knowledge all students should access and engage with to build their repertoire of oracy skills.
c) Incentivising schools to provide a broad curriculum that enables children to access the value of the expressive arts and citizenship as contexts for oracy.
d) Integrating the study of spoken language into the secondary English curriculum, enabling young people to develop critical language awareness.

While measuring oracy is challenging, we believe some form of assessment is necessary in order to recognise and measure young people's proficiency and evaluate progress. The OEC recommended the assessment system can better reflect the scope and value of oracy by:

a) Reforming GCSE English Language to develop a qualification which teaches all young people about the history of the English language, its influence and influences, and celebrates its richness and diversity
b) Increasing the emphasis on assessment to enhance learning, rather than for highstakes reporting, through the provision of diagnostic and formative assessment tools and strategies to support teachers in understanding student progress in oracy and identifying areas of need and improvement.
c) Investigating the feasibility of formal assessment of speaking & listening to recognise a young person's proficiency in spoken language and communication. This could be as part of a functional skills passport at 14 or a new GCSE English Language qualification.
d) Acknowledging the role of oracy in delivering quality of education and personal development as part of a new school 'accountability dashboard'.

Case Study: Voice 21

For the past five years, we have partnered with Voice 21, an organisation supporting teachers to become expert oracy practitioners and providing deep support to individual schools to embed oracy in the curriculum.

Their Voicing Vocabulary project evaluated the impact of an oracy-rich approach to vocabulary development. Focusing on improving the vocabulary of Key Stage 2 and 3 students, the project tracked progress in reading at 12 schools across England.

Year 6 and Year 7 students in participating schools completed standardised reading tests twice a year. At the start of the project, the proportion of students in Voicing

Vocabulary schools with an above average reading score (19%) was below the national average (23%). By the end of the project, this figure increased by nine percentage points (to 28%) - give points above the national average.

The project also helped to codify what an "oracy-centred approach to vocabulary development" looks like:

1. Establish a shared understanding of oracy
2. Prioritise vocabulary in planning
3. Contextualise new vocabulary through talk
4. Monitor ownership of new vocabulary
5. Collaborate across phases

SEL

Through working with our portfolio partners, we have found fostering social and emotional skills (SES) to be another well-evidenced method to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to secure crucial qualifications and equip them with the knowledge and skills for future study and life.

As defined by CASEL, SEL is "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions". CASEL has codified five main social and emotional skills (SES) categories:

1. Self-awareness: To know and understand oneself
2. Self-management: To regulate, manage and motivate one's actions and emotions
3. Social awareness: To understand those around us
4. Relationship skills: To interact with others in a positive and effective way
5. Responsible decision-making: To make decisions and take actions as a member of
6. society with rights and responsibilities

SES are seen as an enabler for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, contributing to narrowing the attainment gap and inequality in later life. Social and emotional skills such as relationship skills are also essential for work, positively correlate with employment by age 25, and are a stronger predictor of workplace success than IQ or academic test scores.

SEL can be implemented in two ways - 'caught' (absorbed through the social environment) and 'taught' (explicitly addressed and included in classroom settings through interventions). Under the current system, all schools are statutorily obligated to provide some space for SEL – either through focused lessons (for instance, through Personal, Social, Health, Economic Education), while some also attempt to incorporate

the development of SES within subject-based lessons.

Our report with CfEY explored two models for effective SEL implementation: SAFE (Sequenced; Active; Focused; Explicit) and CASEL's framework for systemic SEL implementation. We found both models emphasise the need for whole-school, intentional, and phased strategies that actively involve the entire school community and students in SEL. This process should be consistent, repeated, and progressive. It requires a structured SEL curriculum that ensures continuity and progression across learning stages. Additionally, it's crucial to integrate the SEL skills developed in focused lessons into everyday school routines.

Our work also found that allocating curriculum time to explicitly teach SEL is particularly effective, as it gives schools a common framework for discussing behaviour and emotional regulation with students. In this way, 'taught' SEL approaches help support 'caught' approaches.

Case Study: Football Beyond Borders

Football Beyond Borders (FBB) is an Impetus portfolio partner, using football to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are disengaged or at risk of exclusion to build the skills they need to succeed. Their two-year programme consists of weekly two-hour sessions that build literacy, social and emotional, and essential skills.

FBB's approach uses SEL to help young people build confidence and recognise the value of their voice, leading to improvements in engagement and attainment outcomes. Their curriculum teaches skills defined by CASEL through a combination of classroom learning, football sessions, mentoring, and target-setting. FBB's program adopts a gender-sensitive approach, tailoring SEL content to the different developmental needs of boys and girls. Boys' sessions focus on motivation and behavior, while girls' sessions address self-awareness, emotional regulation, group dynamics, and confidence. Both groups also benefit from career development opportunities and enrichment activities.

An evaluation of FBB in 2020 by Nesta and the University of Sussex found significant gains in students' social and emotional learning (SEL) skills. Meanwhile FBB'S most recent impact report has found that SEL skills normally decline as young people go through teenagehood, but FBB participants buck the trend, with 6 out of 10 young people seeing their SEL skills improve.

Even more encouraging is a recent project by Analysis Group, which found a positive correlation between FBB students' Social and Emotional Learning scores and their GCSE performance. The research found that, on average, an SEL score, higher by 0.1 unit, is associated with an 8% higher chance of passing GCSE English and maths. This is mirrored by FBB's outcomes, where young people on their programmes are 9 times more likely to pass their English and maths GCSEs than peers in national comparison groups.

42. Are there ways in which we could support improvement in pupil progress and outcomes at key stage 3?

43. Are there ways in which we could support pupils who do not meet the expected standard at key stage 2?

Tutoring

Tutoring is one of the best evidenced interventions for boosting young people's academic attainment. Small group and individual tutoring has an extensive and robust research base, both in England and internationally, with a course of high-quality tutoring boosting students progress by up to five months. Tutoring is particularly effective for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

During the COVID pandemic we supported our sister charity the Education Endowment Foundation, alongside Nesta and The Sutton Trust, to set up the National Tutoring Programme. Running from October 2020 to August 2024, the programme started 5.5 million courses of tutoring, with around 90% of schools getting involved, and almost a billion pounds being spent on tutoring between government and schools.

We would encourage the review panel to consider tutoring as a highly evidenced intervention to drive attainment for young people both in key stage 2 and 3 who do not achieve expected outcomes.

Case study: The Tutor Trust

The Tutor Trust are an Impetus portfolio partner, providing small group tuition for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in primary and secondary schools in the north of England. The tutors work closely with pupils to improve their confidence and grades in key subjects.

In 2018, the organisation took part in a randomised control trial (RCT) funded by EEF and involving 105 primary schools and 1,290 pupils across Greater Manchester and Leeds. The study examined the impact of Tutor Trust's Year 6 Maths tuition on KS2 SATS results in May 2017, with KS1 SATS results as the baseline.

The headline results found pupils who received tuition made an additional three months of progress in Maths compared with pupils in the control group. On average, this three months of additional progress was the outcome from just 12 hours of tuition, delivered on a 1:3 tutor to pupil basis. Meanwhile, the cost of the intervention was low, at just £112 per child. The RCT also found a particular benefit for pupils on Free Schools Meals and those with low prior attainment.

As of 2022/23, The Tutor Trust were supporting 6,480 young people - 89% of whom received Pupil Premium and/or attended a school serving a low-income area - delivering 7,627 tutoring programmes and working in 156 schools.

54. Do you have any further views on anything else associated with the Curriculum and Assessment Review not covered in the questions throughout the call for evidence?

Evaluation and Benchmarking

We welcome the essential work of the CAR in terms of fostering a curriculum, assessment and accountability system which is delivering the best outcomes, particularly for those young people who need it most.

We've been pleased to see the commitment of the Secretary of State for Education Bridget Philipson, and Chair of the CAR Professor Becky Francis, to evidence and data - as outlined in the principles of the CAR. As the leading impact funder, this is at the heart of what we do.

We believe funding should build on what works and where we do not have sufficient evidence, funding should focus on high-quality evaluations to prepare an intervention for scale. To be impactful requires impact to be at the heart of strategy. It also requires intentionality, making tough choices about who the target population is, where the bar is set in terms of outcomes, and what type of activities and resources are required for impact.

In terms of an oracy entitlement, the OEC recommended the following to ensure impact:

1. Publishing non-statutory guidance to support school leaders and teachers in making informed decisions about how to implement high-quality oracy education.
2. Supporting subject associations in providing training opportunities and resources to help teachers across all subjects to develop disciplinary approaches to oracy.
3. Establishing a foundational body and evidence-based source of expertise that outlines the key elements and components of high-quality oracy education.

For SEL, in our report with the CfEY we recommended:

1. All SEL programmes should take more rigorous, formative long-term approaches to understanding their impact, where possible and conduct relevant evaluation of the impact on specific groups of children.
2. England should create data that is more comprehensive and comparative by nationally rolling out the '#BeeWell' survey currently being trialled in Greater Manchester and participating in the next OECD survey of social and emotional skills.
3. Researchers and research funders should investigate pandemic 'bright spots' to examine why and how some children thrived, socially and emotionally, during the pandemic, or bounced back more rapidly since the return to school, and how schools might learn from changes in school practices during and since the pandemic.

Impetus

All young people can succeed in school, in work and in life with the right support.

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