

Supporting Schools: how government can do a better job

Sir Jon Coles

Introduction

1. Next month will see a general election¹, and in all likelihood a new government, with new Ministers in charge of education policy. Over the last year, there has been increasing focus in the education system on what government should do in relation to a very wide range of – sometimes very detailed – issues. This paper is not focused on what the answer should be to any of these specific policy issues, but rather on what government’s role should be in relation to education – and how to do government better in education.
2. There is no getting away from the fact that the next government will face some very significant challenges in relation to schools, and some of those are unavoidably or at least currently the job of government to tackle. If we cannot get enough teachers when government sets the pay and conditions of most of the sector; if funding is insufficient; and if there is a collapse of children’s services outside schools, then appropriate government action is a necessity.
3. But that is not the whole story. There is an expectation now both in schools and in government that somehow it is government’s job to solve all problems. Too often, government is spending time and energy trying to solve problems that it is not capable of solving, or not best placed to solve, while spending insufficient time on making sure that the school system has capacity and capability to solve its own problems. Meanwhile, the school system feels unnecessarily helpless, waiting for answers to be handed down from on high. This is dysfunctional.
4. This paper is about how a reset relationship between government and schools will improve education. It is not a theoretical exercise or a set of untested ideas. All the examples are drawn from my personal experience of leading improvement work inside government, including as Director General for Schools, and outside, running schools as Chief Executive of United Learning, the largest group of schools in the country.
5. In relation to public services, the key issue of the 2029 election will not be who has the best communication strategy or set of future pledges, but whether people’s experience of local services is actually better. The approach set out here is the one most likely to secure meaningful improvement over that timeframe and over ten years.
6. This paper is not a detailed action plan, nor a list of policy proposals. There are no policy magic bullets and it is more important to have a good, coherent overall strategy than lots of specific policy ideas. Instead, it explores three key principles for government which should now underpin a good strategy:
 - **decentralise** decision-making;
 - **renew a sense of purpose** in the system as a whole; and
 - **get behind schools**.
7. A strategy based on these principles would create a very different relationship between schools and central government and new impetus for improvement.

¹ Though this paper was largely written before that timing was known.

Chapter 1: Decentralise

8. The extraordinary growth of central control over schools that we have witnessed over the last 35 years has gone too far. In 1988, it was understandable that government would take a bigger role in the improvement of the public service which more than any other shapes the future of the country. Public concern was high and government's role was limited.
9. But it is unsustainable, deeply inefficient and counterproductive if any organisation becomes over-centralised. In a large-scale operation in any sector, there is an asymmetry of knowledge between the centre and the locality – and the more that decisions are taken away from the point of maximum knowledge, then over time, the less good those decisions are likely to be.
10. An education system for a nation or jurisdiction cannot be designed in a locality – that is ultimately a governmental task. But that system will not be at its best if its operations are micro-managed from government. Schools are an inherently local service, many decisions require an understanding of the individuals concerned, rely on strong relationships for their acceptance and cannot readily be generalised. The principle of subsidiarity – decisions made at their lowest effective level – is sound: a more devolved system would work a lot better.

Take back control from No10 and Treasury

11. This decentralisation needs to start within government. DfE badly needs to take back control of its own responsibilities from No10 and the Treasury. Good organisations – including organisations as large and complex as governments – delegate responsibility and then hold to account for results. DfE by contrast has little freedom of action and is crippled by requirements for approval which never used to exist.
12. In part, this is driven by an increased focus of the political media on the person of the Prime Minister. This is hardly within any individual's control, but government would be better if there were a return to the sense that Cabinet Ministers are significant figures in their own right and make decisions both independently and collectively as well as under the direction of the Prime Minister.
13. In part too, it is driven by an over-focus of government on communications, sometimes at the expense of policy. In very recent years, there has been a dearth of policy development on the actual problems facing the education system. Instead, there have been – for example – multiple announcements about 'banning mobile phones in schools', which have had solely political purposes, been centrally directed in government by people with no understanding of schools and have no substance beyond the announcement itself. Or else announcements like the 'Advanced British Standard', dreamed up in Number 10 and barely discussed with the DfE before being announced at a political conference.
14. Likewise, the centre's perception of communication risks across government has been allowed to take precedence over operational reality. For example: while it is understandable that Treasury want to brigade announcements from different departments about funding or bad news about public sector pay into a single announcement on one day, this is hopeless if it means that schools don't know key facts about pay or money until long after budgeting and staffing decisions need to be made – or if similar problems are caused to other public services.

15. In those cases where large pieces of education policy may have widespread implications for society or other services, it is of course completely reasonable and necessary that the Treasury and No10 should be involved. When we were developing the policy to increase the age at which young people could leave education or training from 16 to 18, there were naturally extensive discussions with No 10 and Treasury officials, advisers and the Chancellor. It was a big system change with significant consequences for public spending, employers and the labour market. It was critical that we had substantive, challenging, good quality conversations about costs, benefits, potential wider impacts and other important aspects of the policy. The impetus for problem-solving came from within the Department and the policy development was led there but the external challenge added sharpness and focus.
16. That is not what is happening at the moment, though. Now there is second-guessing of small decisions leading to a lack of agency in DfE. When we were originally setting up Oak during the pandemic, a grant worth 0.001% of the DfE budget required approval from Treasury and No 10 as well as at every level (official and political) within DfE. This is a huge hindrance to delivery and no way to run anything: there needs to be freedom to act and initiate at such a low level of risk and cost.
17. The implications are broader. It is not just that development of individual policies and delivery of programmes gets hampered and slowed down. Decisions will be worse, not better, if people who know less are making them. It is also not possible to develop and implement coherent longer-term strategy if each action attempting to pursue an agreed strategy will be crawled over, questioned and altered according to the whim of individuals distant from delivery, and then made subject to separate approval.
18. Government should be – at least in significant parts of its policy making structure – a creative industry. It cannot be without freedom to act and initiate.

Make clear that government won't decide everything

19. For more than 40 years post-war, local authorities and churches ran schools; while the Ministry then Department of Education concerned itself primarily with ensuring that there were enough buildings and enough teachers for rising and then falling pupil numbers. As public concerns about education rose in general and through high profile controversies around schools (such as Rivinghill in the 60s and William Tyndale in the 70s), it was understandable and perhaps inevitable that government would ultimately take a stronger role in setting standards.
20. The Education Reform Act 1988 was a striking departure for government, which became muscularly involved in setting standards of curriculum and assessment, while forcibly delegating from local authority to school level responsibility for the staffing, budgeting and teaching decisions which would enable children to meet those standards. But that settlement with schools (we set the standards and provide you with the money; you make the decisions and take accountability for the results children achieve) lasted hardly any time at all.
21. Quite soon, there were Ofsted to inspect and the Teacher Training Agency to direct teacher training. Then the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies – and then the National Key Stage 3 Strategy – to direct how teaching was to be done (at least in some respects). All

reforms which had a clear rationale and all – to a greater or lesser extent – had impact. And unarguably, there are areas where a national lead is legitimate and helpful – where it is important to set a clear national entitlement or national expectations, or where a piece of guidance produced once through widespread consultation and expert input can be used many times, saving confusion and duplication of effort.

22. Quite where the line should be drawn can be a matter of legitimate debate. But the process cannot go on indefinitely without causing harm – government has continued for 35 years to become progressively more involved in the detail of running schools and this is now counter-productive. Government should aim to create a school sector which can interpret evidence and implement evidence-based practice without political involvement. That was explicitly a goal of the first years of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies – to build informed professionalism. Over time, however, government has lost sight of this objective, seemingly believing that the lesson of past reforms is that ‘government knows best’.
23. However, it is absurd if a government Minister with no experience of early years education makes speeches – as Liz Truss did as a junior education Minister – seeking to direct the appropriate organisation of an early years classroom. There should likewise be no need for a national times tables test. Fluency in times tables is an important contributor to success in higher mathematics but schools should be setting their own daily and weekly quizzes and tests as children learn and improve not focusing precious teaching time on national test preparation after most children should know their times tables.
24. The problem is not just that this is over-controlling and an inefficient use of resource. It creates an over-dependence on government, distorts the system, and reduces the likelihood of schools thinking for themselves, individually and collectively. If you feel obliged to do what government says, what is the point of making sure you are up to speed with research evidence? If you feel you must prepare for a test at a time prescribed by government, you will allocate time and resource to that, even if that is not the right priority for the children you are teaching.
25. Moreover, the years of direction have created a system which is over-responsive to government action, and as a result less likely to maintain its own intrinsic motivation to do the right thing for children. When the decision was made to publish the EBacc measure (with no other link to prescription, accountability or anything else), it was astonishing to see the number of schools changing their curriculum and the courses being studied by pupils who were already in year 10 – and sometimes even year 11 – because they felt they had to, even though the publication of the measure was wholly without consequences. But government cannot any longer claim this sort of system over-reaction is unintended: it knows that this is what happens.
26. As a starting point, DfE should make clear – as it used to – that government will not, and does not need to, decide everything about running a school. Many decisions are better made locally by people who understand the situation and its context than by central government. DfE should make clear what it will and what it will not get involved in and make sure that there is clarity about where responsibility for decision-making lies in relation to things it will not get involved in.

Build institutional capability outside government

27. To support this, we need urgently to build much greater institutional strength and capability outside government. The teaching profession and the school system are institutionally weak compared to virtually every other profession and public service.
28. In every other profession, it is professional bodies which determine professional matters – such as entry requirements, qualification requirements, the approach to professional formation, the content of professional training, the professional and ethical standards that are to be met, and so on. There is high professional trust because these things are determined according to evidence, outside the political process, by independent bodies with significant expertise.
29. In medicine, the Royal Colleges specify standards and oversee training of doctors in their specialties. And across the health sector, NICE provides guidance to professionals on the most effective clinical practice, based on the latest evidence. It determines, based on the evidence, which medicines and treatments deserve funding, according to their efficacy. In law, the Solicitor’s Regulation Agency describes the competences required to be a good solicitor and determines the content of exams which assess that. The ICAEW sets requirements to be met by Chartered Accountants, the necessary contents of training contracts and so on. Likewise for surveyors, engineers, architects and so on.
30. All of these professionals owe duties to their professional bodies – ethically and in relation to competence – which go beyond their duties to individual employers. If asked by an employer to take actions which conflict with their professional duties, they have a clear responsibility not to do so – and clear protections if they need to take this position.
31. It is understood that being a professional consists not in ‘professional autonomy’ – but in something rather closer to the opposite – understanding what a good professional should do in all the circumstances, and doing it. There can be no reasonable suggestion that a professional acting in this way is pursuing their own self interest or political agenda – they are acting as they are required to do by their professional standards, which themselves were evidentially determined.
32. But in education we don’t have equivalents of, for example, NICE or the Royal Colleges. Government is now closely involved, in detail, in the content of teacher training, how training and development must be delivered and questions of effective teaching practice.
33. Government needs to get out of this space entirely, and hand over to proper professional bodies – strong, independent institutions which make decisions and set standards based on evidence and expertise. For this to happen in the medium term, government needs to pay short-term attention to building such institutional capability and – once again – to growing informed professionalism.
34. The original concept of the Education Endowment Foundation was to create an endowment fund from DfE’s annual cash underspend (which typically exceeded £100m) to focus on evidence-based practice development. In reality, the balance of the EEF’s work has been skewed more than originally envisaged towards pure research rather than towards ‘research and development’, but it is nonetheless a potentially powerful actor in developing and strengthening an evidence-led schools system.

35. The Chartered College of Teaching was developed to create for the teaching profession the institutional body which could be for teaching what the Royal College of Surgery is to surgery. If teaching has a powerful body which can be the owner of evidence-based standards for entry and continuation in the profession and requirements for the initial period of professional formation, ensure that training and continuing professional development are meeting the highest standards and challenge politically-driven approaches to change which are not evidentially supported, then teachers and teaching will be in a much better position. Establishing a College with this strength and credibility was always understood to be something closer to a generational than a 3-5 year task and there is more to do.
36. These were first steps – but in the end, power taken by government cannot be wrestled back through professional action alone. Change will require a choice to devolve by an elected government – and such a choice cannot be made and implemented overnight. However, if the intention were set now to move over a ten year period to much greater professional control over entry standards and practice, then that goal could be achieved with clear visible improvements being made at each point along the way. It looks likely that the next government could set ten year plans with some degree of confidence in being able to implement them.

Expect trusts to do a bigger job

37. Government should also expect trusts to take much more responsibility. Currently, Government sets expectations of the trust role and capability which are too low and then over-regulates process because it is not confident of having capable, properly run institutions. Ministers can get out of this vicious circle by articulating higher expectations and requiring trusts to meet them, with genuine consequences if they do not.
38. It is unthinkable that an NHS trust, Housing Association or University would not have proper corporate functions – such as a company secretary to ensure legal and regulatory compliance, a capable financial planning function, effective full-time internal audit to ensure proper use of public funds, HR professionals with an in-depth understanding of employment law, estates and property expertise sufficient to plan, maintain and risk-manage the estate, properly qualified experts in health and safety – and so on. If an organisation does not have these functions, then it is unlikely that it can independently run a complex public service which has responsibility for employing people, managing public money, owning and looking after a physical estate, interacting with the public and looking after young people or the vulnerable.
39. But government does not clearly articulate an expectation that these are minimum requirements for school trusts, let alone take steps to ensure that they are in place. In consequence, it is not confident that every trust has all of these functions (and in truth, not all do), and therefore acts in a ‘precautionary’ or risk-averse way – essentially approaching regulation as if trusts do not have these core capabilities.
40. But if you approach the regulation of an organisation on the assumption that it does not have the core capabilities it needs to be an independent and independently accountable body, then you are approaching it with the assumption that it is not capable of being independent. And that has taken us to where we are – which is that government over-directs process, treats trusts as an arm of government and does too little ‘holding to account’.

41. As it is, for example, government collects a huge amount of financial and other data it does not look at or use, but doesn't specify clearly what financial reserve or other metrics a trust should meet for financial stability. (As, for example, regulators have done post-financial crash with the banks.) Government has finally produced some guidance on the level of reserves trusts should hold but still without the sort of metric-based clarity that might be expected of a regulator of independent organisations: not 'if you meet these levels, we'll consider you financially secure and leave you alone on that front' but rather giving broad ranges and emphasising trustee discretion while retaining the right to intervene if they don't like the answer.
42. Likewise, its response to the issues of RAAC 'soft concrete' in schools was completely different to that we see in other public services. Because it couldn't be confident that individual trusts would have the capability or resources to risk-manage the issue while maintaining a service to the public (as, for example, many NHS trusts have done for some time), it has directed schools to close all RAAC-affected areas and essentially nationalised the response to the issue. At the same time, its accounts direction told trust boards what they were required to say in their annual report and accounts, what they needed to put in risk registers – and so on. This is the clearest possible indication of a lack of trust in trusts to manage their own risks. And a serious 'moral hazard' problem – if government is taking responsibility for deciding what a trust's risks are in this case, then does that mean that trustees no longer need to take seriously their own responsibility for determining and managing risks?
43. School trusts should have enough specialist expertise to know and follow legal requirements without handholding, and the capacity to run themselves effectively as separate independent organisations. By setting out an expectation of this – perhaps to be achieved progressively over 2-3 years – government can make it happen and then ensure that its regulatory approach reflects the new reality. This might well have the side-effect of encouraging some smaller trusts to merge to create bigger trusts, so that they have the capacity to put key functions in place. But this too would be a good thing, building stronger, more capable institutions that can be independently accountable – a school system based on thousands of separate small institutions is not a sensible long-term structure.
44. Likewise, the expectations on school trusts as employers can be higher – and should grow over time. In other sectors, employers take responsibility for making sure, for example, that staff get the training and qualifications needed to meet the entry standards set by professional bodies. Part of the attraction of the big firms in accountancy, for example, is that the quality of their training (which is both internal and commissioned from other organisations) is highly regarded in the profession and so known to provide the foundation for a good career.
45. Larger employers in that sector tend to recruit and train more junior staff than they need. This benefits them through ensuring that they have a choice of excellent staff for the long term; benefits trainees through the quality of their initial training and professional formation; and benefits the wider sector through securing a supply of high quality newly qualified professionals. The sector does not depend on government for supply of staff, nor on universities or other training organisations for recruitment or for independently training future employees.

46. No large employer of professionals outside the school system would expect to receive fully trained staff from a third party. Large accountancy, law or engineering firms may take able graduates from universities, but they then take responsibility for professional, on-the-job training. Employers may commission a third party training organisation to provide some aspects of the required training, but that organisation is then accountable to the employer (and the employee) for the quality and effectiveness of that training.
47. In the schools sector, we have this model 'back to front'. Providers of training who run no schools and employ few teachers (whether HE institutions or third sector organisations like Teach First) do most of the recruitment of new trainees, receive most of the money for training and then look to place trainees in schools (sometimes struggling to find enough engaged employers who wish to 'host' a placement). There should be a move progressively towards employers (who are the people who bear the costs and benefits of recruitment decisions and training quality) being responsible for recruiting new trainees, being responsible for securing excellent training (commissioning others as necessary) and being funded accordingly. Likewise for ongoing professional development of more experienced staff.
48. Again, we cannot change expectations of trusts as employers or as deliverers of public services overnight. But over a 3-5 year period, it would be possible to achieve that, which would create the capability and capacity government needs to step out of micro-managing and into an enabling mode.

Chapter 2: Renew a sense of purpose

49. This model of decentralisation, and of building capability outside government is by no means suggesting that government has no long-term role in educational improvement. Far from it. Government is unavoidably the source of funding for state education, raised through general taxation, and consequently must ensure that the system is properly accountable for the use of that funding to provide high quality education to young people and for ensuring that the expectations of the electorate and taxpayers are met.
50. Only a democratically elected body can legitimately claim to be able to define for a public service society's consensus as to what that service should provide. If questions of how best to achieve particular purposes can be decided evidentially and through professional expertise, then that should be the approach to deciding them: but the question of what a service's priorities and purposes should be – and therefore how public funds should be allocated – can only be decided through a legitimate political process. In other words: of course elected politicians shouldn't be trying to decide the layout of the early years classroom, but of course they should be deciding how much taxpayer money should be spent on the early years and with what overall purposes.
51. It is concerning that some are arguing for educational policy to be removed from the democratic process and handed to unelected bodies or officials whose role might span multiple governments and parliaments. It cannot be right that major questions of how best to spend billions of pounds of public money (still less deciding how many billions) or how to meet society's social and economic needs in the light of changing circumstances could be determined outside a legitimate democratically accountable process.
52. Government therefore has key roles in defining a vision; in ensuring that the system is well-designed to achieve it; and in holding that system to account.

Lead a national movement for higher standards

53. Government should rebuild a national movement for higher standards and educational improvement. When David Blunkett arrived in 1997, he galvanised the whole education system with clear messages which resonated equally strongly within government, within schools and with parents. After some years of structural debate, the message of 'standards not structures' was clear: not that the structures through which high standards are achieved would be unimportant, but that the priority was a mission for higher standards, equity and collaboration.
54. Every policy and every communication was intended to reinforce that priority as something everyone in the sector could get behind, feel part of and be inspired by. It was visible that the 'education, education, education' headline was reinforced in the time, focus and actions of the Prime Minister and reflected in the Chancellor's priorities at Budget time. The specific policies (whether effective or not) – like reducing class sizes and the introduction of the literacy and numeracy hours – were always tied to the overall purpose, both practically and in their communication. Irrespective of the impact or importance of any particular policy, its intentions and the overall purpose it was expected to serve were never in doubt.

55. In their different ways, both Ed Balls and Michael Gove were also able to set new and clear agendas at the start of new governments. A fresh start for a new government is a natural moment to set new vision and direction in education as well.
56. The challenges of today – from post-covid social recovery to economic stagnation; from climate change to global conflict; and from the growing threat of disinformation to a changing world order – should suggest to us that the race between education and catastrophe is hotting up. Our best hope as a society and as a species is to educate more people more thoroughly and to a higher level than ever before, so that their ability and desire to think and act in the world to solve the problems we face and to create new opportunities is greater than ever before.
57. The need of this moment is great; and we must inspire the education system with vision, a sense of possibility and a united desire to improve on our previous best in the interests of young people. A Secretary of State can and should set this tone.

Rebuild a high challenge, high support infrastructure for school improvement

58. But if a vision is not to be mere words and if we are to rise to meet a compelling vision of the future, then we need a system which makes improvement in every part of the system as likely as possible. The need for improvement does not imply a current deficit: it is always possible to improve. No matter how good we currently are, we can always be better.
59. Improvement is most likely when we face high levels of challenge but can draw on high levels of support. Challenge and accountability are actively good for us: we are all at our best when we feel accountable for the quality of what we do. Challenge becomes unhealthy and stressful when we do not feel we are capable of meeting the expectations. But where the level of challenge is well aligned to our capability to meet it, it helps make our work involving, meaningful, inspiring and impactful. Having the support we need to meet a high level of challenge successfully is the most inspiring and impactful work of all.
60. So system-wide improvement is highly likely or certain when every school experiences this combination of high challenge and high support. Every school currently experiences arms-length accountability (and intervention if it all goes wrong). This sort of objective sense of accountability for how institutions are using public money may be necessary – but alone is insufficient in two ways. Firstly, because accountability is most meaningful when it is directly associated with work we have recently done as well as with the long-term results we have achieved. And secondly because without meaningful practical support to improve, arms length judgements can seem arbitrary sources of stress rather than contributions to improvement.
61. Good trusts, the best local authorities and organisations like Challenge Partners all make sure that schools get sharp challenge and meaningful support from leaders with strong experience of leading and improving schools who are seen by the school as ‘on our side’ and understand it well. But too many schools do not have access to this level of informed support and challenge – whether they are part of a local authority structure which lacks a strong school improvement capability or they are part of a trust which has not developed one.
62. So we need to rebuild a high challenge, high support infrastructure for school improvement which systematically ensures that every school has access to what it needs to improve.

63. This *can* be secured from within government. In the London Challenge, the group of ‘Keys to Success’ schools (those facing the most challenging combination of deprivation and low attainment, which were therefore key to the success of the London Challenge) were schools that some had written off and which had some of the lowest results in the country. All worked with a London Challenge Adviser – a respected, experienced, expert leader who got alongside the school and worked in partnership *with* them to improve. London went from the region with the most schools below the government’s ‘floor’ target, to becoming the first region with none.
64. This model would no longer be the right one in an education world which has moved on significantly in every way from that of 20 years ago. However, we should want a system where we can be confident that every school receives this combination of high expectations, sharp challenge and good quality support.
65. The next government will have some choices as to how to achieve this, but it should set out its intent to do so. The current government’s position has been that the best way for schools to improve is to join a high-quality trust which can use its scale, capacity and expertise to drive improvement. That is a sound principle, but there are currently only a relatively small number of trusts of sufficient size and strength to do this at any scale.
66. So the next government should develop a plan for growing the capacity and capability of the sector so that all schools can receive the right challenge and support; and a framework which makes it highly likely or certain that all schools do.

Avoid damaging pendulum swings

67. There are problems to solve in the school system, but wherever there are problems to solve, it is easy to over-correct – in policy, over-corrections are more the rule than the exception. A new government must avoid damaging pendulum swings.
68. Often, government is tempted to pull ‘big levers’ like curriculum, assessment, accountability, teacher training, governance structures or the funding system in order to claim ‘transformational change’. And there is no doubt that change in any of these has the potential to be highly consequential – as a result, they can also be hugely disruptive, are costly in time and energy in schools, and always have unintended consequences.
69. It is perhaps more useful to think of these big features of the system as ‘underpinnings’ or ‘tectonic plates’ rather than ‘levers’. There can of course be very good reason for making changes in any of them – but thinking of them as the underpinnings of the school system emphasises the need for care in making change and the desirability of not doing it too often or too quickly. However, over the last 35 years, there has been no three year period in which none of these underpinnings was undergoing substantial reform.
70. The impact on teachers’ time and focus may be very substantial. The last round of curriculum and qualification changes saw every aspect of the National Curriculum and all GCSEs and A Levels (and a number of other qualifications) changed in substantial ways. So over a small number of years, teachers of every key stage and every year group had to re-plan schemes of work and all their lessons in order to meet new specifications. There were benefits to the changes, but the impact on teacher workload and on reduced focus on continuous improvement were significant ‘hidden’ costs.

71. This is not to argue that there should never be change to the underpinnings of the system, but that it is generally best to be highly cautious about the nature and extent of the change and much more conscious of the need for effective implementation than government generally has been. It is possible to plan implementation over longer timeframes than in the past; and to ensure that there are not simultaneously multiple reforms to systemically important structures.
72. Equally importantly, we need effective policy for continuous improvement rather than dramatic changes of direction. It is possible to produce meaningful improvements even to – for example – curriculum and qualifications without undertaking root and branch reform of every aspect of every subject at once. The approach to reform in the past seems sometimes to have been driven by a desire to claim ‘the biggest change since...’ rather than a desire to solve problems in the least disruptive way possible – yet improvement comes more quickly and surely from the latter approach.
73. In one area of policy in particular – vocational education – pendulum swings are a major cause of the ongoing problems we face. The features of effective systems of vocational education internationally are remarkably consistent – including high quality employer-recognised and endorsed curriculum, nationally recognised qualifications or achievement, high quality off-the-job training, substantial employer engagement in the training of individuals, good education in the basics and some broader general education.
74. This consistency means that it is fairly clear what a successful reform of vocational education in England needs to look like, but also that to establish a new system successfully requires implementation and commitment over a long period. There have been multiple false starts, going back many decades – where essentially the same idea has been announced and then scrapped repeatedly. The most recent two were specialised Diplomas in the 2000s (announced in response to the Tomlinson Report, designed with employers in line with international experience and with a 10 year implementation plan) which were scrapped just as they were getting started by the new government post-2010; and T-levels, announced by the same government, with essentially the same aims and many similar characteristics to Diplomas. Another large scale, multi-year delivery programme began. Now, just as they are being implemented, they have been superseded by the ‘Advanced British Standard’ announcement.
75. There is no case for arguing that a new government should not be free to set its own priorities or to change things it wishes to change. But a wise government will recognise that education is a fundamentally long-term business, that government has immense capacity to change things in the long term through consistent action, that rushed changes can have unwanted consequences and reduced impact and that a continuous improvement mindset is more likely to make education better for more children than a ‘change everything at once’ approach.

Beware false dichotomies and political over-reactions

76. The problem of pendulum swings is made more extreme than it should be in education by the completely unnecessary ‘Trumpification’ of education policy debate, especially on social media. To read the social media accounts of a disturbingly high proportion of those actively debating education policy and practice online, you would think, for example, that there are two choices about how to run a school – either extremely formal or extremely

welfarist – with little in between. In fact, there are many ways to run a school and only a tiny proportion of schools nationally embrace one extreme or the other.

77. Even more concerningly in a debate between educators, there is a tribalism which leads to knee-jerk agreement with all those in the ‘tribe’, more or less whatever they say or do; and correspondingly little attempt to understand the insights or practices of those in the other ‘tribe’.
78. In relation to behaviour, it is perfectly possible to expect and insist on high standards and no disruption of lessons while also being deeply concerned about the situation and needs of children struggling to meet those standards. It is possible to have a rich curriculum, which values knowledge, scholarship and rigour, while also believing that children need to learn to think and learn for themselves. It is possible to believe in adult authority and in listening to children; to favour teacher-led lessons but also value engagement; to believe that all children deserve to learn about the heights of culture and to believe that all children need to be able to find themselves in the curriculum; to believe in teaching good manners without wanting abnormal social control of children; to insist that schools must teach children things that they will not learn in daily life while prioritising equally the need for every child to feel a sense of belonging.
79. We should reject the current tribal way of discussing education and divisive debates between conflicting ideological extremes. Critically, government needs to avoid being drawn into this way of thinking about the issues. Government should start from an understanding that there can be a range of effective approaches and look to create a system which embraces them and is more responsive to the needs of local children and families.
80. Political pressures can make it hard not to respond to high-profile or short-term challenges with short-term solutions. But government and policy discussion tend to over-estimate the potential of government to fix problems in the very short term while under-estimating government’s ability to create long-term change.
81. Hard as it is, government should try to resist the urge to make drastic changes as a knee-jerk response to events, and maintain a focus on bigger-picture goals. Frequent changes to curriculum and qualifications absorb huge amounts of teacher time; frequent changes to inspection frameworks have a direct impact on the quality and consistency of inspectors, who have to be trained in revised frameworks and cannot build up experience of repeated inspections under the same arrangements; frequent changes in accountability systems strengthen a compliance mentality amongst leaders.
82. Stability in the ‘tectonic plates’ creates the conditions for continuous improvement. If we all understand the system we are working in and there is less churn in policy, the real issues become more visible. The question ceases to be ‘is this latest policy initiative working?’ and becomes more sharply – what specifically do we need to improve for children?

Chapter 3: Get behind schools

83. In a well-functioning system which it isn't micro-managing, government can best accelerate change by getting behind schools, rather than by seeking to direct. It is not plausible that the best way to generate improvement in a public service is for a government department run by people who are not practitioners to direct the nationwide efforts of hundreds of thousands of people who are. It is even less plausible in a populous, varied and highly centralised country, where it is unlikely that the priorities and solutions will be identical everywhere, and the asymmetry of information between the locality and the centre will be significant.
84. A turn towards humility in the mindset of government would pay great dividends. Rather than assuming that it knows best, government makes the biggest impact by understanding that it doesn't know best but can stimulate major improvement through working skilfully to understand and remove obstacles and blockages, amplify or extend effective work and highlight successful approaches.

Build meaningful relationships focused on action and solutions

85. It is often easy and natural in government to think hierarchically about public services – that government is at the top, with 'the frontline' at the bottom of the system and everyone else in the middle ('the middle tier'). Government on this view stands above the fray, seeing the big picture and making 'strategic' decisions. Government, on this view, is entitled by virtue of its democratic mandate, cleverness and access to information, data and evidence to make sweeping decisions. And government – on this view – is required by virtue of public procurement law or other rules justified by fairness to treat everyone the same.
86. This way of thinking risks turning policymaking into an abstract, theoretical and intellectual exercise ('how do we want things to be?') rather than a specific, concrete and practical activity ('what shall we do?'). The art of coming up with a clever line to take or winning the political trick of the day is valued more highly than the humanly messy task of making something actually happen. Success in implementation, so far as it is considered at all, is defined more by the exercise of power ('they did what we said') than by the humble goal of enabling others to flourish more fully than before. The rules of fairness too often provide a comfort blanket in the face of a charge of inappropriately broad-brush or idealised thinking.
87. This hierarchical and abstract way of thinking often stands in the way of deep and lasting improvement in public services. To find effective solutions to specific problems requires insight into those problems as they are in reality – understanding how they are manifesting in different contexts, what people's perceptions are of the situation, what might be causing that reality, how it might be different. And that understanding can only come from policy makers building relationships of trust with school and sector leaders which focus on action and solutions, not process and bureaucracy.
88. One reason why school leaders, local authorities and others look back fondly on London Challenge is that they were at the table and had a voice. That is also one reason the work had lasting impact. In the 'key boroughs' strand, for example, DfE and each of the five boroughs developed and published jointly a plan for that local area. The Department then funded a project manager in each borough to work directly for the Director of Education to help make that plan happen. It takes trust for an independent local authority to accept someone funded by government working in their offices without suspicion; the trust has to

be reciprocated for government not to try to manage where that person is spending time and energy.

89. The regular 'round table' meetings we had to review progress against the plan and resolve issues were as much about our holding to account other parts of the Department for the commitments made as holding to account the local authority for their progress. Everyone there put their issues on the table with a view to deciding what action each of us needed to take to resolve the issues. DfE officials listened to what the specific problems were, understood how national policy was playing out locally against the original intentions and looked to find solutions which would achieve a shared goal. This model of 'collapsing the levels of the system', with everyone alongside each other, acknowledged that each party had different roles, responsibilities and resources – but started from the understanding that we can only achieve the aims we share by seeing each other's perspective and deploying our resources, skills and powers in concert.
90. The regional structure in DfE could in theory work in this sort of way. But in reality, too much of the work of the regional teams is impersonal, rule-governed and process-following rather than engaging and outcome-focused; and reactive rather than strategic. The experience of engaging with different regions, from the perspective of an academy trust, is very variable. An outlying positive example and a good direction for the future is the South West Regional Team, which has made a proactive attempt to engage with the sector and think strategically about direction of travel, the mix and size of trusts locally, which of them should grow and which organisations it should aim to bring in. The style has been much more open, transparent and engaged, whilst the substance has been much more strategic. It is not an accident that this team has been led by people whose extensive school sector experience has been both strategic and operational.

Grow the top

91. To get behind schools and accelerate change, government can play a key enabling role by 'growing the top' and spreading the impact of effective institutions, leaders and practitioners. Another London Challenge lesson was that nurturing and growing the best practitioners to take a wider role works. The London Leadership Strategy developed consultant leaders, giving them high quality training and putting thought into deploying them to the right places in schools.
92. The structure of a larger trust can also enable this kind of strength-based approach, identifying where strengths are and how to expand their impact. For example, successful school leaders in United Learning increasingly take roles across the trust, sharing practice, supporting other schools, leading development work or broadening line management span. Growing success leads to growing contribution.
93. If a key question for schools, trusts and local authorities is how to grow great people and use our most effective people to do more, then in the same vein, a key question for government should be how to grow the most effective trusts or other providers to do more. This is the task of commissioning: that more public money is spent on good providers and good provision, that the reach, influence and operations of the strongest leaders should grow.
94. A government seeking to drive improvement can and should have an active strategy to support the development of the strongest leaders and providers, grow their reach and

extend their impact. A strategic focus on using the most effective leaders and providers to support and develop others would include setting a clear and public intent about how provision should develop regionally and sub-regionally; being more open that area-wide factors matter and that growing capacity and capability is a priority. This has the potential to be a powerful engine of system-wide improvement.

Mind your language

95. Taking public servants with you on a journey of reform and change is not inherently difficult if you begin from the recognition that they do the jobs they do because they want to serve the public. Overwhelmingly, teachers are teachers because they believe in the importance of education, like children and want to play a part in preparing them for successful lives – and in building a successful future for society.
96. It becomes more difficult to take teachers with you if you sound like you think they know less or have thought less than you, are an obstacle to reform or a vested interest. Political expediency or just the desire to show you're on parents' side can too easily lead to language which teachers find critical, demotivating or annoying – which slows or blocks improvement. Michael Gove fell too frequently into that trap. Reforms that many teachers would find sound in principle, and points that could have resonated with teachers were undermined by statements that sounded like damning criticism. He could have taken many more with him by not sounding like he was running against the profession, and communicating a greater sense of shared endeavour.
97. All leaders must remember that what they say can have as much impact as what they do. Tim Brighouse was the master of finding the right words and the right tone to convey a sense of shared purpose in the interests of children in ways that inspired teachers even in challenging times of great change. As he said: 'our language makes the school' and – conversely – 'careless talk can drain a school's energy'. His emphasis on the importance of skilfully using 'we' in place of 'I' and 'you', of talking about possibilities and an inspiring future, of demonstrating through careful choice of words a sense of working towards the same goal and on the same side was an important reason why so many were inspired by him.
98. Estelle Morris's tone and language also always showed teachers she understood them and knew that they wanted the best for young people. Because her motivation to improve education for children came from the same place, she had an unrivalled ability amongst Ministers to communicate with the teaching profession the urgency and importance of 'improving on our previous best' (as Tim Brighouse would put it). Parents too welcomed the sense that government was alongside teachers in working for improvement.

Resource for success

99. The public finances are tight and we understand that we cannot expect riches. But making genuine improvement is extremely difficult if funds are shrinking and leaders are making redundancies or cutting staff and eliminating all discretionary expenditure.
100. Even limited real terms growth in school funding would enable school leaders to think creatively about change, in a way that has been extremely difficult in recent years. Conversely, shrinking resources would make reform extremely difficult as leaders focus on keeping the show on the road. Likewise, well-judged investment in services which support

children and families more widely would make a substantial difference in easing the pressures schools feel.

101. More stability and predictability in both funding and centrally-led drivers of cost (especially staff pay) would make a significant difference in giving school leaders more confidence to make long-term decisions. This requires both longer-term funding settlements and serious attention to operational efficiency in making and announcing decisions in a timely way with proper attention to the operational needs of schools.

102. The predictability and timeliness of decisions on teacher and support staff pay in particular have a huge impact. A system in which schools have to finalise their budget for the year months in advance of knowing how much they will be required to pay those staff and how much, if any, additional funding might be provided for that is a system which is about as badly designed as it could be to support good local leadership and management. Repeated government promises to provide earlier information have never been fulfilled and addressing this would, on its own, improve leaders' ability to secure good value for money.