



2026 NATIONAL EDUCATION REPORT: BELONGING, CAPACITY & COHERENCE





WELCOME



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FOREWORD

EDUCATION IN ENGLAND CONTINUES TO BE SHAPED BY THE COMMITMENT, PROFESSIONALISM AND CARE OF THOSE WHO WORK WITHIN IT. FROM CLASSROOMS AND STAFFROOMS TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND NATIONAL BODIES, PEOPLE ACROSS THE SYSTEM ARE STRIVING TO DELIVER THE BEST POSSIBLE OUTCOMES FOR LEARNERS IN INCREASINGLY DEMANDING CIRCUMSTANCES.

This year's National Education Report is grounded in that lived reality. We are proud to have launched the National Education Assembly (NEA), a place for joined-up national voices from across our education system. The NEA is an important new addition to our education ecosystem where more voices than ever before have a forum to be heard. The conversations we have had with thousands of practitioners, leaders, policymakers, learners and partners have been wide-ranging and consistent in their message: ambition for education remains strong, but the conditions

required to realise that ambition are under sustained pressure.

Stakeholders describe a system contending with significant challenges across all areas: funding insecurity, a lack of workforce capacity and wellbeing, rising levels of additional need and the complexity of accountability continue to place a strain on the day-to-day experience. Yet there is an enduring commitment from those in both policy and practice to improve inclusion, raise standards and ensure that education remains a powerful force for opportunity and social mobility.

What comes through most strongly is not a call to lower ambition, but a call for greater coherence and stability. Policies often look good in principle, but their impact depends on whether the system has the capacity and consistency required to embed change. When that alignment is missing, pressure is felt most acutely by those closest to learners.

The findings in this report underline the importance of collective voice. The NEA has enabled contributions from across the system to be heard, not as isolated concerns, but as part of a shared conversation about what education needs now and in the years ahead. That breadth of perspective strengthens not only the evidence presented here, but also the legitimacy of the conclusions we draw.

Alongside this, the work of the FED Futures programmes reflects our belief that responding to immediate pressures must go hand-in-hand with shaping longer-term solutions. The challenges facing education are complex and interconnected; addressing them requires sustained collaboration, informed by evidence and rooted in practice. In the next 12 months we will publish reports on English

and literacy, maths and numeracy, careers and skills and inclusion from early years to post-16.

This report does not seek to provide easy answers. Instead, it offers a clear synthesis of what the system is experiencing, where hope is growing and where action is most urgently needed. Above all, it reflects our conviction that by listening carefully to those with lived experience, working collectively and focusing on the conditions that enable success, education can continue to adapt and to thrive.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed their time, insight, experience and expertise to this year's report. Their willingness to engage openly and constructively is a testament to the strength of the education community and to its shared commitment to learners.

Carl

Dr Carl Ward

Chair of the Foundation
for Education Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THIS NATIONAL EDUCATION REPORT PROVIDES A DISTILLED AND ACCURATE PICTURE OF WHAT STAKEHOLDERS FROM ACROSS THE ENGLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM THINK AND FEEL ABOUT ITS DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESS OVER THE PAST YEAR.



As a waypoint in our system's annual education cycle, its value comes from the contribution made by the many thousands of rank-and-file education stakeholders. This has been achieved through the National Education Assembly that provides a forum for joined-up stakeholder voice across the system; the work of the National Education Futures projects that examine key issues in-depth across the education system; and FED's qualitative analysis that draws accurate insights from stakeholders. Together these generate uniquely neutral and independent views and recommendations to help develop and improve the education sector.

England's education system is at a critical inflection point, moving away from a narrow, performance-driven model focussed on headline metrics. Government policy is beginning to align with the long-term systemic concerns that stakeholders have consistently raised through FED consultations. Across recent policy documents – the Schools White Paper, the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper and Young people and work: interim report – there is a shift toward treating inclusion, learner wellbeing, curriculum reform, and teacher supply as connected parts of a wider equity agenda. This signals a gradual move toward a structural redesign where creating a sense of belonging is a foundational system goal.

Translating high-level policy ambitions into the daily reality of classrooms and learning places is a significant challenge. FED's critical role is to elevate the voices of those closest to children, young people and all learners and help hold the system accountable for its promises and commitments. FED continues to advocate for sustainable reform, which requires long-term planning,

cross-government coherence and deliberate investment in order to ensure that strategy and policy recommendations are delivered successfully.

FED launched the National Education Assembly (NEA) in 2025-26 to gather rich, qualitative and broad perspectives on the key issues affecting education today through a diverse membership of education leaders, teachers, support staff and lecturers. The NEA expands and strengthens the evidence base used to help shape national education policy, practice and strategy and ensures that stakeholders' voices are heard, shared and amplified at a national level.

As promised in our 2025 report, we continue to expand the National Education Futures projects to build on our previous focus areas and address emerging national priorities. In 2026 we are focused on Careers and Skills, Maths and Numeracy and English and Literacy. Inclusion remains core to FED's work, with the focus this year on early years and transition, while continuing to ensure inclusion is threaded through all of our Futures projects. We will publish individual reports on each topic in the coming months, drawing from lived and learned expertise, which will provide tangible strategy, practice and policy recommendations.

The report also features our plans for our next round of National Education Futures Projects from September 2027. These will explore some crucial areas for the future of the English education system and include Assessment and Accountability, Funding in Education, Nutritional Inclusion, Science Education and SEND. This work will help stimulate debate in a proactive and positive manner to help find solutions to problems.

EDUCATION IN REVIEW 2026

“Funding is tighter than ever. Funding for SEND doesn't come close to be able to support effectively and safely where there is significant need. Schools are operating as effectively as they are able in spite of dwindling budgets.”

2026 FED National Education Survey participant

ENGLAND'S EDUCATION SYSTEM IS AT A GENUINE INFLECTION POINT. THERE IS GROWING RECOGNITION OF THE REAL CHALLENGES SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES FACE AND A SHARPER FOCUS ON THE BARRIERS PREVENTING TOO MANY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FROM THRIVING.

Inclusion, disadvantage, attendance, curriculum reform, teacher supply and accountability are no longer being treated as isolated issues, but as connected parts of a wider equity agenda. At the heart of this agenda lies a question the system has struggled to answer: do our young people feel they belong? Through our many consultations, including with the National Education Assembly and at the FED Summit, as well as through wider consultation events, one message came through with striking consistency: belonging is not a buzzword, it is the foundation of meaningful education. Belonging in education means more than feeling welcome in a classroom. It is the sense that a young person is known, valued and connected to their peers, to the adults around them, to their school community and to a broader society in which they see themselves reflected and represented. When children feel they truly belong, engagement rises, wellbeing improves and learning flourishes.

Yet the evidence tells a troubling story. Out of 27 European countries, the UK is last in how happy 15-year-olds are with their life.¹ That is a systemic concern, not an individual one, and one that the Government has also acknowledged as an issue in its planned reforms.

The paradox of our time is this: in

a world that is becoming vast in its possibilities for connection through technological developments, on a human level, our young people are becoming increasingly disconnected. AI is now an ever-present and freely accessible tool, which has not only changed the way content is produced, but has impacted the future of learning and work. Tasks that were previously done by people across all levels of employment can now be accomplished by AI, fundamentally reshaping the landscape of opportunity. It has been a long-held truth that practitioners in the classroom have been preparing young people for jobs that may be phased out by the time they enter the workforce, which is now happening at an increasingly rapid pace due to the expansion of AI.

Alan Milburn's recent 'Young people and work: interim report'² makes a constructive contribution to the urgent national debate on how to give our young people the best possible preparation for navigating today's difficult employment environment.

The Government appears to recognise this. In the past 12 months, three important education policy documents have been published that, taken together, suggest a system beginning to respond to this crisis of disconnection.

¹ Every Child Achieving and Thriving - GOV.UK
² Young people and work: interim report - GOV.UK

Three reforms, one direction

THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER 'EVERY CHILD ACHIEVING AND THRIVING', THE CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW AND THE POST-16 EDUCATION AND SKILLS WHITE PAPER SIGNAL SOMETHING MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN A SERIES OF ISOLATED REFORMS.

Collectively, they reflect a gradual but important shift away from a narrow, performance-driven model of education towards a broader understanding of inclusion, learner wellbeing and long-term system capacity. Crucially, they place belonging at the centre of what the system is being asked to achieve.

Stakeholders tell us that for the first time in a decade, schools and colleges are being asked to do more than narrow their focus and chase a set of headline metrics. The Schools White Paper 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' sets a ten-year vision in which inclusion, enrichment and belonging are system goals rather than school-level choices.³ In practice, this means £1.6 billion directed at inclusive mainstream provision, £1.8 billion for specialist support and a new pupil engagement framework that will require schools to track pupils' sense of belonging. This is a quiet but meaningful shift in what the system is asked to measure, moving from performance alone to the conditions that make performance possible. However, feedback gathered through the National Education Assembly suggests that in practice, belonging remains fragile.

Given that FED has repeatedly stressed the importance of long-term planning in education, we are encouraged that recent government policy papers have taken a longer-term approach. Our partners have welcomed the emphasis on early years, family hubs and community-facing schools, though they are clear that warm words and necessary investment are different things: implementation clarity and workforce capacity are needed to make these proposals become a reality.

For teachers and school leaders, the

Curriculum and Assessment Review offers something long overdue: permission to teach more broadly.⁴ Moving away from the EBacc, reducing GCSE exam time by at least 10 per cent (but many stakeholders say this is not enough), widening access to enrichment including the arts, music and sport as well as vocational subjects, and introducing an oracy framework will require major adjustments. These changes matter because they recognise that belonging is built not just through academic success, but through opportunities for young people to discover who they are, what they value and where they fit. Educators broadly welcome the direction, but pace matters. A revised curriculum will not reach classrooms until 2028, which makes the next two years critical for building the conditions, workforce capacity and professional development that will determine whether it lands well.

For young people over sixteen, the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper sets out a clearer structure for post-16 options.⁵ Three routes (A Levels, T Levels and the new V Levels) replace a wider range of qualifications. From September 2026, the Lifelong Learning Entitlement will allow people to study at a higher level in shorter blocks throughout their working lives, rather than committing to a full degree up front. Questions remain about further education capacity, employer engagement and the quality of careers guidance, issues FED will continue to raise.

The big question is not whether change is coming (it is) but whether the ambitions set out across these landmark policy documents will be translated into the daily reality of classrooms, staffrooms and education



“ There is too much emphasis on students taking large numbers of exams and over excessive assessment and testing. I have seen a detrimental effect on students and believe it is a huge factor in the rising levels of anxiety in young people.”

2026 FED National Education Survey participant

communities across the country. That translation is harder than it looks and it is exactly where the work of FED matters most: elevating the voices of those closest to children and holding the system to account for what it promises.

Steve Chalke MBE put it directly at the FED Summit: “We need to move the fence, not repaint it.” To illustrate this, he reflected on a wartime story from France in which two soldiers sought permission to bury their fallen friend in a village churchyard. The vicar initially refused because the cemetery was reserved for local people, so the soldiers buried their colleague just outside the boundary fence. Overnight, however, the vicar reconsidered his decision, recognising that his responsibility was not to define who belonged, but to ensure that people experienced belonging. The following morning, he moved the fence so the soldier's grave became part of the churchyard.

Chalke used this story as a metaphor for inclusion within education systems. For too long, the system has focused on repainting the fence rather than moving it. ‘Repainting’ might mean giving disadvantaged students aids or extra tutoring to help them overcome an inaccessible curriculum, whereas ‘moving’ the fence means changing the curriculum itself so the barriers no longer exist. ‘Repainting’ means adding interventions for the children and young people who struggle, extra support for those who fall behind and pastoral systems for those who do not fit, while leaving the structures that created the struggle unchanged. It means measuring attendance as a performance indicator without addressing why children and young people do not want to or cannot

come to school. It means celebrating academic progress while ignoring the pupils and students who feel they do not belong. It means building accountability frameworks that reward schools for managing exclusion rather than eliminating it.

Dan Morrow reinforced this message by reflecting on his own journey from a disadvantaged background to studying at Oxford University. While gaining entry to one of the world's most prestigious institutions represented opportunity and achievement, he spoke candidly that access alone does not create belonging. Recounting experiences of feeling out of place within unfamiliar social and cultural settings, he highlighted the distinction between being present and feeling accepted. His message was that inclusion cannot be measured simply by whether someone has been given a seat at the table. True belonging comes when individuals feel valued, understood and able to participate authentically without concealing who they are.

The reforms outlined above represent real progress, but progress alone is not transformation. ‘Moving the fence’ means having the courage to dismantle the structures that have kept too many children and young people on the outside looking in. It means building a system where belonging is not something children and young people have to earn or prove, but something they experience from the moment they walk through the door. It means accepting that inclusion designed as an afterthought will always be fragile, and that equity built on goodwill alone will always be precarious.

³ Every Child Achieving and Thriving - GOV.UK

⁴ Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all - GOV.UK

⁵ Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper - GOV.UK

Where the tensions lie

WHILE THE SECTOR FEELS GENUINE OPTIMISM ABOUT THE PLANS OUTLINED IN ALL THREE REFORMS, THERE IS ALSO APPREHENSION AROUND HOW THESE AMBITIONS WILL BE REALISED IN PRACTICE, ESPECIALLY WHEN FUNDING CONTINUES TO BE REDUCED.

Stakeholders across our wide consultations were direct about the central risk: without a clear, coherent implementation strategy, the recent White Papers risk becoming a wish list. Fragmentation remains the system's deepest structural problem: education, health and social care operating in silos, with the consequences falling hardest on children at the margins. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) funding was identified as the most critical pressure point, with rising need outpacing resources and mainstream schools being asked to absorb complexity without the specialist support to match. We keenly await the proposals that result from the Department for Education's recent consultation on SEND reform.

Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector and Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sector is currently facing a massive operational funding and staffing crisis. Stakeholders tell us that they need more investment in EYFS to enable long-term system capacity. Without that infrastructure, our school-age SEND crisis could hit an absolute breaking point. The investment in school-based nurseries is very much welcomed but it can't be delivered at scale overnight, and needs to be done in tandem with investment into EYFS.

Workforce capacity constrains everything else:

recruitment and retention remain stubbornly difficult challenges, workload pressures are unresolved and the workforce plan is notably silent on SEND-specific provision. FED's 2025 National Education Futures report stressed the importance of training and developing the education workforce specifically on inclusive practice: "To deliver system-wide inclusion, teacher training must move from a deficit-based model to one that is strength-based and responsive to learner diversity".⁶

The growing challenges around attendance, emotionally based avoidance of education settings and diminishing relational trust are not isolated concerns. They need a system response that gets to the root causes.

Policy language is shifting towards belonging, wellbeing and flourishing, but institutionally the sector remains driven by attainment metrics. Accountability frameworks continue to reward the measurable over the meaningful, pushing schools and colleges toward curriculum narrowing even as policy and national mission pulls in the opposite direction. Poverty, geography and SEND demand continue to shape outcomes more than talent or effort, in a system that has promised equity for decades.

“Funding pressures and workforce shortages continue to place significant strain on schools and colleges, particularly around SEND provision and staff retention. While there has been positive progress in inclusion and collaborative working between organisations, many education settings are still operating under considerable pressure. Concerns also remain around accountability measures and the impact of inspection processes on staff wellbeing.”

2026 FED National Education Survey participant

“Education needs a shift from system-first to child-first. I would prioritise:

- Relationships before results – safe, trusted connections drive learning
- Earlier intervention – support before crisis, not after
- Broader definitions of success – include wellbeing, engagement and life skills
- Proper integration of Alternative Provision – as a valued part of the system, not a last resort
- Workforce support – train and retain staff in relational, inclusive practice
- Family and community inclusion – education beyond the classroom
- Flexibility – personalised pathways over rigid structures

In short: build a system that fits the child, not the other way around.”

2026 FED National Education Survey participant



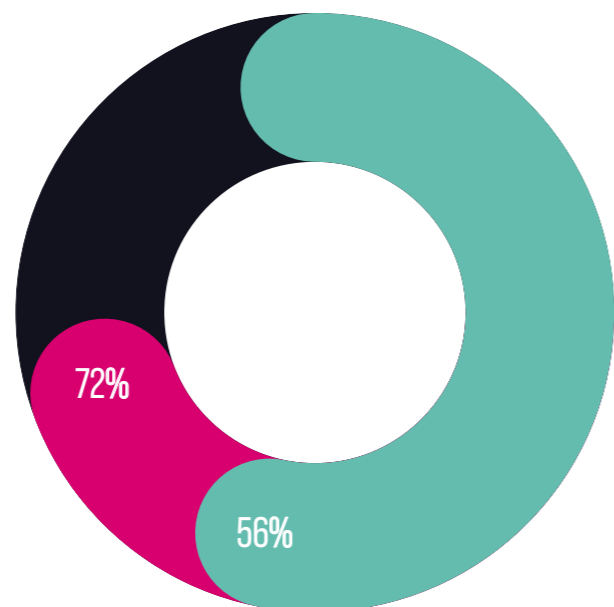
FED's 2026 National Education Survey results highlight the need for a system that listens deeply and centres the child

THE FED NATIONAL EDUCATION SURVEY THIS YEAR EXPLORED PERCEPTIONS OF THE ENGLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM, CONFIDENCE IN FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS AND VIEWS ON DECISION-MAKING WITHIN EDUCATION.

Overall, respondents expressed low confidence in the current direction of the education system and limited belief that meaningful improvement will occur in the short or long term. Across most areas, respondents felt that conditions had either remained unchanged or worsened over the past 12 months. Concerns were particularly strong around funding, workforce pressures, SEND provision and long-term strategic planning. **Key findings include:**

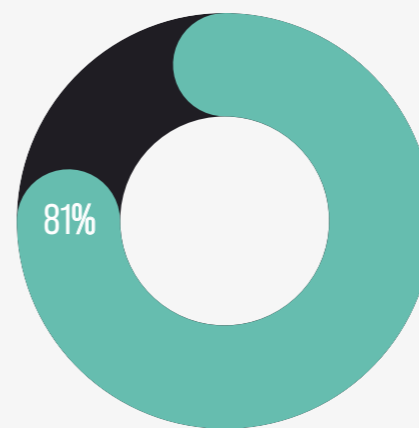
The way Ofsted inspects education settings

56% FEEL THAT THE WAY OFSTED INSPECTS EDUCATION SETTINGS HAS WORSENERD IN THE PAST YEAR, AND 72% DO NOT FEEL CONFIDENT EFFECTIVE ACTION WILL BE TAKEN IN THE NEXT YEAR TO ADDRESS THIS KEY ISSUE.

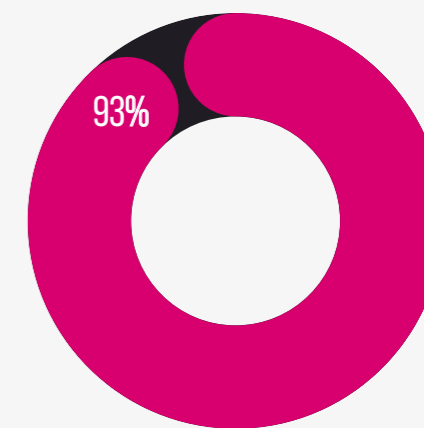


Key: ● Worsened ● Not confident

Funding for schools

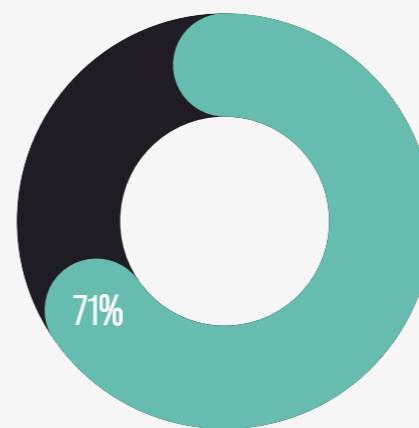


81% FEEL THAT FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND OTHER EDUCATION SERVICES HAS WORSENERD IN THE PAST YEAR.

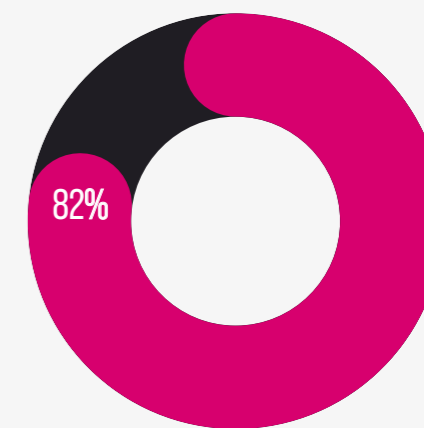


93% DO NOT FEEL CONFIDENT EFFECTIVE ACTION WILL BE TAKEN IN THE NEXT YEAR TO ADDRESS THIS KEY ISSUE.

Support for learners with SEND



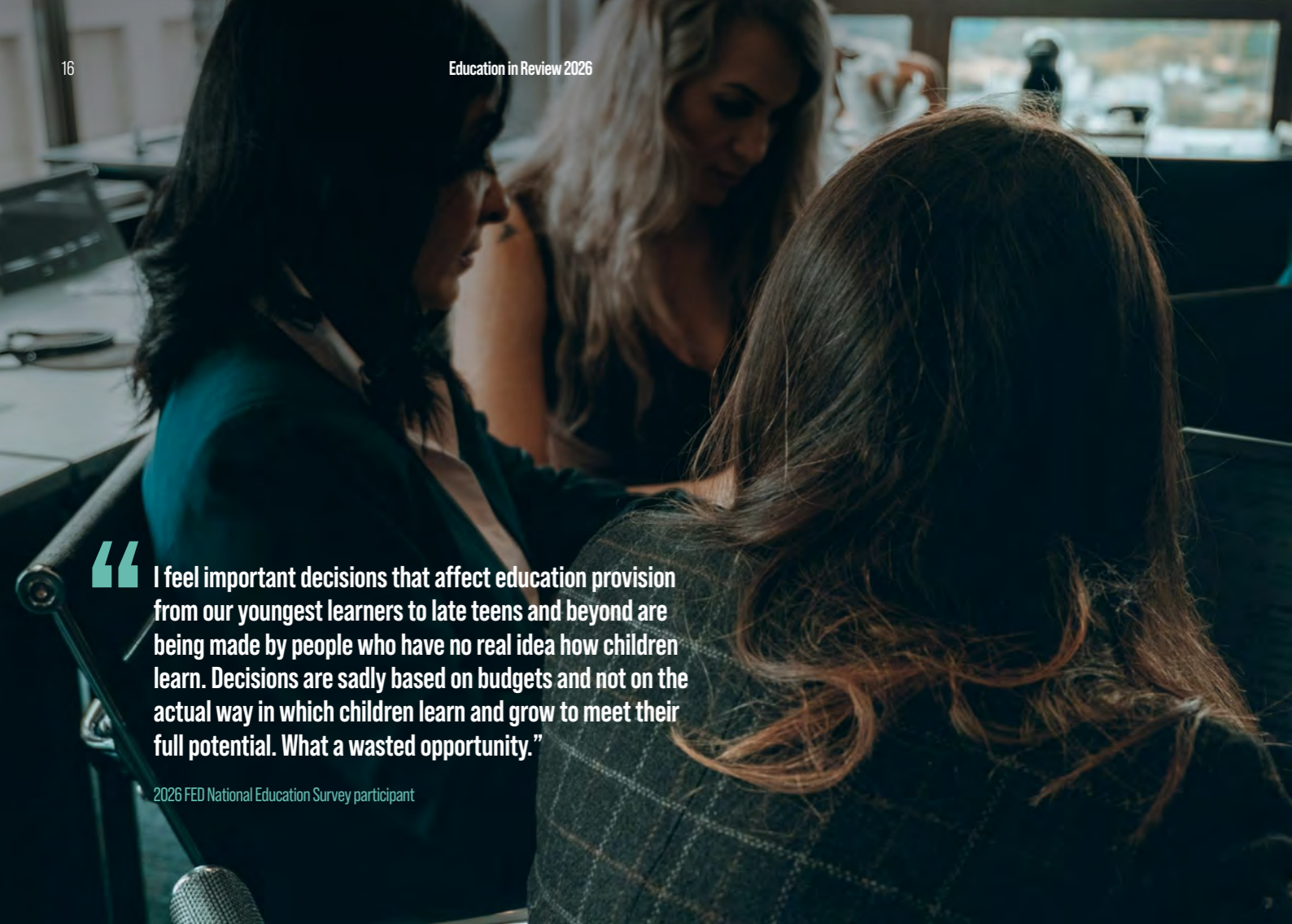
71% FEEL THAT SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS WITH SEND IS GETTING WORSE.



82% ARE NOT CONFIDENT THIS ISSUE WILL BE TACKLED EFFECTIVELY IN THE NEXT YEAR.

Key: ● Worsened ● Not confident



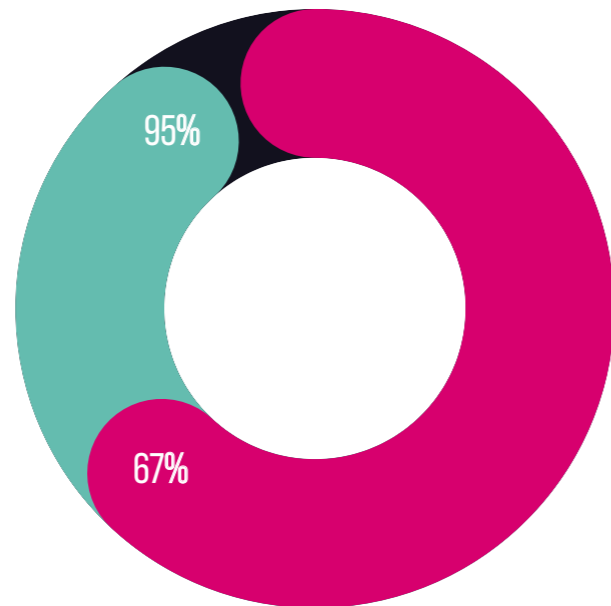


“ I feel important decisions that affect education provision from our youngest learners to late teens and beyond are being made by people who have no real idea how children learn. Decisions are sadly based on budgets and not on the actual way in which children learn and grow to meet their full potential. What a wasted opportunity.”

2026 FED National Education Survey participant

The way we assess pupil progress

95% FEEL THAT THE WAY WE ASSESS PUPIL PROGRESS HAS EITHER NOT CHANGED OR WORSENERD IN THE PAST YEAR, AND 67% DO NOT FEEL CONFIDENT EFFECTIVE ACTION WILL BE TAKEN IN THE NEXT YEAR TO ADDRESS THIS KEY ISSUE.



Key: ● Not changed or Worsened ● Not confident



57%

are unconvinced that government strategies will deliver improvements to the education system

31%

didn't know if they would help or hinder progress

86%

do not believe they are listened to when decisions are made about the education system

The findings do however suggest a strong relationship between respondents' sense of being listened to and their overall confidence in the education system. Respondents who felt listened to consistently reported:

- More positive views about changes over the past 12 months
- Greater confidence in future improvements
- Stronger agreement with statements about government reforms and long-term progress.

While some respondents reported awareness of consultation opportunities, many did not believe these opportunities resulted in meaningful influence over decision-making. Taken together, the findings indicate widespread concern about the current state of education, low confidence in future action and a significant perception gap between policymakers and those working within the education system.

“ While the aims of the White Paper are positive, without significant and sustained additional funding they are unlikely to improve the system. Schools facing deprivation, rising SEND needs, staffing shortages and increasing accountability already lack the capacity and resources to implement new strategies effectively.”

2026 FED National Education Survey participant



Responding to stakeholders' concerns

ACROSS FED'S CONSULTATIONS, A CLEAR MESSAGE CONTINUES TO EMERGE: THE EDUCATION SYSTEM MUST BECOME MORE COHERENT, INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE. THIS IS ESSENTIAL IF IT IS TO REALISE THE AMBITIONS BEING SET OUT THROUGH CURRENT GOVERNMENT REFORM AND RESPOND EFFECTIVELY TO THE SCALE AND COMPLEXITY OF CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS.

Many of the proposed reforms require sustained cultural and structural change over a decade or more, yet the education system continues to operate within short political and funding cycles that can undermine continuity, trust and implementation.

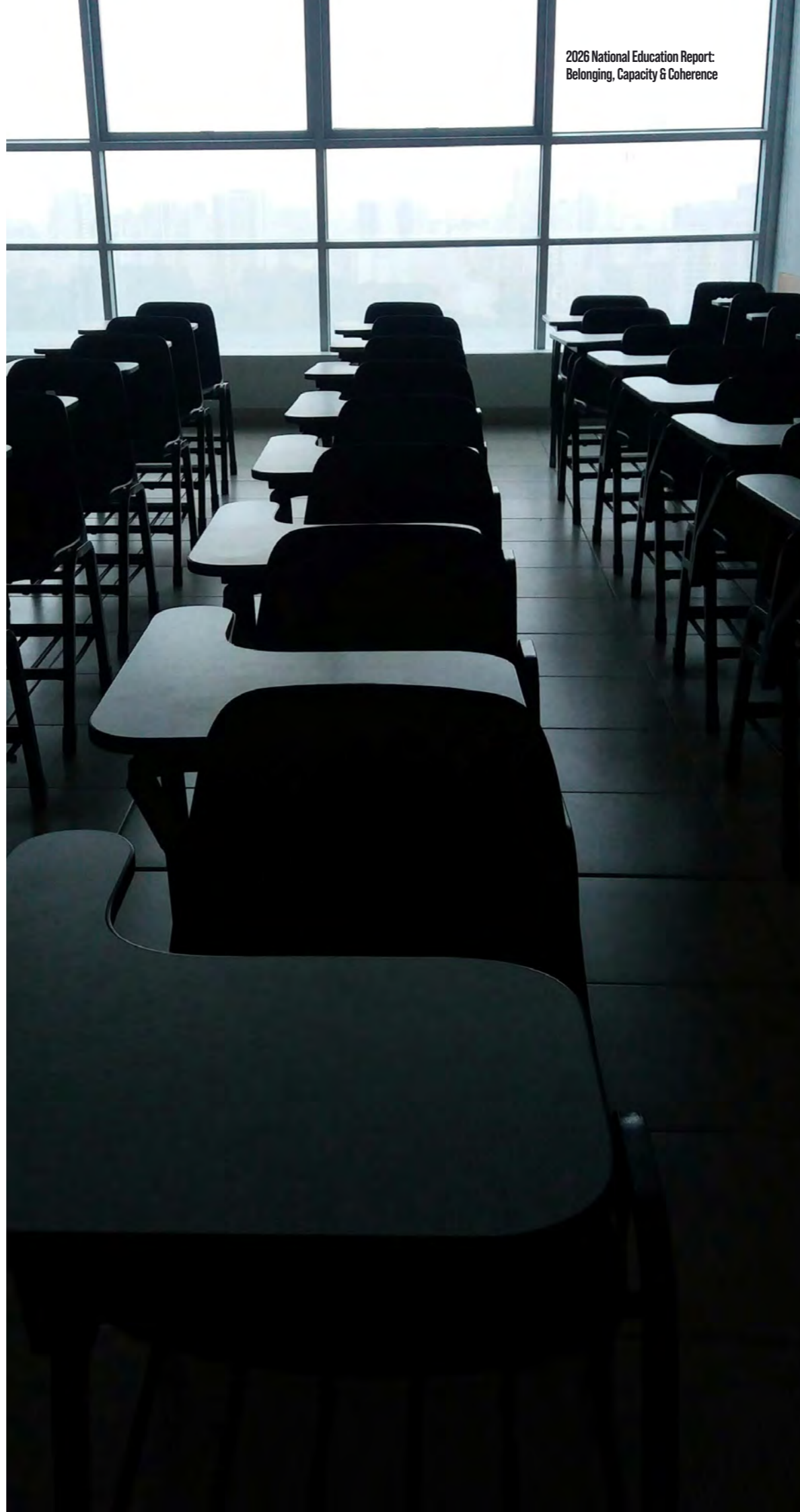
Stakeholders have told us throughout the year that the ambition to create a more inclusive and innovative education system that provides belonging and opportunity for every learner, is threatened by an overbearing accountability system that could unintentionally

damage the journey towards this vision.

FED's stakeholders describe a system under growing strain – one that too often relies on short-term intervention, fragmented structures, an overstretched workforce and goodwill to compensate for deeper structural pressures. Yet they also describe a strong appetite for a different future, where learners and educators are supported to thrive, inclusion is designed into the system rather than added onto it and education is driven by purpose as well as performance.

“Inadequate funding prevents excellent inclusive practice.”

2026 FED National Education Survey participant



Five interconnected priorities have consistently surfaced across our consultations and will shape the next phase of FED's work:

- 1) Sustainable Funding, Workforce Capacity and System Resilience
- 2) Inclusion and Equity: SEND and Early Childhood Development
- 3) Accountability, Assurance and System Trust
- 4) System-Wide Mental Health and Wellbeing
- 5) Learning With Purpose: Curriculum and Assessment for Meaningful Outcomes.

We repeatedly hear that lasting reform cannot be achieved through isolated policy change alone. Progress depends on greater coherence between education,

health, social care, employment and wider community. At its heart, this is a call for a system that moves beyond reactive policymaking towards long-term stewardship, shared responsibility and sustained investment in the conditions that allow learners, educators and communities to flourish.

As an independent and trusted convener, FED is uniquely placed to bring together diverse voices across education and wider society, amplify lived experience, supporting evidence-informed dialogue and strengthening coherence within long-term reforms. Our role is not to add to fragmentation or noise, but to help create the conditions for meaningful collaboration, continuity and implementation.



HOW FED'S WORK MAKES A DIFFERENCE

THE FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT (FED) WAS ESTABLISHED IN 2019 TO PROVIDE AN INDEPENDENT AND NEUTRAL SPACE FOR STAKEHOLDERS TO HELP SHAPE THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION. OUR MISSION IS TO SUPPORT LONG-TERM PLANNING IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS SO THAT EVERY LEARNER, NO MATTER THEIR BACKGROUND, RECEIVES THE BEST POSSIBLE EDUCATION AT EVERY STAGE OF THEIR EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY.

FED continues to advocate for system-wide changes in education through deep and wide-ranging qualitative consultations with a range of stakeholders.

Over the years, these collective voices have called for long-term planning in education: "The country's current approach to education strategy and planning needs to improve if we are to unlock our potential in the face of significant challenges".⁷

In our National Education Consultation Report 2024,⁸ we outlined four proposals to underpin long-term planning and national dialogue:

- **A 10-year plan for education** – with clear goals and processes for setting and delivering short- and long-term aims
- **A National Council for Education** – on statutory footing, bringing together experienced leaders from within and beyond education to develop and oversee the long-term plan
- **A National Education Assembly** – akin to the NHS Assembly, bringing together stakeholders across and beyond the sector for open dialogue, review and collaboration, with a built-in feedback loop into future planning
- **A Chief Education Officer** – an independent, senior advisor to government, focused on delivering the long-term plan in partnership with the Secretary of State and key stakeholders.



At the heart of this vision is the belief that we need structures that support stability, continuity and collective responsibility – not fragmented initiatives or short political cycles.

While we are encouraged that long-term framing is visible in the Schools White Paper 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' and in other government strategies, we continue to stress the need for a delivery infrastructure that supports the governance and implementation of long-term plans. This is why we continue to advocate for a detailed long-term planning framework, independent governance and greater expertise to oversee the Government's proposed programmes over a 10+ year timeframe – a period that will include a number of electoral cycles and potential changes in government.

Launched in 2024, our FED National Education Futures projects have explored the issues that most concern our stakeholders. Together we have developed practical recommendations that we're starting to see reflected in recent policy papers. For example, our MAT, Schools and Partnerships project⁹ looked at how we can move from isolated institutional performance to genuine system-wide collaboration. This was echoed in the Schools White Paper 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving': "We will create a new model of local partnership and shared accountability for children's outcomes across local communities. Our aim is to enable the conditions that allow a sense of collective endeavour and responsibility".¹⁰ We will look to ensure that collaboration engages educators in all sectors and settings, including alternative provision, virtual schools and independent schools.

SEND reform and wider inclusion was a central theme of the White Paper and Curriculum and Assessment Review echoing the collective recommendations of our Inclusion Futures project which set out three priorities in 2025 that could move inclusion from "being a reactive accommodation to a proactive foundation".¹¹

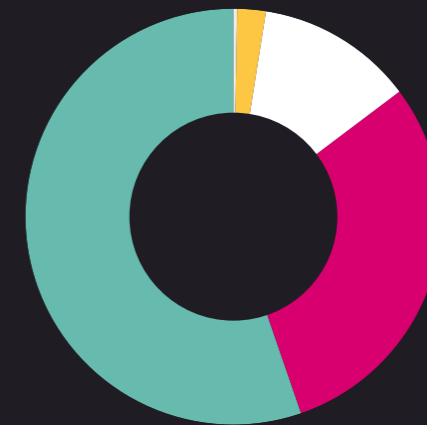
- Setting expectations for inclusive practice across all education settings
- Broadening curriculum and assessment models
- Strengthening inclusive practice across the education workforce.



⁹ Education at the Crossroads – FED
¹⁰ Every Child Achieving and Thriving – GOV.UK
¹¹ Education at the Crossroads – FED



HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU THAT EFFECTIVE ACTION WILL BE TAKEN TO ADDRESS RECRUITING AND RETAINING TEACHERS AND OTHER EDUCATION STAFF OVER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS?



Very confident 0.4%
 Fairly confident 2.3%
 Neutral 12.3%
 Not very confident 29.9%
 Not at all confident 55.2%

Moreover, our Education Workforce Futures project focused on three enablers to support our education workforce to thrive. A workforce that is "not only skilled and supported, but valued, energised and proud to stay in the profession". We set out a series of recommendations to make education careers more inclusive and appealing, prioritise professional development and increase the flexibility of the profession. The Government's intention to explore ways to make teaching more inclusive across education settings and make high-quality professional development an entitlement for teachers¹² could begin to move us in the right direction.

In 2025, FED launched the National Education Assembly (NEA). It is a space that listens to the profession, respects lived experience and enables honest reflection and discussion – capturing members' experience and sentiment. This is then synthesised into system-level insight, highlighting recurring themes, points of pressure, areas of divergence and patterns over time. FED uses this insight to ground thinking and shape stakeholder conversations, so when FED speaks to policy makers, it does so with integrity and credibility.

¹² Every Child Achieving and Thriving – GOV.UK

Learners Council

THE VOICE AND EXPERIENCE OF LEARNERS THEMSELVES ARE CRITICAL TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLICY. THIS IS WHY WE CREATED THE FED LEARNERS COUNCIL IN 2021.

Since then, members of the council have visited 10 Downing Street to speak directly with government officials, met with the Children's Commissioner to talk about the future of education, shared ideas with partners such as University College London (UCL), Pearson and Ofsted and have taken part in national consultations. We continue to grow and expand the work of the council, which will join the National Education Assembly ecosystem later this year as the National Assembly of Learners.



“Being part of the FED Learners Council has not only facilitated my individual and academic development but has inspired a continuous pursuit of learning, expanded my professional network, and provided opportunities for personal growth. In summary, the FED Learners Council is the ideal platform for young learners aspiring to influence change in education while undergoing a transformative personal journey.”

Victor Sosanya, FED Learners Council member 2021-2024



Summary of our annual reports and their recommendations:

Over the past five years, alongside our continued call for a long-term education strategy and planning framework to support it, our reports have advocated for:

- 2021
 - Improving system coherence across education phases
 - Enhancing collaboration between sectors
 - Encouraging less fragmented policymaking.
- 2022
 - Addressing technological change, economic shifts and evolving workforce needs
 - Broadening the curriculum to include life skills, digital literacy, creativity and applied learning, plus stronger employer engagement.
- 2023
 - Conducting a system-wide curriculum and assessment review
 - Broadening school accountability beyond exam results.
- 2024
 - Strategic thinking embedded through a Long-term Planning Framework
 - Robust independent governance through a leadership body – an Education Council
 - Enhanced expertise in the education system through the office of a Chief Education Officer
 - Expanded engagement with a wide range of stakeholders through a National Education Assembly.
- 2025
 - Inclusion – ensuring pathways for every learner to thrive
 - The Education Workforce – building a valued, inclusive and supported profession
 - MAT, School and Education Partnerships – building a more collaborative and coherent system.



Year in review

FED uses qualitative analysis to accurately understand what stakeholders really think. That is why our findings are so impactful. We are committed to bringing people together to share learning and to help shape the direction of education in England, the UK and around the world. Our activities in the past 12 months have included:

Launching the National Education Assembly (NEA), surveying 2,000+ members in autumn 2025 to shape the NEA's focus around the education issues that most concern them.

Holding the first NEA meeting in November 2025.

Publishing "Equipping Education for the Age of AI" Futures report¹³ in September 2025.

Publishing "Financial Wellbeing Core Knowledge and Competencies" Futures report and framework¹⁴ in November 2025.

Holding 24-hour deep consultation events at Windsor Castle and the Guildhall, which included: Education in Emergencies and Protracted Crises in September 2025, Reimagining Maths and Numeracy in December 2025, Inclusion by Design: Early Years and Transitions in February 2026 and The Future of English and Literacy in March 2026.

Holding online consultations, which included Inclusion and English and Literacy in October 2025, Careers and Skills in January 2026 and the Schools White Paper in March 2026.

Convening the FED Summit in April 2026, titled 'Belonging: Conversations with Purpose'.

Convening the NEA Assembly in May 2026 at the Schools and Academies Show at Excel London, bringing together education professionals in the FED Theatre.

Holding a number of FEDSpaces¹⁵ online events throughout the year, which included: Starting Well, Moving Well: Improving Transitions in Education, Strong Starts for Every Child and What Does it Mean to be a Literate Citizen Today?

Holding termly meetings for the Learners Council.

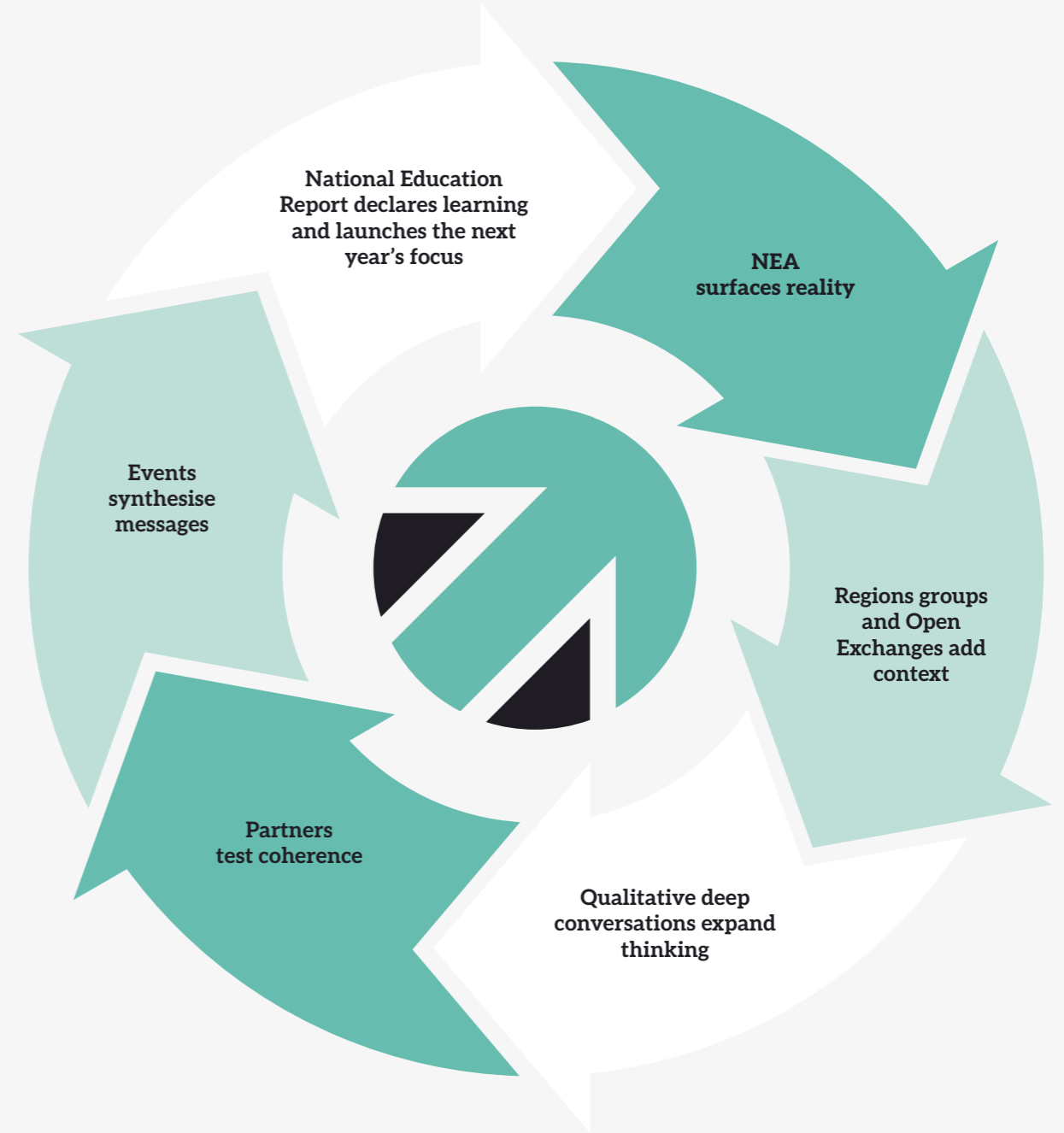
Continuing to survey stakeholders to ensure our work aligns with their concerns.

“ I feel important decisions affecting education from our youngest learners to late teens are being made by people with no real understanding of how children learn. Decisions are sadly based on budgets, not on the actual way children learn and grow to meet their full potential. What a wasted opportunity.”

2026 FED National Education Survey participant

¹³ Equipping Education for the Age of AI - FED
¹⁴ The Financial Wellbeing Core Knowledge and Competencies Report & Framework - FED
¹⁵ FEDSpace

FED architecture



ENTER THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSEMBLY

IN FED'S 2024 REPORT, 94% OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS CALLED FOR THE CREATION OF A NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSEMBLY (NEA). IN NOVEMBER 2025, FED LAUNCHED THE NEA: THE FIRST STAKEHOLDER-LED PLATFORM OF ITS KIND FOR THE ENGLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM.



The NEA is the unified voice of the profession; gathering diverse perspectives on the key issues affecting education today through a dynamic membership of education leaders, teachers, support staff and lecturers.

Through the NEA, the profession is collectively empowered to expand and strengthen the evidence base used to shape national education policy, practice and strategy.

FED has always believed in the importance of listening to all stakeholders. Through the NEA, we can now hear the voice of the profession at scale.

Membership continues to grow rapidly. To strengthen engagement at a regional level, the NEA has since launched three regional groups: NEA South, NEA Midlands

and NEA North. Members of these groups have expressed a clear desire for a greater voice in regional and national skills planning, and for more consistent representation in the decision-making forums that shape education policy across England. The groups also provide a forum for exploring regional issues in greater depth. For example, members of NEA South have highlighted the particular challenges facing coastal communities, where access to further and higher education, employer engagement and careers support can lag significantly behind that of more connected inland areas. NEA North will host its first assembly in July 2026 at Manchester Metropolitan University, focusing on three core themes: how education prepares children for life and work, SEND and home-school partnerships.

The NEA is formed around three core pillars:

Your voice.



Heard.

Every stakeholder has meaningful input into national education policy. Through regular assemblies and our NEA website, we listen to our members' lived experience and professional insights.



Shared.

NEA assemblies break down silos, fostering collaboration between diverse stakeholders. Members access exclusive FEDLearn professional development sessions that respond to current education challenges.



Amplified.

NEA transforms individual contributions into collective evidence-based recommendations that reach the highest levels of government decision-making to help shape education strategy.

The critical issues identified by NEA Members

In November 2025, more than 2,000 NEA members shared their views on the issues they believe matter most for the future of education. Their responses informed discussions at the first National Education Assembly in Stafford later that month.

Across the responses, **five key themes emerged:**

1.

Funding and finance were identified as the most urgent concern. Participants consistently linked financial pressure to staffing levels, SEND provision, workload, wellbeing and the capacity to sustain enrichment. Many described the difficulty of long-term planning as a result of short funding cycles and late announcements, particularly in relation to pay awards.

“Schools and colleges are balancing spreadsheets rather than shaping futures.”

2.

SEND emerged as a significant concern across all roles. Respondents described stretched specialist services, lengthy assessment processes and inconsistencies across local authorities. Many linked inclusion to wider system health, noting that when SEND provision is strained, pressure rises across the school.

“Inclusion has to start from belonging; it cannot just be about compliance or paperwork.”

3.

Half of all respondents selected mental health and wellbeing as a priority. Building belonging, behaviour, workload and retention were closely associated with this theme. Respondents emphasised that the wellbeing of pupils and staff is fundamental to learning and to the sustainability of the workforce.

“When staff feel supported and trusted, everything else follows.”

4.

Although views about accountability varied, respondents consistently described the need for systems that support improvement and professional trust. Many identified inspection-related stress and the need for clearer, more proportionate approaches.

“When feedback is fair and focused on development, it changes everything.”

5.

Respondents identified curriculum and assessment as important areas for development, particularly in relation to relevance, breadth and student engagement. Although selected less frequently than funding or wellbeing, this theme was strongly connected to equity, workload and inclusion.

“A broader curriculum would allow us to keep more students engaged and proud of what they can achieve.”

WHILE PERSPECTIVES DIFFERED, THERE WAS BROAD AGREEMENT ON MANY OF THE CHALLENGES FACING EDUCATION AND THE CHANGES NEEDED TO ADDRESS THEM. THE DISCUSSIONS HELPED MOVE THE CONVERSATION BEYOND IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS TOWARD UNDERSTANDING WHAT MEANINGFUL REFORM MIGHT REQUIRE IN PRACTICE.



The 2026 Assembly

IN MAY 2026, THE NEA CONVENED A SERIES OF PANEL DISCUSSIONS IN THE FED THEATRE AT THE SCHOOLS AND ACADEMIES SHOW AT EXCEL LONDON. THE FIVE SESSIONS CONTINUED THE CONVERSATIONS THAT BEGAN AT THE NOVEMBER ASSEMBLY AND DREW ON ISSUES IDENTIFIED THROUGH THE NEA SURVEY AND REGIONAL MEETINGS. TOGETHER, THEY EXPLORED SOME OF THE MOST PRESSING CHALLENGES FACING EDUCATION, FROM INCLUSION AND ACCOUNTABILITY TO CURRICULUM REFORM, WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND THE FUTURE OF LEARNING.



SEND REFORM

The first discussion, "Policy Promises into Trust and School & College Reality", focused on turning policy ambitions for SEND and inclusion into effective practice. Participants discussed how new support models could be delivered successfully; what schools and colleges need to implement them effectively and how wider partners can contribute to better outcomes for children and young people.

THE GAP THAT WON'T CLOSE?

The second discussion, "Tackling Persistent Disadvantage in Trusts, Schools & Colleges", examined the factors that continue to drive educational disadvantage. Participants explored the role of funding and targeted support in narrowing attainment gaps, and considered how schools, colleges and trusts can create the conditions in which all children and young people can thrive.

'MIDDLE OF THE ROAD' OR 'WORLD-CLASS'?

The third discussion, "What Needs to Change and How We Might Do It", focused on the future of curriculum reform. Discussion centred on how proposed changes could shape learning, engagement and post-16 pathways; what schools, colleges and trusts need to deliver a rich and meaningful education; and how the curriculum might evolve to meet the needs of young people in the decades ahead.

'BURNED OUT' OR 'BOUGHT IN'?

The penultimate discussion, "Tackling Staff Engagement in Trusts, Schools and Colleges", focused on building organisational cultures that foster engagement among pupils, staff, parents and carers. Discussion centred on the factors that strengthen staff morale and loyalty; the strategies that best support attendance, engagement and retention; and how schools, colleges and trusts can attract and retain talented staff. The session also showcased examples of schools and trusts challenging established practice and adopting new approaches to improve engagement and retention.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The final discussion, "Is the Accountability System Fit for Purpose? What Do We Need to Do to Make It Better?", explored whether current accountability arrangements are delivering what the education system needs. The session considered how accountability can drive improvement, support professional development and maintain public confidence, while remaining fair and proportionate for those working in trusts, schools and colleges.

The discussions in May built on the themes identified at the inaugural Assembly in November 2025. While funding, SEND, wellbeing, accountability, and curriculum and assessment remain key concerns, the focus has increasingly shifted towards implementation and reform.

Across all five sessions, participants explored what meaningful change requires in practice. Whether discussing inclusion, curriculum, workforce challenges or accountability, the conversation repeatedly returned to the importance of trust, capacity and long-term investment in the people and institutions that support children and young people.

NEA – into the future

THE AMBITION IS SIMPLE: TO ENSURE THAT EDUCATION POLICY IS BETTER INFORMED BY THE REALITIES OF EDUCATION PRACTICE.

The insights gathered through the NEA are already helping to shape FED's work. Members' contributions have informed the National Education Futures programme and supported the development of the Futures reports.

The next phase of the NEA will focus on broadening participation and strengthening the evidence base. Future surveys and meetings will bring more voices into the conversation, particularly those whose experiences are not always reflected in national debates. By gathering perspectives from across different roles, phases and regions, the NEA will continue to build a richer understanding of the challenges facing education and where support is most needed.

A key priority will be ensuring that these insights reach decision-makers, so that policy is informed by the experiences of those working across the education system.



Join the NEA today to get access to the following key benefits:

- A platform for lived experience to inform national education policy
- A stakeholder-led network focused on improving outcomes across the education system
- Quarterly opportunities to contribute feedback and insights to government and key institutions
- Ongoing engagement through NEA social media channels and member networks
- Access to NEA Learn professional development shaped by current sector priorities
- A stronger collective voice for education practitioners and stakeholders

nea.education

NATIONAL EDUCATION FUTURES PROJECTS



fed
National
Education
Futures®

FED'S NATIONAL EDUCATION FUTURES PROJECTS & REPORTS PROVIDE AN IN-DEPTH FOCUS ON THE ISSUES THAT OUR STAKEHOLDERS TELL US MATTER MOST; THOSE WITH THE GREATEST POTENTIAL TO DRIVE MEANINGFUL, SYSTEM-WIDE CHANGE WHICH WILL IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND ALL LEARNERS.

We published our first five reports in 2025 on the topics of inclusion, the education workforce, MAT, schools and partnerships, AI and financial wellbeing.

We continue to expand the series, responding to emerging national priorities. This reflects a clear message from stakeholders: that education must evolve to remain relevant in a context of rapid social, economic, demographic and technological change, alongside rising complexity in children's needs and widening inequality.¹⁶ The knowledge, skills and

experiences young people need to thrive are shifting, yet the system has not consistently adapted to meet this reality.

Our approach enables us not only to surface the realities of the current system, but to identify where barriers persist, where levers for change already exist and how policy is experienced on the ground. It also provides insight into how reform may land, highlighting potential unintended consequences, missed opportunities and the conditions needed to ensure that change leads to sustained impact over time.



¹⁶Closing the attainment gap - The Sutton Trust

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Our structured methodology enables a comprehensive exploration of each issue area through four core stages:

- Vision setting: Clarifying what success would look like over the long-term, grounded in the values of inclusion, equity and coherence
- Current state analysis: Wide stakeholder consultation on the lived experience of the system, including key challenges, disparities and pressure points, using both qualitative insight and existing quantitative data
- Identifying levers and blockers: Examining where progress is already evident, which system conditions and enablers could be strengthened or scaled, and where structural misalignment, policy constraints or cultural factors continue to slow or prevent change
- Recommending change: Bringing together a coherent set of policy and practice proposals across short-, medium- and long-term timeframes, aligning immediate priorities with the structural changes required for sustained system improvement.

This process draws on a wide range of engagement methods, including targeted roundtables, focus groups, panel discussions, desk research, surveys, virtual policy roundtables and policy dialogues, regional listening events, cross-sector workshops and interviews with system leaders and practitioners. This year the NEA has been a vital resource in helping identify which areas are most critical.

Importantly, the process combines both breadth and depth: engaging a diverse cross-section of stakeholders across the country, from early-career teachers to national policy-makers, from young people and families to leaders in education, business, health and civil society. This ensures that each theme is shaped not only by a wide range of perspectives but by deep expertise and lived experience to build a 360-degree understanding of both the challenges and the opportunities for change.



Emerging insights from our current Futures Projects

In 2025, we started working with partners on new Futures projects: Maths and Numeracy, English and Literacy and Skills and Careers – areas that underpin both individual life chances and wider economic and societal resilience. Inclusion remains central to FED's work, with a particular focus this year on early years and transitions, recognising these as critical points where inequality is either addressed or entrenched. This focus on inclusion is also threaded through all areas of our work.

We will publish individual reports on each topic in the coming months, drawing on both lived and learned expertise – bringing together the perspectives of learners, practitioners, leaders and communities to inform practical, system-level recommendations for change. Below are our emerging findings.

The Future of Maths and Numeracy

EXPANDING MATHS AND NUMERACY EDUCATION TO REFLECT REAL-WORLD APPLICATION

“ This work matters more than ever because mathematics and its applications sit at the heart of individual opportunity, economic prosperity and future success. By working together to build a system that works for every learner, we can better meet the needs of both young people and society as a whole.”

Ian Davies, Director of Curriculum & Research, White Rose Education

Too many young people leave education without the confidence and competence in maths they need for life and work. Around a third do not achieve grade 4 in GCSE Maths by age 16, and many go on to resit these exams multiple times without success.¹⁷ A FED Learners Council member reflected on how cultural attitudes towards maths diluted her experience of accessing the diagnosis and further support needed as someone living with dyscalculia: “We laugh about ‘I hate maths’ but it masks real needs.”

At the same time, employers are increasingly saying that the education system, of which GCSE Maths is an essential part, is not equipping learners with the practical skills and aptitudes needed, including mathematical literacy, for work.¹⁸ This raises important questions about what maths is for – particularly for those entering technical routes and trades – and whether the current system is truly fit for purpose. As the importance of maths continues to grow in a more data-rich and technologically advanced world, this disconnect between what is taught, assessed and needed in practice is

becoming more pronounced.

This project explores how maths and numeracy education can be redesigned to work for all learners. It focuses on three priorities: understanding why the system is not delivering for a significant proportion of young people; reforming curriculum and assessment to prioritise real-world application, reasoning and confidence; and strengthening the capacity of teachers, learners, families and communities to support success.

While recent policy developments around curriculum and assessment recognise the importance of raising standards, our consultation suggests that more fundamental challenges must be addressed if these ambitions are to be realised. The system remains heavily shaped by high-stakes assessment, particularly GCSEs at age 16, which drives teaching and learning in ways that do not consistently support deep understanding or meaningful application. Learners themselves consistently report a lack of clarity about the purpose of what they are learning and limited connection to real-world use.

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Mathematics
& Numeracy



Around half of working-age adults in England have numeracy levels at or below those expected at the end of primary school.

(OECD, 2025)¹⁹

AT THE HEART OF THIS WORK ARE THREE KEY QUESTIONS:

- ❗ What will it mean to be mathematically literate in 2035?
- ❗ How can curriculum and assessment better reflect the maths learners need for life and work?
- ❗ How do we design a system that works for all learners, not just those who currently succeed within it?

Our emerging vision is of a system where all learners develop confidence and competence in maths; where curriculum and assessment support application, reasoning and problem-solving; and where multiple, high-quality pathways enable success for a wider range of learners – benefiting not only individuals, but also employers, communities and the wider economy.

The structure of assessment –

particularly GCSEs – plays a central role in shaping outcomes across the system. Teachers need opportunities to expand their expertise so they can ensure their practice reflects the latest mathematical pedagogical advances. Importantly, learners emphasise the need for earlier support, clearer purpose and the need to link what they are learning at school with real-world applications of maths.

EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ❗ Revising assessment approaches to better reflect how maths is used in real contexts
- ❗ Creating systems that offer students multiple pathways from which to choose, while maintaining rigour
- ❗ Providing earlier intervention and more tailored support for learners.

Our full report on the future of maths and numeracy will be published in the next academic year.

The Future of English and Literacy

*THE LITERACY THROUGH-LINE: FROM EARLY YEARS
TO LIFELONG CONFIDENT COMMUNICATION*

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English
& Literacy®

“The state of literacy and English is at a crossroads. With the development of AI tools and the recent White Paper, leaders and educators must implement a schoolwide culture on literacy to best prepare all young people and their families for the world around them now and in the future. No matter how much technology advances, it should never replace critical thinking and literacy as an agency of true identity, voice and decision making.”

Marlon James-Edwards, Education Consultant & Manager of Upward Bound UK

For a modern education system to remain relevant, literacy must be understood as a foundational capability that underpins learning, participation and opportunity across all aspects of life. Yet there is growing evidence that the system is not consistently delivering this.

Nearly a third of students do not achieve a pass in GCSE English,²⁰ while employers increasingly report deficits in communication, writing and reasoning skills. At the same time, reading engagement is falling, with only one in five children aged 8–18 reading daily.²¹

“Reading is an experience that stirs the emotion and fires the imagination... It has a uniquely portable magic.”

FED Partner

These challenges are not isolated. Gains made in early reading are not consistently sustained beyond primary school, with particular pressure points emerging during the transition years (Years 5–8), where curriculum coherence, sequencing and progression often break down. This fragmentation widens inequalities and limits access, particularly for learners experiencing disadvantage.

This points to a more fundamental, system-level issue: literacy is too often treated as a phase-specific priority or the responsibility of English department alone, rather than as a shared, cross-cutting foundation. It also reflects an unresolved question at the heart of the system – what does it mean to be literate in the 21st century? Beyond reading and writing, literacy increasingly

includes the ability to think critically, interpret information, communicate effectively and engage responsibly with the world. In this sense, literacy is not only about employability – it is central to active citizenship, enabling young people to navigate information, participate in democratic processes, challenge misinformation and make informed decisions about their lives and communities.

“Oracy is foundational to literacy and inclusion but remains under-prioritised in policy and practice.”

FED Partner

While the Schools White Paper ‘Every Child Achieving and Thriving’²² and the Curriculum and Assessment Review²³ emphasise rigour, progression and high standards, there is not yet a coherent, system-wide approach to sustaining literacy development from early years through to post-16. Without a clear through-line, literacy remains vulnerable to fragmentation

across phases, subjects and regions.

This report explores how literacy can be embedded as a core thread across the entire education system. It sets out a vision in which every child becomes a confident and capable reader, writer and communicator, supported by a curriculum that builds a genuine love of reading, reflects the diversity of learners’ identities

and experiences and develops the skills needed for lifelong learning, employability and participation in a global, digital world. This includes a stronger focus on oracy, enabling learners to express ideas clearly and engage meaningfully with others on digital and multimedia literacy, including the ability to navigate emerging technologies such as AI.

EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Treat literacy as a continuous throughline from ages 5–18
- Embed disciplinary literacy across all subjects
- Design assessment models that capture deep literacy development over time and reflect the communication and reasoning skills valued by employers
- Integrate digital and AI literacy alongside foundational reading and writing.

A system that gets literacy right does not only improve attainment; it strengthens inclusion, builds critical thinking, supports workforce readiness and enables young people to participate fully as informed, engaged citizens in society and the economy.

Our full report on the future of English and literacy will be published in November 2026.

²² Every Child Achieving and Thriving – GOV.UK
²³ Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all – GOV.UK



The Future of Skills and Careers

BUILDING A DEMAND-LED INCLUSIVE CAREERS EDUCATION MODEL TO PROVIDE LEARNERS WITH THE RELEVANT SKILLS TO BE WORK-READY

fed
Skills &
Careers

“Preparing learners for jobs is a necessary foundation, but it is no longer sufficient in a labour market characterised by automation and constant change. Employers need a demand-led skills system that develops adaptable individuals with strong human capabilities such as collaboration, problem-solving, creativity and ownership because these are critical to productivity, innovation and long-term competitiveness. Skills and careers education must therefore be shaped in partnership with employers, not just to meet current vacancies, but to build a resilient workforce capable of sustaining and growing the future economy.”

Bogdan Stefan Pop, Senior Account Executive, HPC & AI Compute at Intel

The education system is not delivering fully on one of its core purposes: Preparing young people for life beyond school. Too many young people leave school without a clear pathway into employment, further learning or training. A failure for young people and a growing risk to the economy. The UK skills gap is estimated to cost £96 billion each year, with around a quarter of vacancies linked to skills shortages.²⁴ At the same time, almost a million young people are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), exposing fundamental weaknesses in

how the system supports transitions.

At the heart of this is a lack of alignment between education and the labour market. Careers education and skills development are not yet fully embedded within the core structures of the system – including curriculum, accountability and workforce development. Provision is often fragmented and inconsistent, with too many young people experiencing limited exposure to the world of work, variable access to high-quality guidance and insufficient understanding of the pathways available to them.



This challenge starts early. Careers education is not currently statutory in primary schools, despite strong evidence that aspirations, stereotypes and perceptions about work are formed at a young age. By the time formal careers provision begins, many of these views are already established, shaping choices and limiting opportunity.

There has been important progress. Through the work of the Careers & Enterprise Company, 96% of secondary schools and colleges are now part of a Careers Hub, and engagement with the Gatsby Benchmarks continues to grow.²⁵ Most students now report at least one encounter with an employer. These developments demonstrate the potential of a more connected system, but they also highlight the need to move beyond improvement

at the margins towards more fundamental reform.

This report explores how to shift from a supply-led system, focused on qualifications and institutional delivery, to a demand-led model that is shaped by labour market needs and progression pathways. It sets out how careers education can be embedded as a core, continuous entitlement for all learners, rather than an additional offer.

The aim is to build a system that is inclusive by design and centred on the learner: one that enables every young person to understand their options, develop relevant skills and progress into meaningful work. In doing so, it seeks to reduce NEET levels, strengthen transitions and better connect education to the needs of employers, communities and the wider economy.

EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS:

- A demand-led system: aligning provision with labour market needs and clearer progression routes
- Inclusion by design: ensuring equitable access to high-quality careers education and experiences
- A cradle-to-career approach: starting earlier and building knowledge and aspiration over time
- System coherence: aligning curriculum, qualifications and accountability to support successful transitions.

Incremental change will not be enough. Without a shift to a more coherent, demand-led system, young people will continue to leave education without clear pathways, employers will struggle to find the skills they need and NEET levels will

remain high. A better-aligned system is essential to improve transitions and support long-term economic and social outcomes.

Our full report on the future of skills and careers will be published in November 2026.

The Future of Inclusion

CHILD-CENTRED DESIGN: INCLUSION FROM EARLY YEARS TO POST-16

“FED’s focus on EYFS and transitions matters more than ever because children are arriving in schools shaped by a rapidly changing world, with increasing pressure on communication and emotional development. Children thrive when movement between phases is built on belonging, trust and relationships rather than simply systems and accountability.”

James Searjeant, Head Teacher, Wyborne Primary & Nursery School

Inclusion remains one of the defining challenges of our education system. Despite plenty of recent policy attention, government ambition and growing evidence, too many children still encounter a system that responds late, fragments support and struggles to recognise the full complexity of their lives. These failures accumulate over time, contributing to disengagement.

FED’s work this year builds on this reality, deepening the evidence through sustained engagement with lived experience. In 2026, we focus on two critical pressure points where inclusion is most often won or lost: the early years and key moments of transition.

The evidence is clear: inclusion is not yet designed into the system. In the early years, support is too often triggered by diagnosis, resulting in delays, fragmented services and unmet need. For example, a child may be identified by a nursery as having emerging communication needs, while health services hold separate assessments and families are left to navigate support independently. Without shared

systems or coordinated planning, information is not brought together in a timely way, and support remains inconsistent.

These challenges are then compounded at transition points. Information about a child’s needs, strengths and successful strategies does not consistently transfer between settings, or is reduced to partial records and labels. Receiving schools are often required to rebuild understanding from scratch, with limited time to establish relationships with the child and family. As a result, support that was beginning to work can be disrupted, leading to disengagement and poorer outcomes. Vulnerability, particularly for learners experiencing disadvantage and learners with SEND, is amplified at each transition.

Consultation findings point to the need for a fundamental shift: from reactive support to inclusion by design. This means creating a “child-ready system” in the early years and ensuring that transitions are experienced as continuous journeys, where support, knowledge and relationships travel with the child.

fed
Inclusion

Two-fifths of the attainment gap at age 16 is already present by age 5.²⁶

(GOV.UK)

FFT Education Datalab analysis suggests that attainment trajectories become less predictable across Key Stages, with gaps widening over time and many pupils diverging from earlier attainment patterns, particularly learners experiencing disadvantage.²⁷

(FFT Education Datalab)

Emerging reforms, such as the Best Start in Life strategy, signal a growing commitment to more joined-up, multi-agency approaches. However, deeper structural questions remain at the heart of this work:

- What is the system currently doing to children and families?
- What should a better system feel like from a child’s perspective?
- What knowledge about a child actually matters – and how is it shared?
- Who is the system designed for, and who does it leave behind?
- Is the problem the child, or the system itself?
- And how do we move from where we are to where we need to be?

Answering these questions requires more than ad-hoc responses. It demands a system that is designed with children’s lives at the centre, not institutional boundaries, building inclusion from the start and sustaining it through every stage. Without this shift, patterns of fragmentation, disengagement and inequality will persist. With it, there is an opportunity to create a more coherent, inclusive system that supports every child to achieve and thrive.

EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Reframe ‘school readiness’: Move from a deficit view of the child to a ‘child-ready system’ aligned with developmental reality, not narrow attainment measures
- Replace reductive data with rich learner profiles
- Design inclusion into the system: Shift from diagnosis-led support to universal, inclusive environments and avoid deficit labelling of young children
- Align structures with development, enabling more flexible pathways (especially for SEND and post-16)
- Start preparing for transitions earlier and extend the period of transition, rather than seeing them as one-off events (especially KS2-3 and KS4-5)
- Invest in early intervention and integrated services, using transitions as trigger points for support.

Our full report on the future of inclusion will be published in summer 2026.



Announcing the themes of our next Futures projects

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION FUTURES PROJECTS PROVIDES A STRUCTURED PROGRAMME FOR LONG-TERM THINKING ABOUT EDUCATION SYSTEM DESIGN. BUILDING ON INSIGHT FROM PREVIOUS FUTURES WORK AND NATIONAL EDUCATION REPORTS, THE PROJECTS OUTLINED BELOW EXPLORE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS ABOUT PURPOSE, COHERENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY.

These projects are not designed to offer immediate solutions. Instead, they aim to support evidence-informed dialogue about how education systems evolve over time and what conditions enable participation, inclusion and improvement to be sustained.

Building on our recent report, *Equipping Education for the Age*

of AI,²⁸ each Futures project will also explore how AI is already transforming the way we learn and educate. To extend our collective thinking around the value of this fast evolving technology for education, we are excited to be kicking off another international project on the *Pedagogy of AI* with Brookings Institution, Washington DC.



The Future of Assessment and Accountability:

Rationale

Assessment and accountability frameworks play a powerful role in shaping behaviour across the education system. While they are intended to provide transparency and assurance, they also influence curriculum design, workforce behaviour and inclusion in ways that are not always aligned with long-term educational purpose.

Core lines of enquiry

1. How do current accountability arrangements shape behaviour at different levels of the system?
2. What aspects of learning, inclusion and development are currently under-recognised or invisible?
3. How can accountability frameworks balance assurance with improvement and capacity-building?

This project explores how assessment and accountability could better support improvement, professional trust and system coherence over the coming decade.

The Future of Nutritional Inclusion:

Rationale

Food and nutrition play an integral role in wellbeing, behaviour and readiness to learn. Yet provision across the system remains uneven and vulnerable to wider economic pressures.

Core lines of enquiry

1. How does access to high-quality nutrition shape learner wellbeing and engagement?
2. What drives inconsistency in provision across settings and regions?
3. How might workforce capacity, infrastructure and funding models support sustainable provision?

This project explores how nutrition and school food culture can be better integrated into a coherent, inclusive education system.

The Future of Funding in Education:

Rationale

Funding is consistently identified by stakeholders as a foundational system condition. Beyond questions of overall investment, the structure, stability and timing of funding shape planning, inclusion and workforce sustainability.

Core lines of enquiry

1. How do current funding arrangements influence institutional behaviour and system planning?
2. What would enable leaders to plan with confidence rather than manage short-term risk?
3. How can funding better support inclusion and early intervention across the system?

This project examines how funding models could better support long-term thinking, coherence across services and equitable provision.

The Future of Science Education:

Rationale

Science education is central to preparing young people for future study, work and participation in society. Yet engagement and progression are uneven across the system.

Core lines of enquiry

1. What knowledge and skills will matter most for future scientific literacy?
2. How can science curricula better connect learning to lived experience and application?
3. How can progression be widened without narrowing ambition?

This project considers how science education can better reflect societal needs, support inclusion and create meaningful pathways.



The Future of SEND:

Rationale

Despite extensive reform, SEND remains one of the most pressured and fragmented areas of the education system, with responsibility often dispersed across services.

Core lines of enquiry

1. How has SEND provision changed over time and where has momentum slowed?
2. How can alignment across education, health and care sectors be strengthened?
3. What would a system designed around lived experience require?

This project examines how SEND provision has evolved, where current arrangements constrain progress and what a more coherent system could look like over the next decade.

Taken together, these Futures projects reflect FED's commitment to long-term system stewardship. They build on earlier inquiry while deliberately looking beyond immediate reform cycles, creating space to consider how education systems can be designed to support learners, practitioners and communities sustainably over time.



APPENDIX

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- Jo Malone
- Kate Fahey
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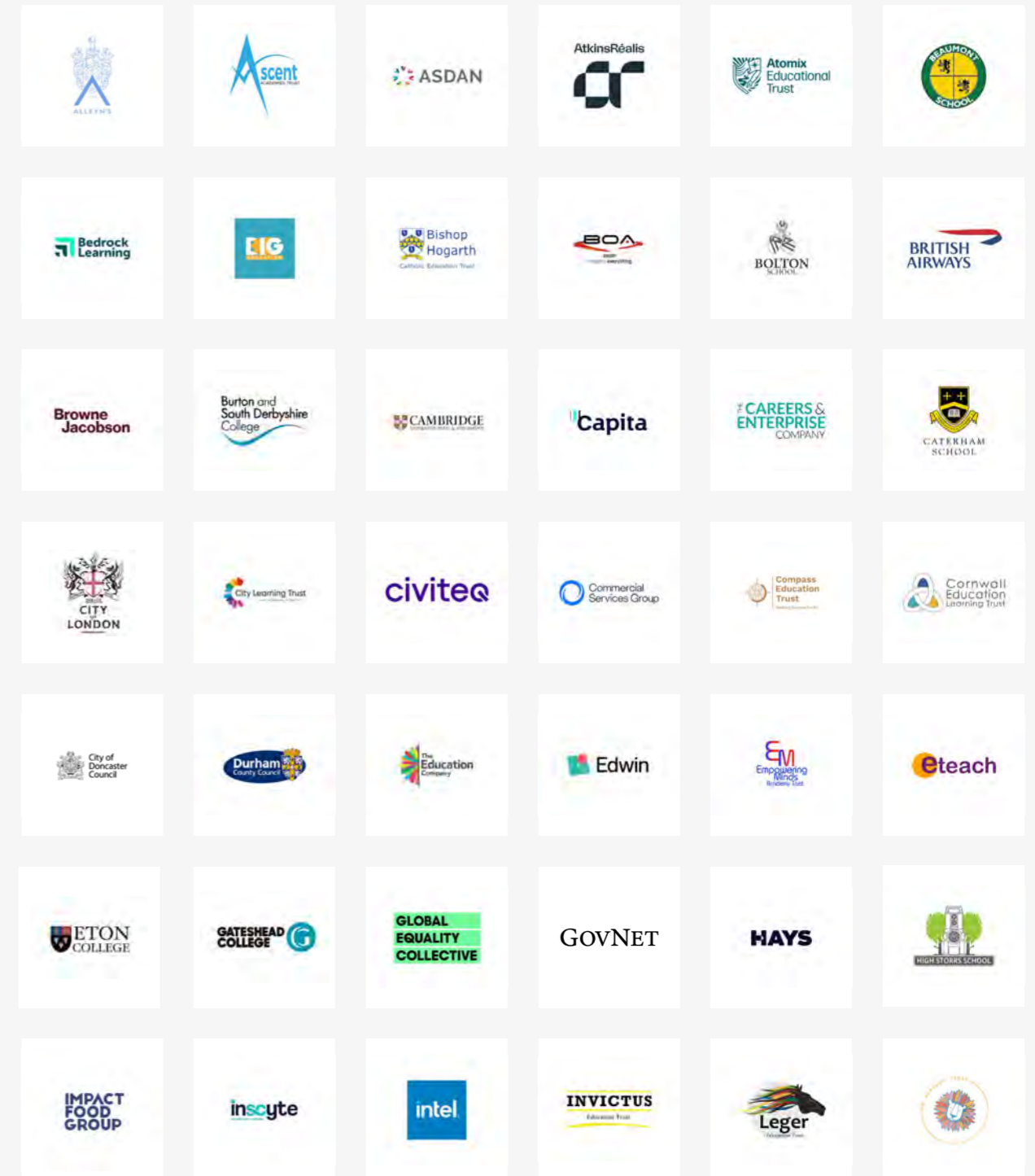
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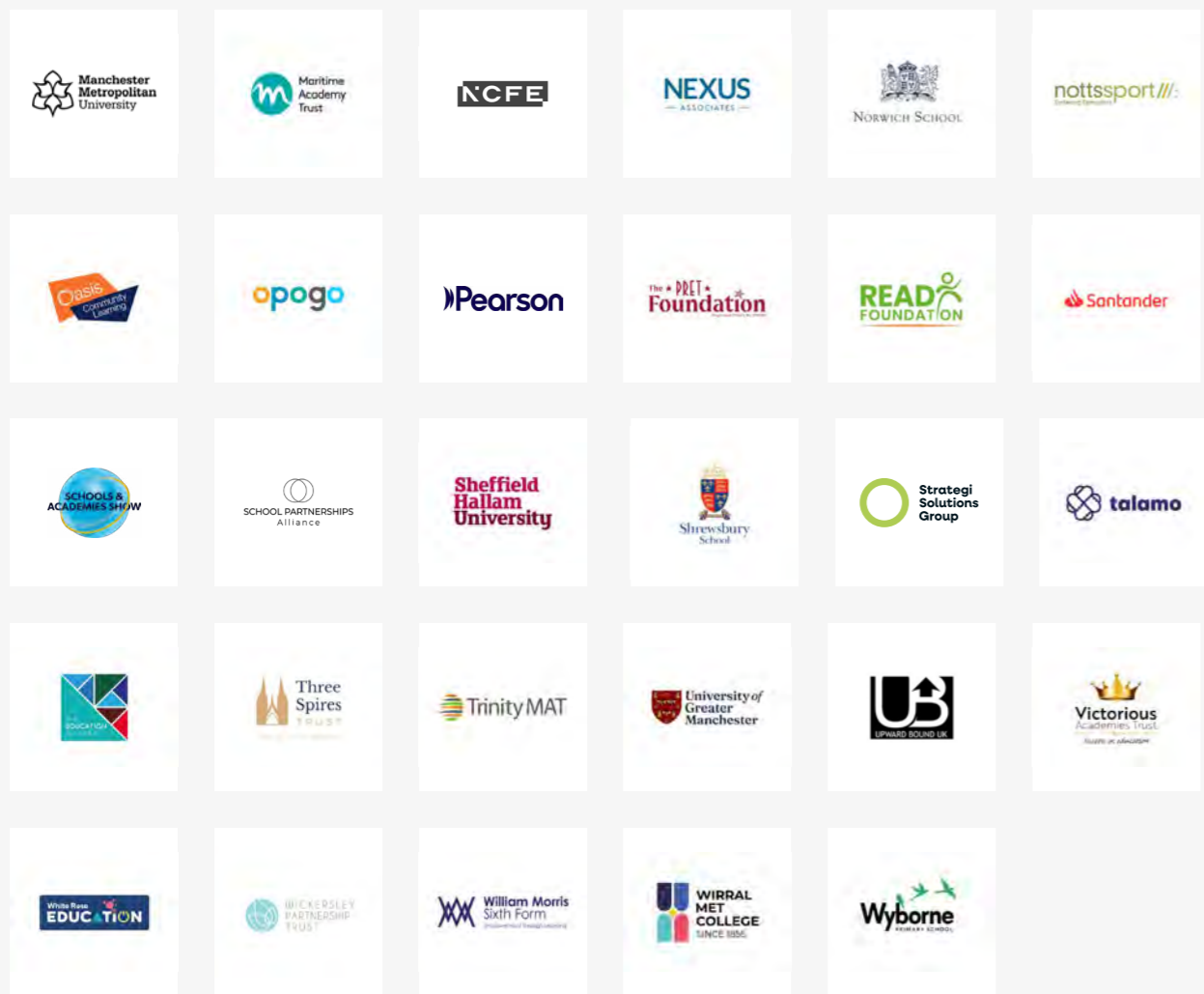
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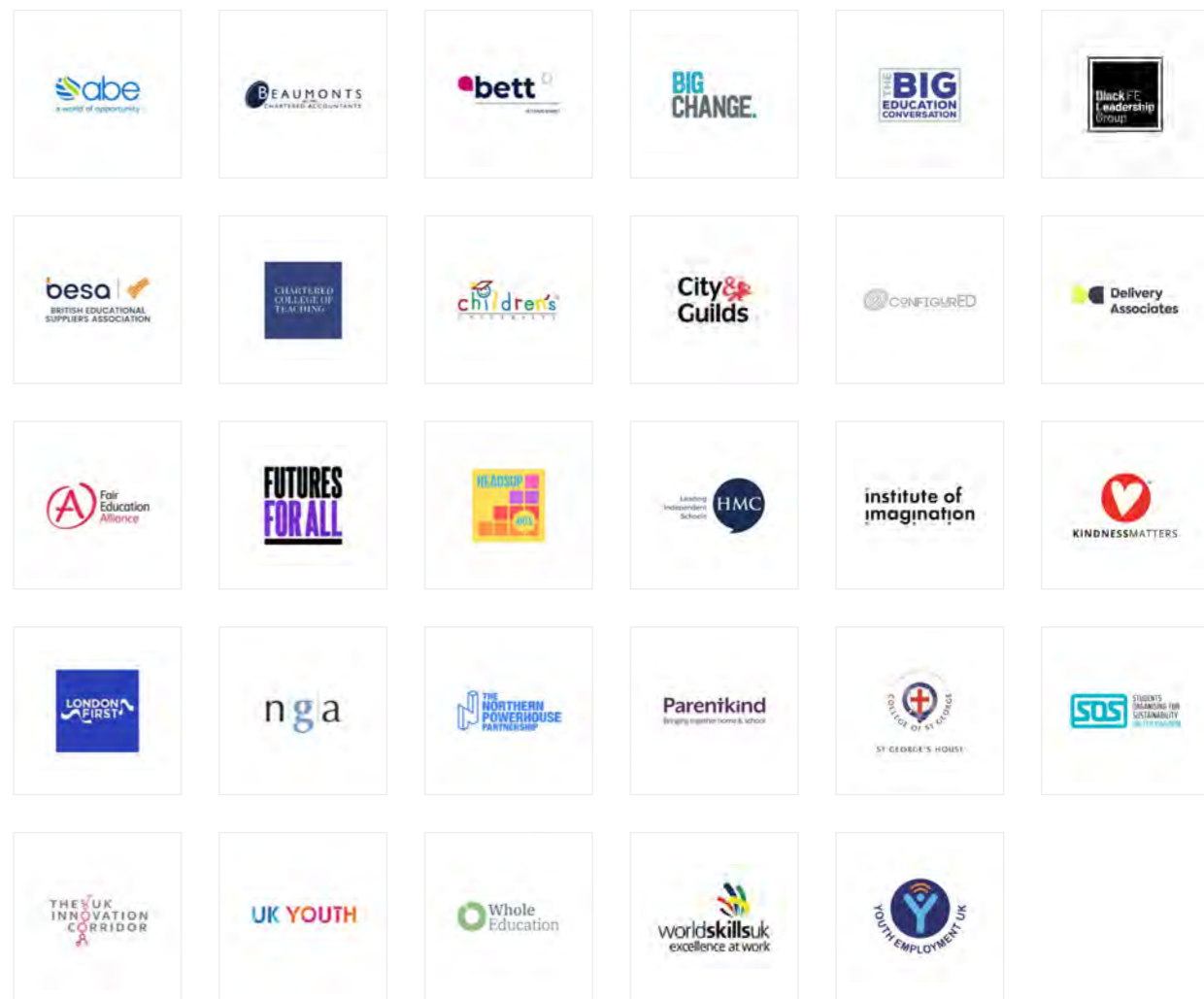
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FED has launched the National Education Assembly (NEA) – the first fully stakeholder driven initiative designed to ensure all voices across the education community have a genuine role in shaping the future of education.

The NEA is the first of its kind: of an education system, for an education system.

Stakeholder-led, with no vested interests, the NEA is designed to give all education stakeholders a meaningful input into national education policy, practice and strategy.

The NEA meets at regular intervals throughout the year. It provides objective and positive developmental feedback to government, its institutions and wider stakeholders.

“It’s been a pleasure to contribute to the work of FED through 2025-26. I salute the organisation’s democratic sensibility. I don’t know of many organisations that better manage to give equal attention to the views of diverse education leaders, those working at the coalface of education and those from other professions who join FED meetings because they care about education. That makes for a rich tapestry of ideas and an action-focused approach.”

Dr Joe Spence, CEO SPA & Co-Chair, National Education Assembly

94%

of stakeholders called for the NEA to be created



“The 2026 National Education Report delivers an undeniable truth: true educational excellence cannot exist without systemic coherence and a deep, structural sense of belonging. Through the National Education Assembly, we are finally amplifying the collective, lived experience of our workforce to co-design a sustainable, child-ready system that enables every learner to thrive.”

Phillip Hedger, CEO, LEO Academy Trust & Co-Chair, National Education Assembly



Join the NEA today

Help us create a thoughtful, sustainable, long-term approach to the education of our country’s young people. Only by doing this can we build a positive, thriving, economically robust and morally-driven future.

Find out more



nea.education

The Foundation for Education Development is dedicated to acting as the national body for long-term planning in education, we are independent and neutral, and amplify a fully inclusive stakeholder voice to help inform national education policy, practice and strategy.

“**The 2026 National Education Report successfully positions FED not simply as responding to education reform, but as helping shape a longer-term vision for what a more coherent, inclusive and future-facing education system could become. A necessary contribution to the national conversation on education.”**

Melissa Farnham, CEO ASDAN & Co-Chair National Education Assembly

National Education Futures Projects:

- Inclusion – Summer 2026
- English & Literacy – Autumn 2026
- Careers & Skills – November 2026
- Maths & Numeracy – 2026–27
- Assessment & Accountability – Launching 2026–27
- Funding in Education – Launching 2026–27
- Nutritional Inclusion – Launching 2026–27
- Science – Launching 2026–27
- SEND – Launching 2026–27
- More to come – Driven by you

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A structured programme for long-term thinking about education practice, strategy and policy. To contribute through consultations, roundtables and events, email: media@fed.education

“**FED’s work is helping to shape a more inclusive, ambitious, and future-focused education system. I’m proud to play a small part in those conversations and contribute to work that is helping influence the next chapter of education for children, families, and educators alike.”**

Stacey Postle, Head Teacher, Beaumont Primary School

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