



Beneath the Headlines: The Two Questions FED North Keeps Coming Back To

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FED North was framed around two questions on the day:

What are people experiencing in education right now that policymakers still don't fully understand?

What should central policymakers prioritise?

In short, we were asking for a revolution, not an evolution.

The breakout conversations on SEND, curriculum and relationships all fed back into those same two questions, so that's how we've set out what follows too.

What People Are Experiencing

A system absorbing strain it didn't create

Families feel unheard. Heads and staff are carrying a level of public frustration that few other professions face, on top of recruitment gaps, stretched budgets and a rising CPD bill. Teacher resilience research points to real strain between parents and schools, and to something researchers are now calling moral injury: the discomfort of going into teaching to make a difference, then leaving each day with a heavy heart feeling like you have applied a sticking plaster when really you wanted the opportunity to reveal those wounds whilst sewing together a solution that could withstand not only the pressures as it heals but also the new pressures that the solution would pose for all.

There is nothing left to hide; it is clear to see that the system can't cope with what it is being asked to deliver. It is therefore now not a question of what, but when.

When can we revolutionise a system to see a child as an asset to society?

Empathy without compassion

The SEND system still runs largely on a deficit model, focused on what's wrong with a child rather than what needs to change around them. Long waits for support have created a genuinely perverse incentive; one where a fight for anything and everything is better than nothing, one where solutions are used because they tick a box rather than because they work, one where exclusion can end up being the fastest route to help a child. Everyone in the room at the conference knew and knew this was wrong. But nobody had a quick fix.

What and how are now clearer than they have ever been before. The evidence is there.

Trust as the first casualty

Relationships between home and school are strained by misinformation, communication overload, and a lack of time to build them properly. Parents who are assumed to be disengaged are usually just busy, and trust outs the school, and this applies equally to schools. As one contributor puts it, change moves at the speed of trust, and right now there isn't much time built in to earn it. A lack of trust, a lack of relationships, and a lack of progress.

A curriculum measuring the wrong things

Learners can't always see how what they're taught connects to their future, and the system still rewards what's easy to measure over what actually matters. Learners can see the potential in adopting technology and new methods and systems, and they are very adept at using and applying their learning in these ways. Conversely, schools understand the learning process and therefore need the time to consider which tools capture this to support making learning visible. AI is also moving faster than curriculum design can keep pace with. This puts schools under commercial pressure to adopt tools. And is where the system is constraining innovation, not the interest in wanting to try new tools and new methods. System constraints and a lack of trust in teachers at the expense of learner potential.

Progress that gets marginalised over time

Young people at risk of becoming NEET nearly always start out with real ambition. What derails them is rarely the young person. It's a slow build of minor incidents, exclusion, a gap while a new setting is found, then a catch-up problem that never quite closes. They arrive at post-16 further marginalised by a system built around exams they were never on track to be measured fairly by. As one contributor asked, are the NEET figures hiding a problem with the quality of provision, rather than revealing one with the learners themselves? I would ask whether it is the assessments themselves that aren't capturing a learner's because of their timing or their design.

What Policymakers Should Prioritise

Fund inclusion, not exclusion

Inclusive schools that avoid exclusions often find it hardest to access funding and specialist resources. Fix that incentive, and much of the pressure driving exclusion goes with it. How? Change what learners and schools are measured by and invest in specialist resourcing efficiently through system design. It can only work when we do both. When you incentivise the right things, when you invest in the right people, the right pedagogy and the right places, trust is built, relationships grow and progress is made.

Give relationships time to grow

Staff consistency, relational training for new teachers, and something like a government backed National Charter for Parents. Give parents a voice to be able to support their children on their learning journey with the schools. This would give schools a foundation to build trust, rather than leaving it to individual goodwill. When you design schools you build families, you build trust, you build communities.

Redefine what success looks like

Stop weighing the pig, as one participant put it. Wellbeing, destination outcomes, belonging and community contribution deserve at least as much weight as exam results. Why? Because the emotion of learning drives the emotion for learning and underpins the connection with learning. We all know that it is hard to motivate yourself to do something when you don't want to.



Build a curriculum for change, not a single career

That means practical, ethical AI literacy; applied learning with genuine parity of esteem alongside academic routes. Give permission for young people not to know their future path yet, without that being treated as a failure. Give them permission to try, to fail and to get back up again. Secure resilience is designed for a built in a different way. It is built on the right level of support and challenge at the right pace and at the right time. The system needs to understand how to dance, what to push, what to pull, when to pivot and when to pause.

Back what's already working

We must not forget that pockets of excellence and real progress exist across the system; schools quietly getting inclusion, curriculum and relationships right, but they stay as pockets rather than becoming the norm. Why? Teams that work want to stay together, teams that work want to keep doing more and don't always have the time to be able to train others. They are quite rightly very proud of their successes.

The ask from the room therefore wasn't for another pilot scheme. It was for the confidence to properly fund and scale what's already been proven. We know what works; we need to pull together and push it out there. **Revolution, Not Evolution.**

That was the room's own phrase for what's needed, and it's hard to argue with. Reform that arrives in small, incremental steps was seen as part of the problem, and not a safe or sustainable way through it. Every thread traced back to the same root: a system built to measure compliance, whilst being asked to deliver belonging. Fix the environment, physical, relational or systemic, and much of what currently looks like a deficit in the child; the parent or the teacher stops looking like a deficit at all.

When you feel valued, when you feel seen, when you feel heard, you feel that you have permission to be you.

It is not a small ambition. Nobody in the room on the 10th of July was asking for a small one. Everyone was asking for us to do the right thing, not to just do what is easy.

Let's dance together.

We are better together.

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