AoC responds to the ASCL Blueprint for a Fairer Education System

April 2020

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The Association of Colleges represents the large majority of colleges in England including General Further Education, Sixth Form, Tertiary, Land Based and other specialist colleges.

1. To what extent does the current National Curriculum meet the needs of today's children and young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and prepare them for successful futures? What, if anything, would you like to change about this?:

All young people should be entitled to access a broad and stimulating national curriculum up to 16 in preparation for progression to further education and work, active citizenship and lifelong learning. This should include access to English, maths, STEM, humanities and arts subjects as well as personal and social development. All students should have the opportunity to explore and consider the range of post 16 progression opportunities and careers within key stage 3 and 4.

We think that some aspects of that entitlement should continue beyond 16 to include progress towards a level 3 qualification, level 2 English and maths, personal and social development and access to continuing education, training and upskilling throughout life.

The generation that has experienced the Covid-19 pandemic will need a curriculum which helps understanding of major global challenges, including climate change, and develops the knowledge, skills and attributes which are likely to help address them. This is as relevant post-16 as it is pre-16.

2. Should all state schools be required to follow the National Curriculum? What difference might this make, both positive and negative?:
By definition, a national curriculum should apply to all young people with elements of compulsion as well as some flexibilities.

3. To what extent do the teaching approaches and strategies commonly used in English schools and colleges equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies they need to succeed in their future careers and lives? What, if anything, would you like to change about this?:
We would suggest that students' experience pre-16 should include the development of study skills, practical skills and as well as English, maths and

some understanding of politics, economics, society and culture. We believe that students benefit from post-16 study if they have successful experience of working independently and with others, asking questions, being creative, making choices and engaging with wider social issues.

4. How well does the current approach to assessment at 11 and 16 (including National Curriculum Tests (SATs) at primary, and GCSEs and vocational/technical qualifications at secondary) allow schools and colleges to prepare children and young people for their future, and allow all children and young people to demonstrate what they are capable of? What, if anything, would you like to change about this?:

We believe that the heavy assessment regime at age 16 is too intense and age-specific, creating a 'cliff edge' for young people and a sense of failure for a fixed proportion of the cohort rather than valuing achievement and progress. Colleges play a major part in helping to level up achievement gaps post-16 by providing students with opportunities to study at Entry, level 1 and level 2 and progress to level 3 at the right pace for them. GCSE outcomes at 16 should not be the main determinants of what options are open to students. We suggest that there needs to be a stronger emphasis on curriculum continuity and progression and this requires a more flexible, modular approach to programmes of study and assessment models up to level 3 and beyond.

5. How well does the current range of post-16 programmes of study and qualifications serve the needs of today's young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds? How coherent are these programmes and the assessment associated with them for all levels of attainment? What, if anything, would you like to change about this?:

We are in the midst of a major review of qualifications at level 3 and below which supports the aim of strengthening technical education and we support the development of T Levels and the Transition phase as part of this. We want young people to have a coherent set of options at 16 which support their personal and career aspirations and develop their ability to flourish and contribute to society. This necessarily means a degree of choice and specialisation as well as some common educational entitlements. Every young person should have the opportunity to engage and explore a wide range of post 16 options within the pre-16 curriculum.

6. What actions can we take to encourage the best people to become teachers?:

Colleges need adequate funding to enable them to match school teacher salaries as well as industry salaries to draw in talent without the potential 'pay

cut' so often offered into the sector and to enable good terms and conditions for staff, reasonable contact time, decent leave entitlements, good quality CPD and the time to fully engage with this. For those training whilst in a teaching role, Taking Teaching Further provides a 'soft landing' for new staff with remission, mentoring and teacher training costs covered. This type of scheme should be supported within recurrent funding rather than being supported as a special project.

7. Should we actively incentivise our strongest teachers and leaders to work in the most disadvantaged areas? How?

The majority of colleges recruit from the most disadvantaged areas and recruitment patterns for FE teachers are different to schools: the number and geography of colleges compared to schools, means there are some cities where college teachers/trainers move quite regularly and others are working in the only college within a reasonable commuting distance.

8. How can we better encourage and support teachers and leaders, including business leaders, to stay in the profession, and to perform at a high level?

Colleges need remuneration to keep pace with inflation at least, and with the school sector where roles are comparable. We need to reduce the risk of burnout. Flatter management structures have limited progression opportunities; the loss of support staff to help and support with duties create additional pressures; the loss of remission and increased responsibility in teaching departments: internal verification, moderation, lead IV, teaching and learning champions, IT champions, EDI champions, HE research project, writing marketing materials, course leadership, new course development, industry updating are all now expected together with a substantial teaching timetable; increased class sizes etc.

The vast majority of teachers want to be able to do their job well; but current pressures mean that unless they sacrifice work life balance, this is hard to maintain over the longer term. Investment in support staff, manageable workloads, remission where it is needed and internal progression opportunities to aspire to would go a long way to retaining teachers in the FE sector.

9. Do we need to accept that, in the short- to medium term at least, we may not have sufficient teachers to structure lessons and classrooms in the traditional way? How might we rethink the traditional model of one teacher, plus one or more members of support staff, in front of a class of around thirty pupils? What role might technology play? How could we ensure that this doesn't have a

detrimental impact on children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

We certainly need to address teacher shortages by making the profession more attractive and supporting teachers better. We also need to address digital exclusion and embed new learning technologies into the work of all staff.

Learning technologies should not be regarded as a way of reducing the number of teachers needed or replacing classroom contact time. Rather, their use can allow teachers and students to work more effectively and to enhance the opportunities for student learning and student support.

10. Should all schools and colleges be required to be part of a strong and sustainable group, such as a MAT or federation, to enable them to better support each other and reduce the risk of children 'falling between the cracks'? If so, how might groups of schools also be encouraged to contribute to the wider system?

Institutional autonomy has brought many benefits, but excessive local competition is not in the long term interests of students or the sustainability their institutions. Post-16 providers should be encouraged to act as a system and take collective local responsibility for local provision. We strongly support local and regional co-ordination and collaboration post-16 where colleges and schools work together to improve the quality, sufficiency and breadth of the local course offer and we believe this should be incentivised by the funding system and via the extension of programmes such as the College Collaboration Fund.

11. Should the admissions system be reformed to ensure a more representative spread of pupils from different backgrounds across all schools and colleges? If so, what is the best way of achieving this?

Any local collaborative system should be inclusive and ensure that it is providing for all young people's needs while offering choice where possible. Providers should aim to serve their communities and be representative of them. As large comprehensive providers, colleges are well place to support this aspiration while protecting specialist, 'minority' or 'niche' provision.

12. What role should selective schools and colleges play in a more socially equitable education system?

Post-16 programmes include those with no pre-requisites and others where clear minimum entry requirements are necessary based on evidence of prior achievement. An inclusive local system should offer a good mix of programmes

based on the needs and aspirations of the whole age cohort. Unnecessarily exclusive entry requirements will tend to work against social inclusion. Colleges generally have a broad offer which addresses the range of student starting points and are well place to be hubs for local post-16 provision.

13. How might independent schools help promote social equity?

Selection by ability to pay will tend to work against social inclusion.

14. If the education budget were to increase, how should any extra money be spent in order to have the biggest impact on social equity?

Beyond the need for 16-18 funding to 'catch up' and then 'keep up' pro-rata with 11-16 funding, additional funding should be targeted at the most disadvantaged students and those who are furthest from successful progression to work and most in need of support. We have made the case that pupil premium funding should be extended to post-16 students.

15. Is it right that the per-pupil funding rates differ between the primary, secondary and 16-19 phases? If not, how would you change this?

Each phase has distinctive needs and costs, but there is no rationale for such a large funding gap between 5-16 year olds and 16-18 year olds where programmes are more diverse and complex. Funding for 16-18 year olds needs to move towards parity with 5-16 year olds, including restoring parity for 18 year olds with 16 and 17 year olds.

16. How effective is the pupil premium in helping schools and colleges to prioritise disadvantaged pupils and 'close the gap'? If this could be more effective, how would you change it?

Additional funding cannot fully compensate for structural inequalities but it would allow colleges serving disadvantaged communities to invest in additional provision to support students who face the biggest barriers to achievement.

17. How might the various school and college improvement funding 'pots' be sensibly consolidated to support schools and colleges, particularly those in more disadvantaged areas, to develop and fund evidence-informed practice?

We are in favour of more sustained longer-term investment for post-16 providers rather than a proliferation of time-limited projects. Such investment should include support for local collaboration and co-ordination hubs and could be conditional on evidence of improved sufficiency and effectiveness as well as the requirement to share and disseminate good practice of all sorts. The

Strategic College Improvement Fund and its successor, the College Collaboration Fund, are good models which could be built on.

18. Should schools receive additional funding for the services they increasingly provide in relation to safeguarding and social care, to recognise their role as community hubs and the extent to which they now function as the 'fourth emergency service'?

Colleges also play a strong role as 'anchor' institutions in their communities, supporting economic and social resilience and providing a wide range of key services, often in partnership with employers, voluntary organisations and statutory agencies such as the health service and local authorities. Colleges often also have the capacity and the facilities to provide a base for much needed community activities, including youth services.

19. Does our current accountability system (including Ofsted and performance tables) help or hinder schools and colleges in focusing on the needs of disadvantaged children and young people? If the latter, how should this be changed?

Colleges have welcomed the new Education Inspection Framework with its stronger focus on coherent programmes and student development. We would like to see more emphasis on the effectiveness of provision across a geographical area to help providers evaluate the impact of their contribution to meeting all the educational needs of their locality. This collective local accountability would support the development of collective local responsibility and collective local leadership.

20. Should the current performance tables be replaced with a 'dashboard' of broader information about a school or college? If so, what information might this include?

The performance and accountability measures are now too complex and don't include much of the impact of the work of colleges below level 3. We would welcome greater contextualisation as well as a radical simplification of the measures. This could include a place for the student and staff voice.

21. Should we find ways to encourage and measure collective local responsibility, e.g. hold schools and colleges across a town collectively responsibility for the outcomes of all children and young people in that town? How might this work? What would be the pros and cons?

Because of their limited remit, the post-16 area reviews did not take a overarching view of the post-16 system in their area. We would support a

dialogue between the school and college sectors about the notion of collective local responsibility and how it could build on all the strengths of current providers and be supported and deepened in the interests of students and local communities.

22. Do you have any other comments or suggestions on how we can move towards a fairer education system and 'narrow the gap'?

We welcome the ASCL Blueprint and the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. This comes at a time when everyone working in education will want to question many of the assumptions underlying our current system and when there seems to be a realistic possibility of substantial system change.

We are keen to engage with any processes which flow from this work and to consider how this relates to the work of the Commission for the College of the Future and other initiatives such as the FE/HE Climate Change Commission.

Association of Colleges (29/04/20)