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Empowering students as democratic
citizens: how schools and colleges can
prepare young people for votes at 16

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About the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Schools, Learning and Assessment

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Schools, Learning and Assessment was established in 2022 to promote and support school level education, the quality of learning, assessment, and outcomes for all pupils. It is chaired by Peter Swallow MP, and the National Education Union (NEU) provides and funds the secretariat. Further details on the APPG, its membership and its work can be found on our website: schoolsappg.org.uk

In November 2025, the APPG launched its inquiry into how schools and colleges can enable young people to feel empowered and enfranchised in anticipation of the introduction of votes at 16.

The inquiry considered a wide range of written evidence including submissions from young people, educators, academics, education campaign groups and charities, professional bodies, and youth organisations in England, Scotland and Wales. The inquiry also held three oral evidence sessions focused on young people and youth organisations; educators; and examples of democratic education and civic engagement in Scotland and Wales, where 16-year-olds already have the vote in devolved and local elections. In addition, members of the APPG inquiry team ran a discussion session at the 2026 Fair Education Alliance Youth Summit.

This report provides an overview of the evidence gathered by the APPG and concludes with a set of recommendations for government. For more information on the inquiry process and evidence submissions, please contact the APPG secretariat at appg.schools@neu.org.uk

Contents

Recommendations

Introduction

Background to Votes at 16 and the scope of this inquiry

Limitations

A note on ‘democracy’ and other terms

The role of schools and colleges in supporting democratic engagement

Structure of the report

Areas for further research

1 Embedding democracy in curriculum design

Clearer guidance on a core citizenship curriculum entitlement

Do not neglect citizenship as a dedicated subject

Recentre political and democratic themes and content across disciplines

Specific curriculum themes

Critical media literacy

Practical information about voting, elections and democratic systems

Diversity and marginalised voices in politics

Current affairs

Training

- Recommendations to the government
- The importance of experiential learning for democracy and democratic engagement

2 Embedding democracy in teaching and learning

Examples of participatory teaching

The move away from participatory approaches in education

The importance of teacher training

Dialogic teaching around sensitive and contentious issues

The government’s new commitment to oracy

- Recommendations to the government

3 Embedding democracy through student voice

Current limitations and ideas for improvement

Other forms of student participation in governance and decision-making

External organisations and partnerships

Enrichment

- Recommendations to the government
- An overloaded compulsory curriculum

4 Broader systemic barriers to embedding democracy in schools and colleges

Exams and standardisation

School accountability

- Recommendations to the government

References

Appendices booklet

Appendix 1 Types of evidence considered

Appendix 2 Meetings of the APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment

Appendix 3 Contributors who submitted written evidence to the APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment

Recommendations

1. **Support schools and colleges to strengthen enactments of student voice to ensure young people have meaningful and non-tokenistic opportunities to engage in governance and decision-making. This should include:**
 - **Developing non-statutory guidance on strengthening school councils as well as embedding forms of student voice beyond school councils** – for instance, through direct democracy at classroom level, involving students in curriculum co-creation and co-development, and supporting students to be school and college governors or trustees. In developing this guidance the government should seek to learn from existing and historic democratic education practice by collaborating with relevant experts and stakeholders.
 - **Expanding the new targeted enrichment funding** to enable all schools to embed extracurricular engagement with democracy and democratic processes, both through enrichment activities such as clubs, trips and events related to civic engagement and through building meaningful structures for student voice.
2. **Explore changes to initial teacher training and invest in continuing professional development to support democratic classroom practice. This should include:**
 - **Supporting practitioner knowledge and skill in participatory, dialogic teaching** so that inclusive, critical deliberation and dialogue form a core part of classroom learning. This should include supporting teachers' confidence and skill in facilitating discussions around sensitive and contentious issues.
 - **Examining why participatory and critical pedagogies have become sidelined within the education system**, including the role of curriculum overload, standardised assessment, and school accountability measures.

3. Ensure that upcoming changes to the curriculum in response to the curriculum and assessment review create a core curriculum entitlement for citizenship that is clear, well sequenced and incorporates citizenship as both a dedicated subject and cross-curricular theme. This should include:

- **Collaborating with relevant stakeholders** such as educators, education unions, education organisations and subject specialists to consider how political and thematic content relevant to democracy and citizenship can be incorporated within and across subjects. This should include exploring ways of incorporating priority content underscored by this inquiry, such as critical media literacy, practical information about democracy and elections, a more rigorous engagement with the concept and history of democracy (including movements by marginalised groups to fight for their democratic rights), and current affairs.
- **Providing training and support for non-specialist teachers to embed content and themes related to democracy and citizenship** in their subject teaching across the curriculum.
- **Learning from other national contexts** where citizenship has been made central to curriculum design, such as Scotland and Wales.

In addition, we recommend that the government:

- **Support the creation of a National Union of School Students (NUSS)** so that a powerful structure for student voice and participation in policymaking is embedded across the education system. The government might look to countries with existing school student unions for ideas on how a newly created NUSS could be supported by the government and formally consulted on education policy development.
- **Consult with sector stakeholders on improving the current Department for Education impartiality guidance**, so that schools and educators feel supported in engaging students in participatory discussion of political – including politically sensitive – issues in the classroom without fear of sanctions and negative repercussions.
- **Take steps to widen access to citizenship as a dedicated subject**, for example by working to increase the number of trained specialist citizenship teachers and addressing subject hierarchies arising from current accountability measures like Progress 8.

Finally, we urge the government to recognise that much of this valuable work to embed democracy and democratic education in schools and colleges relies on broader, systemic changes across the education system. Without a joined-up approach, there is a risk that efforts to support young people's democratic participation and citizenship will fall short. We therefore urge the government to:

- **Ensure that commitments to tackling curriculum overload, as indicated by the government's response to the CAR, translate into a meaningful reduction in core content overall, especially at secondary/GCSE level.**
A reduction in current curriculum demands is crucial for making space for new core content related to democracy while also ensuring sufficient flexibility and space for schools to do the important, time-consuming work of embedding democratic governance and pedagogy more broadly.
- **Substantially reduce the focus on standardised assessment within the education system,** which evidence suggests is sidelining other important educational outcomes and processes including the development of civic skills and participatory learning experiences. This would echo widespread sector calls for change including by the recent interim report *Young People and Work* by former Health Minister Alan Milburn.
- **Consult further on transforming approaches to school accountability.**
In particular, explore moving away from solely top-down, standardised approaches – which evidence has suggested are barriers to democratic practice and culture in schools – and towards an approach in which schools and colleges are active partners in co-creating processes and criteria for evaluating success.

Introduction

Background to Votes at 16 and the scope of this inquiry

A broad coalition of young people, youth organisations, charities, politicians, political parties, and unions have been campaigning to lower the UK voting age to 16 for decades. In 2014, Scotland extended the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds for the Scottish independence referendum, and in 2015, they introduced votes at 16 for all devolved parliament and local elections. In Wales, the franchise was extended to 16- and 17-year-olds for all devolved and local elections in 2020. However, the power to determine the franchise for UK-wide elections remains in the hands of the UK Parliament.

In 2025, the UK government announced its intention to extend the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds for all UK elections. The change was brought to Parliament earlier this year in the form of the Representation of the People Bill 2026, and is set to become law in late 2026 or early 2027. Introducing votes at 16 will bring the UK in line with a growing number of countries around the world – not only the devolved nations of Wales and Scotland, but also Austria, Malta, Argentina, and Brazil, among others.

In light of the decision to introduce votes at 16, the APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment decided to hold an inquiry into how schools and colleges can support young people to leave education feeling empowered, enfranchised, and ready

to participate in society as democratic citizens. In doing so, the inquiry has considered how schools teach about democracy, critical thinking, and the skills needed to navigate online misinformation and disinformation, but has also moved beyond this to examine how democratic practices and values are embedded in pedagogy and school culture.

“Democracies don’t crumble overnight, they gradually erode back through disengagement. Equipping us with political education is not an ideological statement, but a democratic necessity.”

Raffaele De Faveri, Year 8 student

The inquiry has also considered whether proposals contained within the recent Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) (Francis, 2025) and the government’s response (DfE, 2025), as well as the 2026 schools white paper (DfE, 2026), will enable schools and colleges to effectively prepare young people for democratic citizenship. The government’s response to the CAR explicitly underscores “the opportunity that is presented” by votes at 16 in terms of considering the role of schools in supporting young people’s democratic engagement (2025:25). It also recognises that citizenship education “can play a vital role in making sure young people feel the democratic process is relevant to them”

(2025:25). In light of this, the government has committed to strengthening citizenship across secondary education and introducing a statutory citizenship requirement at key stages 1 and 2. The inquiry has examined these proposals (as well as other proposed reforms in the government's response to the CAR and the schools white paper) in relation to evidence that the APPG has received. The report makes a series of recommendations for how the government's proposals can be effectively enacted as well as further recommendations for supporting young people's democratic engagement through education.

The government intends to publish its curriculum reforms in spring 2027 in time for implementation in schools from autumn 2028. We hope this report offers a timely contribution to the process of considering these reforms in greater depth over the upcoming year and that the government will take on board the report's recommendations to ensure the education system can support young people to be empowered and engaged democratic citizens.

Limitations

Schools and colleges are not the only places that can and should support young people's engagement in democracy. Several contributors pointed to the importance of third sector organisations, informal education spaces such as youth work, families, and local communities, in supporting democratic engagement and learning. Contributors also pointed to the importance of broader measures to elevate young people's voices in society, including politicians and political parties actively engaging with young people and developing policies that speak to their perspectives and priorities. Although beyond the scope of this inquiry, we strongly support a joined-up approach to enabling young people's political engagement and participation and urge the government to facilitate cross-sector collaboration in preparing for the extension of the franchise.

The high number of evidence submissions the inquiry received (50 written submissions, and oral evidence from 18 contributors), and the breadth of perspectives and recommendations they contained, demonstrates the level of cross-sector interest and commitment regarding democratic education. It also means we have been unable to include direct reference to every contributor in the report, or cover every issue or suggestion highlighted by submitted evidence. All evidence contributors are listed in Appendices 2 and 3, and page 16 provides a brief overview of themes from submitted evidence that we have been unable to include in the report as well as signposting for future research.

A note on ‘democracy’ and other terms

“While voting is a vast part of any democratic system, democracy does, in fact, go further than this, ensuring that young people have a voice in any decision that affects their life and future.”

Alishba Amir, I Have a Voice and Youth Shadow Panel for the CAR (oral evidence)

This inquiry views votes at 16 as a vital extension of democratic rights. However, the report uses a definition of democracy that goes well beyond voting. When the inquiry team ran a discussion session at the 2026 Fair Education Alliance (FEA) Youth Summit, we asked young people in the room what democracy meant to them. They offered a rich variety of definitions including:

- Making sure everyone’s voice is heard
- Having a say in issues that affect you and the people around you
- Choices about communities made by those communities
- De-centralising decision-making
- Not just representative democracy but also forms of direct democracy

This broad understanding of democracy and democratic engagement was reflected across submissions to the inquiry: contributors routinely highlighted the importance of supporting young people not only to vote, but also to engage in community activism and decision-making, social changemaking and campaigning, and local and national policymaking and advocacy. Therefore, while this inquiry is deeply concerned with education that supports young people to vote (the introduction of votes at 16 being the primary motivation for the inquiry) it also

goes beyond this, to examine how schools and colleges can foster the democratic skills and knowledge that underpin using that vote, and support young people to participate in broader democratic society as critical, engaged and active citizens.

There are many ways of describing the work done in schools and colleges that support young people to vote and to engage in democracy. This is reflected in the range of terms used across evidence submissions. In line with this, the report uses a range of terms and phrases largely interchangeably – including ‘democratic education’ and ‘citizenship education’ – to refer to educational approaches that support young people’s democratic understanding, engagement and citizenship. The phrase ‘political literacy’ is also used at points and can be understood as when a person has the skills and knowledge to participate in political discussion, activities, and changemaking (in short, political literacy is a key educational outcome that citizenship and democratic education help to support) (ACT, 2022).

The role of schools and colleges in supporting democratic engagement

“It’s not enough to simply give young people the vote at 16, but we must change the practice and culture across our political systems to ensure that this democratic right can be fully realised. [...] This means embedding children and young people’s rights and participation through the entire school curriculum and in communities from as early as possible.”

Ellie Craig MSYP, Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament (oral evidence)

It was noted across evidence submissions that research demonstrates a clear relationship between learning and educational experiences relating to democracy and politics, and likelihood of voting and broader political participation. For instance, Dr Christine Huebner (University of Sheffield) and Dr Jan Eichhorn (University of Edinburgh) submitted written evidence to the inquiry summarising the findings of five major studies they have led over the last 14 years “into the implementation and outcomes of Votes at 16 in Scotland, Wales and internationally”. Their research clearly shows that “effective democratic education in schools can positively impact young people’s intended political engagement as well as perceptions of political efficacy, confidence, interest and trust in politics – all important factors associated with voting in elections.” Moreover, they argue that “democratic education in schools can compensate for inequalities in political engagement”, pointing to evidence that “young people from families who are less likely to vote or be politically engaged, benefit most from receiving democratic education in schools.”

Yet, another consistent theme in submitted evidence was that, currently, access to political and democratic education in schools and colleges is generally low and inconsistent. The UK Youth Parliament, for instance, stated in their submission that through “extensive engagement with young people across the UK” they have concluded “that there is a strong appetite among young people to participate in political life. However, this is frequently undermined by inconsistent access to high-quality political and citizenship education.” Where it does exist, provision is highly uneven across schools and regions; it is well evidenced, for instance, that private schools and better-resourced state schools are more likely to offer democratic education (Sant et al., 2024). In their written submission, I Have a Voice pointed to reasons for this such as schools in disadvantaged areas being more likely to “lack resources, trained teachers, and institutional support for political education.”¹ The upshot is that, as Dr Huebner and Dr Eichhorn point out, “the positive effects democratic education can have on young people’s political engagement are not accessible to all young people equally”.

¹ More root causes behind this inequality between wealthier or more privileged schools and those in disadvantaged areas are explored later in the report.

“I’m head of citizenship in an inner-city Leicester school serving young people who face severe levels of deprivation. [...] Before they walk through the school gates, young people are facing challenges in unequal access to resources or information, and this will affect their ability to participate in democracy on equal terms. [...] In a school like mine with a community with historically low turnout, citizenship [education] cannot be optional [...] it must be an entitlement for all, otherwise we reproduce the same participation gaps [that] votes at 16 is trying to address.”

Sera Shortland, citizenship teacher and chair of the Association for Citizenship Teaching Council (oral evidence)

A connected theme across submissions was that schools and colleges are currently experienced by many young people as highly undemocratic places. For instance, the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award quoted one of their youth ambassadors reflecting on their experience of school, who said “for the most part you’re just blindly following rules and not being taught at all about democracy.” Evidence also pointed to inequalities in terms of who experiences school as undemocratic. In their submission, the Young Lives, Young Futures study highlighted that a key finding of their national, longitudinal research² is that historically marginalised groups are particularly likely to feel alienated in school and that this is connected to feeling their priorities and views are not listened to. Concerns were raised by several contributors that this has a direct impact on young people’s broader political enfranchisement. The submission

² The six-year longitudinal study conducted a nationally representative survey of more than 11,000 young people and qualitative interviews with 123 young people and 75 local policymakers and practitioners.

from Sands School, for instance, suggested that “if students spend years in school where their voice is often not even listened to [...], they learn something about politics long before they reach a polling station.”

Contributors highlighted that many young people already feel alienated from politics and marginalised by mainstream political institutions. For example, a survey³ by the Jack Petchey Foundation found that only “seven per cent of young people feel that MPs amplify young people’s voices”. The National Union of School Students argued that young people feel “systematically excluded from the decisions made about them, leading to a decrease in trust in political institutions and democracy.” Although broader reforms will be needed to address the causes of political marginalisation, evidence submitted to this inquiry suggests that giving young people opportunities to experience democracy first-hand in the institutions in which they spend a significant proportion of their lives is a vital part of the solution.

It must be underscored that schools and colleges are facing enormous pressures. Successive governments have overseen real-term cuts to school funding, leaving many schools at crisis-point in terms of resourcing. There is a widely acknowledged retention crisis (NEU, 2025) and workload crisis (DfE, 2025b) within the teaching profession, as well as concerns about the growing demands of standardised metrics and accountability structures and the intensive demands this places on schools and colleges (UCL, 2021; Creagh et al., 2025). These challenges are – as noted above – particularly acute for schools in disadvantaged areas. A number of systemic challenges that schools face – and the implications for embedding democracy in education – are explored throughout this report, especially in section 4. It is the view of this inquiry that policy changes to support democratic and citizenship education must go hand in hand with

³ See Jack Petchey Foundation report (2026).

holistic policy measures and reforms that ensure schools and colleges have the resources, capacity and scope to be able to do this work.

At the same time, evidence submitted to the inquiry was characterised by considerable optimism, and a sense of opportunity afforded by votes at 16. This is well captured in the words of Dan Whittall, a teacher of geography in Halifax, who stated in his submission: "I hope the APPG will put forward recommendations that both take seriously the nature of the current crisis, including young people's disillusionment with representative democracy, and re-establish schools as central spaces where democratic pedagogies are embraced, the gamut of democratic concepts and forms are taught, and democratic practices are embedded for young people, education workers and communities. Votes at 16 presents us with a historic opportunity to rethink the democratic school. We ought not waste it."

Structure of the report

Section 1

Embedding democracy in the curriculum

This section explores how democratic education can be delivered through changes to the content and themes included in the national curriculum, for instance by outlining a clear, sequential core curriculum entitlement to citizenship and democracy.

The importance of experiential learning for democracy and democratic engagement

This section break is a preface to the following two sections, explaining the shift in focus from learning 'about' democracy, to learning 'through' democratic experiences in school and college.

Section 2

Embedding democracy in teaching and learning

This section explores how democratic skills and understanding can be supported by approaches to teaching and learning that centre active student participation through dialogue, discussion and deliberation.

Section 3

Embedding democracy through student voice

This section explores how democratic education can be facilitated through meaningful student involvement in governance and decision-making in schools and colleges. It examines both school councils and other forms of student voice and extra-curricular activities related to civic engagement.

Section 4

Broader systemic barriers to embedding democracy in schools and colleges

This final section explores some of the broader cross-sector barriers that make it challenging to enact the examples of democratic education outlined in previous sections of the report. These include curriculum overload, high-stakes testing cultures, and current approaches to school accountability.

Areas for further research

There are several areas of direct relevance to the inquiry, but where evidence submissions were minimal or there was insufficient space to discuss them within the report. These include:

Post-16 education. Although the report contains practice and examples from post-16 spaces, and many of the report's recommendations have relevance across settings, there is limited engagement with specific recommendations for post-16 education. The majority of evidence submissions focused on schools and the CAR and government response to the CAR and schools white paper – to which this inquiry directly responds – also primarily focus on schools. We would recommend that further policy work is done to explore supporting young people's democratic engagement through post-16 education specifically.

Assessment. Very few contributors discussed ways of enacting democracy in or through assessment, for instance, through more participatory or collaborative assessment approaches. There was, however, a strong emphasis in submitted evidence on current approaches to assessment (specifically, top-down, standardised testing cultures) being a barrier to much of the democratic work that this report outlines. This is explored in Section 4, and we would also signpost readers to the APPG's last inquiry report (APPG for SLA, 2023), which provides recommendations for assessment reform relevant to calls for change outlined in this report.

Relationships and relational practice.

A small number of submissions emphasised the importance of relational practice and supporting more democratic relationships between students and staff. These submissions emphasised reducing elements of institutional control and hierarchy in everyday interactions between students and staff as a vital part of embedding democracy in school and college life. These submissions also proposed less authoritarian and hierarchical approaches to behaviour management, and one specifically raised concerns about the rise of punitive zero tolerance approaches in mainstream schooling. Several of the report's recommendations relate to transforming school culture in line with egalitarian principles (in particular in Sections 2 and 3). Nonetheless, it is regrettable that, due to space constraints and due to it only being raised by a minority of contributors, we have not been able to explore the specific theme of relationships and relational practice in more depth. The inquiry recommends that deeper exploration of the role of relationships and relational dynamics – including approaches to behavior management and conflict resolution – in supporting democracy and democratic engagement in schools and colleges would be a generative avenue for future policy research.

1

Embedding democracy in curriculum design

“Democratic education includes core knowledge that all young people need in order to understand how democratic systems work and how citizens can participate within them.”

The Politics Project

Many evidence submissions to the inquiry argued that democracy can be embedded in schools and colleges through the formal curriculum. These submissions focused on the content, knowledge and themes that should be included in the curriculum to support young people's political literacy and engagement. The Politics Project, for instance, highlighted the importance of “structured learning about political systems, democratic institutions and elections delivered through the curriculum”, while the Electoral Commission called for “modernis[ing] the citizenship curriculum by strengthening content on media literacy, mis- and dis-information” and other key areas related to political understanding. This inquiry does not take the view that changes to the formal, written curriculum alone are sufficient for embedding democracy in schools and colleges. Sections 2 and 3 highlight contributions to the inquiry that make clear how formal curriculum content must be combined with democratic pedagogies and other forms of experiential, active learning to support democratic

knowledge and skills and to ensure democracy is meaningfully embedded across school and college life. Nonetheless, contributors were clear that ensuring the formal curriculum incorporates high-quality thematic content related to citizenship, democracy and politics is an important part of the puzzle. This section focuses on this proposed content, including why it matters and how it could be embedded as the government enacts its curriculum reforms in the wake of the CAR.

Research consistently suggests that exposure to a dedicated citizenship curriculum increases democratic engagement among young people. Arellano et al's analysis of 359 quantitative studies on educational approaches and their impact on ‘democratic competences’ found a clear link between exposure to civic education content and outcomes including political engagement and tolerance (Arellano et al., 2026). In their written submission, Dr Christine Huebner and Dr Jan Eichhorn summarised research they carried out examining how young people in Scotland have engaged in politics since Scotland's introduction of votes at 16 (see Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023). They found that “young adults who remembered taking classes in school in which political issues were discussed, were more likely to turn out in elections throughout their 20s”. The Economist Educational Foundation, meanwhile, pointed to findings of their 2024 Young Citizens Survey, which

suggested that “if young people feel more informed about political issues, they are more than twice as likely to plan to vote”.

While the case for citizenship education is well-evidenced and it has been a statutory curriculum requirement in secondary education since 2002, numerous evidence submissions suggested that current provision is “uneven and inconsistent despite examples of excellent practice” (Send My Friend to School). A recent survey by the Electoral Commission showed that “only a minority of young people report learning about UK politics in the last year at school, and delivery is often infrequent”. This unevenness was referenced by young people contributing to the inquiry. For instance, at the inquiry’s first oral evidence session, Manel Bansada – Votes at 16 ambassador for My Life My Say – related their experience that “citizenship lessons during secondary school were often swept under the rug. We [...] got that same video or a brief discussion on British values, and then we moved on.”

Clearer guidance on a core citizenship curriculum entitlement

Several contributors pointed to a lack of clarity over the current place of citizenship within the formal curriculum as a key problem underpinning the inconsistencies described above. In their written submission, Dr Thomas Loughran (Lancaster University), Dr Andrew Mycock (University of Leeds) and Professor Jonathan Tonge (University of Liverpool) pointed out that citizenship is currently “delivered through a range of formats, including via discrete citizenship classes, as part of personal, social, health and economics education (PSHE), and/or as a cross-curricula theme.” Send My Friend to School suggests that while this multi-strand approach has strengths, it also risks “confusion [and] potential deprioritisation”

when not accompanied by clear guidance.

There was accordingly a recommendation by multiple contributors for the government to build clearer guidance on a minimum curriculum entitlement to citizenship from primary to post-16. The Electoral Commission, for example, called on the government to develop clear “curriculum alignment and sequencing” for citizenship “so that learning builds progressively from primary through to first voting eligibility, rather than being delivered as a one-off event.” Some submissions prioritised this curriculum entitlement being embedded across the curriculum while others focused on it being its own distinct subject within the curriculum. It is the view of this inquiry that both matter, and the government should consult further on strengthening a dedicated citizenship curriculum strand as well as providing clearer guidance on citizenship as a cross-curricular theme.

It is encouraging that the government has already taken steps towards clarifying a citizenship curriculum entitlement in its response to the CAR – for instance, stating that citizenship will be statutory at primary as well at secondary and committing to “provid[ing] a clear framework” (2025:29) for citizenship in the national curriculum as a whole. However, contributors pointed to a number of important considerations to ensure that these commitments translate into a high-quality citizenship curriculum offer. These are outlined below.

Do not neglect citizenship as a dedicated subject

Several contributors raised concerns that ‘citizenship’ as a distinct subject has been sidelined in the curriculum, despite strong evidence of its important role in promoting democratic engagement. In their written submission, the Politics Project underscored the findings of the final Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study report in 2010 which studied more than

40,000 students in England and found that citizenship education taught “in discrete timetable slots and for more than 45 minutes per week” (Keating et al., 2010:vii) was associated with “positive attitudes and intentions towards civic and political participation” (2010:vi). The Politics Project also highlighted research by Dr James Weinberg demonstrating that “students who received whole lessons on citizenship and political education once a week were, on average, 27 per cent more likely to anticipate voting than participants who never received such lessons” (Weinberg, 2020:37). A number of submissions therefore called for any core entitlement to citizenship and democracy to include citizenship as a dedicated subject taught by specialist staff.

“Citizenship is an academic subject in its own right, and reducing it to PSHE or British values creates a false impression. [...] The prevailing model in schools is to ask all teachers to be citizenship specialists. It doesn’t work. They don’t have time, and they’ve not had a year of training to understand the subject properly.”

Sera Shortland, Citizenship teacher and Chair of the Association for Citizenship Teaching Council (oral evidence)

Submitted evidence also highlighted the importance of broadening access to Citizenship qualifications, such as GCSE citizenship studies. The Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) recently commissioned a major national study surveying a diverse sample of young people aged 16–19 across England (Henn et al., 2025). The research found that young people who took GCSE citizenship studies were more likely to say they understand how politics works, to express interest in politics and the news, and to intend to vote. In their evidence submission, ACT noted that the research found these positive

effects to be “particularly pronounced for groups that are historically under-represented in political participation”. Send My Friend to School noted in their submission that distinct policy changes have led to a decline in provision and uptake of citizenship studies at GCSE, most notably the introduction of the EBacc school performance measure,⁴ which led to subjects not included in the ‘core’ list being rapidly deprioritised. While contributors welcomed the government’s commitment to abolishing the EBacc in its response to the CAR, it was suggested that further changes are needed. For instance, ACT pointed out that citizenship remains devalued in other school accountability measures such as Progress 8.⁵ While they welcomed the government’s proposals for a “revised humanities breadth requirement” as part of Progress 8, they noted that “under the current proposals, GCSE citizenship studies is not included within Category A (Humanities) [of the Progress 8 breadth bucket] alongside subjects such as history and geography”, which has a detrimental impact on schools’ capacity and incentive to offer the subject at GCSE.

A lack of specialist teachers was also identified as a key barrier to increasing access to citizenship as a dedicated subject, including at GCSE. ACT therefore placed a strong emphasis in their submission on the importance of steps to recruit and train more specialist citizenship teachers and called for the government to seek “urgent clarity from the Department for Education on specialist citizenship teacher supply and ITT [initial teacher training] capacity”. This was echoed by other contributors, such as the UK Democracy Fund who made a

4 The Ebacc measured student attainment within a core range of ‘academic’ subjects at GCSE.

5 Progress 8 is a ‘value added’ measure used to assess the extent to which students in secondary schools have made progress in their attainment, and to compare levels of progress across schools. It measures attainment across eight subjects: English and maths, plus six other subjects drawn from a ‘science’ bucket and a ‘breadth’ bucket.

specific recommendation to the inquiry that “the government should work towards ensuring that there is a properly trained citizenship teacher in every school.”

Recentre political and democratic themes and content across disciplines

“Embed the concepts of democracy in all subjects and not sideline [it] to citizenship lessons. It’s in the heart of everything that we do.”

Evie,⁶ teacher

While – as noted above – several contributions highlighted the importance of citizenship as a dedicated subject, others made clear that democracy should not be seen as the remit of only certain subjects and disciplines. Contributors noted that themes related to citizenship, politics and democracy have powerful cross-disciplinary relevance, yet are too often absent in subject curricula. This was underscored in a written submission by geography teacher Dan Whittall: “Effective teaching about democracy in schools requires democracy itself to become a core curriculum concept [...] approached from the diverse perspectives of multiple subjects. To take one example: the subject I teach, geography, has a long academic research tradition exploring the relationship between politics, place and democracy. The concept is clearly relevant to any attempt to evaluate geographical issues, ranging from urban policies to efforts to address climate and ecological emergencies. Yet the concept is almost entirely absent from the school curriculum.”

The argument for ensuring themes related to citizenship are embedded across subjects extended beyond the humanities. For example, the submission

from the InSECT (Investigating Science, Education, Citizenship and Truth) Project highlighted the importance of teaching students how political context and social processes shape scientific knowledge and understanding, especially in the context of “frontier research science” – that is, new research that is innovative and pioneering. The InSECT project argued that explaining the social processes underpinning how frontier research is produced in scientific research communities, and how politics shapes citizens’ engagement with scientific knowledge, is vital for supporting students to make informed decisions and to critically question pseudoscientific claims and misinformation – for instance, around new vaccines – that are undermining open, democratic debate in wider society.

The government’s response to the CAR includes a commitment to better incorporate climate education as a theme across subjects, including geography and science, which this inquiry welcomes as a crucial reform, given the centrality of climate change to contemporary democracy, politics and society. However, beyond this, the government’s response to the CAR includes limited explicit engagement with the relevance of democracy and political themes in other subjects,⁷ and specifically states that “the subject [of geography] does not need significant change” (2025:32).

Specific curriculum themes

Above we outlined contributors’ calls for the government to develop clear guidance on a core, minimum entitlement to citizenship in the curriculum – both as a dedicated subject and as a cross-curricular theme. Evidence submissions also outlined suggestions for specific content and themes that this curriculum entitlement

⁶ Pseudonym – anonymous contributor via a National Education Union survey.

⁷ One exception is the government’s commitments around history curriculum reforms, touched on further below.

should contain. Key examples are briefly outlined below.⁸

Critical media literacy

A very large number of submissions underscored the importance of critical media literacy in any core curriculum entitlement to citizenship education. This includes teaching knowledge and skills enabling young people “to question sources, recognise bias, evaluate evidence, and understand how digital algorithms can shape the content they see” online (Independent Schools Council). It is notable that there was a strong focus on media literacy in submissions by students and young people. The Arts Emergency Youth Collective, for instance, argued that “teaching students how to read information and spot misinformation is a key core skill in our information saturated climate. Media literacy will give students the opportunity to be informed voters.” The urgency of this curriculum theme was underscored by submissions highlighting research showing most young people do not feel confident “identifying, challenging and reporting misinformation”⁹ (Jack Petchey Foundation). There was particular concern about the rise of mis-, dis- and mal-information online, given evidence showing that online content – in particular, social media content – is “a primary route through which [young people] encounter news, politics and current affairs” (Internet Matters). The specific challenges associated with “the rise of AI-generated content online” (Internet Matters) was noted, and some contributors accordingly called for critical media literacy to incorporate “AI literacy, including ethics, knowledge

and awareness of tech structures and algorithmic systems” (Jo,¹⁰ teacher).

Contributors welcomed the fact that the government’s response to the CAR has strongly emphasised the importance of embedding media and digital literacy across the curriculum. However, some contributors pointed out that this must go hand in hand with high-quality training as, “without specialist instruction, many teachers do not feel confident teaching students how to spot misinformation or tackling misinformation when it arises in classroom settings” (The Day News & Media). This was clearly foregrounded at the inquiry’s second evidence session by Richard Hand – an English teacher with over 30 years of experience – who pointed to the need for “proper training for teachers” to address the daunting task of “deal[ing] with this toxic social media environment of disinformation and equip[ping] students to understand how to deal with this too.”

8 One curriculum theme raised in submissions but not discussed in this section is oracy. Oracy can be understood as a set of key skills in speaking, listening, and communication, taught through participatory, active pedagogies. Oracy is discussed in Section 2, which focuses on pedagogy, though it can also be understood as a core curriculum area.

9 This quote is from the Jack Petchey Foundation Are You Listening Youth Survey Report 2026, submitted alongside their written evidence.

10 Pseudonym – anonymous contributor via a National Education Union survey.

High quality resources

Several contributors noted the importance of access to high-quality resources for delivering citizenship and political education. Many of the organisations that submitted evidence to the inquiry offer high-quality citizenship resources – often for free – to schools and colleges. At the same time, Send My Friend to School noted that curriculum changes and funding cuts have led to “a steady decline” in citizenship-related resources available to schools and colleges. Some submissions called on the government to provide more resources to support citizenship education, while others cautioned against standardisation and centrally prescribed lesson plans. This underscores the importance of teachers being able to draw upon a diverse and rich range of resources that they can use and adapt for their classrooms and school communities as they see fit. It was also noted that access to resources must go hand in hand with other key changes noted throughout this section and later in the report – such as training to support subject knowledge and participatory and dialogic teaching, sufficient time and autonomy for educators, and clarity in the design of the written curriculum.

Practical information about voting, elections and democratic systems

Several contributors pointed to the importance of providing practical information about voting and elections as part of the citizenship curriculum. The Electoral Commission, for instance, pointed to how explaining “registration processes, voter identification requirements and what to expect at a polling station” can help “reduce uncertainty and support confident first-time participation”. This was echoed by Marcus Flucker MSYP, vice chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, who spoke at the inquiry’s third oral evidence session. Marcus described how “after being elected as a [member of Scottish Youth Parliament], I remember leading a presentation at the school of my constituency leading up to the 2022 local elections [...]. And I was surprised to learn that many young people in [my local area of] Angus were nervous about voting. [...] Young people were worried that they would make a mistake whilst voting. They were unsure where their polling station was located or how to find it.”

Teaching practical information about democracy should, contributors argued, be extended to understanding how decisions are made and translated into legislation, processes for holding politicians to account, and how to engage as a citizen in policymaking, advocacy, and changemaking.¹¹ Young people at the inquiry’s first oral evidence session, as well as at the FEA Youth Summit, highlighted how this kind of practical information was missing in their experience of the school curriculum. For instance, at the inquiry’s first oral evidence session, Manel Bansada described how “even A level politics [...] was still quite limited because of the focus on exam performance and theoretical

¹¹ Beyond formal curriculum content there is a clear role here for experiential learning and enrichment activities in supporting practical understanding. This is explored in Section 3.

knowledge rather than practical political engagement, such as how to register for voting, how to scrutinise local decisions, or even just take part in your local community action.”

Diversity and marginalised voices in politics

Several contributors called for a citizenship curriculum that includes marginalised voices, movements, and histories as part of a more meaningful engagement with the concept of democracy. For instance, Reggie J Dovener – political campaigner and founder of The 8 Principles, an organisation seeking to strengthen political education across Wales – underscored the importance of recognising that “young people, disabled people, BAME [people], LGBTQIA+ [people], women, and people from across the wealth spectrum all shape politics.” Reggie suggests this is part of students “learn[ing] that we all have a voice.” It’s also about students learning that democracy has a complex history whereby marginalised groups have had to fight for their representation. Reggie points out that “democracy as we know it right now didn’t just happen overnight, people had to fight for the right to vote and students should learn about it. You should teach about the Suffragettes and other civil rights movements.”¹² A similar point was made by a teacher contributor – Nasim¹³ – who pointed to the way that “much of colonial history is erased from the curriculum” as an example of how the current curriculum fails to engage with the concept of democracy through a rigorous historical lens.

Some contributors suggested that this problem is exacerbated by the citizenship curriculum very often being delivered through the lens of British values, which

can cause the concept of democracy to be taught in over-simplified ways that don’t account for its complex history nor the diversity of present day interpretations and challenges. Geography teacher Dan Whittall, for instance, argued that “democracy should not be taught as though it is a uniquely British value, nor as though the state has not acted over time to suppress or restrict democracy.” The government’s response to the CAR does acknowledge the need for diverse representation in the curriculum and includes some encouraging changes to the history curriculum specifically in this regard. A balanced curriculum is crucial for supporting young people to engage more deeply and rigorously with British values – including the concept of democracy.

Current affairs

Finally, there was a call among several contributors for the citizenship curriculum to include engagement with current affairs. The Economist Educational Foundation suggested in their submission that when it comes to citizenship education, “engaging with the live, evolving topics that actually inform a vote is critical”. This was echoed by academics Dr Christine Huebner and Dr Jan Eichhorn, who pointed out in their submission that “research shows [...] teaching about general principles of democracy and how elections work is somewhat less important” than engaging students “with discussions of real-life political issues.” The importance of teaching current affairs and key political issues through discussed-based approaches was particularly underscored. This is returned to in more detail in Section 2, which focuses on participatory teaching.

¹² These quotes are from The 8 Principles’ Blueprint of Political Education in Wales, written by Reggie J Dovener and submitted to the inquiry alongside written evidence.

¹³ Pseudonym – anonymous contributor via a National Education Union survey.

Training

Contributors were clear that a well-constructed formal curriculum must go hand in hand with support for teachers and schools to deliver it. In particular, contributors highlighted the importance of a “sustained investment in teacher training and continuing professional development” to support citizenship education (Shout Out UK and the APPG on Political and Media Literacy). There is substantial evidence that the majority of teachers in England do not currently feel confident delivering citizenship as a curriculum area. For instance, a 2021 report by the APPG on Political Literacy¹⁴ with Dr James Weinberg analysed data from a survey with over 3,000 secondary school teachers. The data showed that “79% of teachers feel that their initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD) have ‘not prepared them at all’ for teaching political literacy” (Weinberg, 2021:23). Accordingly, in addition to calls for training specialist citizenship teachers, contributors highlighted the need to “upskill teachers” across the workforce “to ensure strong subject knowledge on UK political systems” as well the “knowledge and confidence to ensure accuracy and balance” when engaging with political issues in the curriculum (Kristina Lewis, deputy head and history & politics teacher).¹⁵

14 Now called the APPG on Political and Media Literacy.

15 The need for training around facilitating learning and discussion of sensitive and contentious issues specifically is discussed in Section 2.

Case study

Learning from Scotland and Wales

Several submissions suggested that, in developing the citizenship curriculum, the government should seek to learn from Scotland and Wales, which have endeavoured to place democracy and citizenship at the heart of their curriculum designs.

For instance, in their written submission, Dr Deborah Outhwaite (University of Liverpool), Dr Alpesh Maisuria (University of the West of England Bristol), and Penelope Williams (University of Bristol) highlight how the Curriculum for Wales “makes strong provision for the teaching of democratic education. This is a new curriculum, and England should be learning from its journeys and the history that Scotland has in this area.” Dr Outhwaite and colleagues go on to highlight how social studies – which teaches students to understand society, history, geography, and modern systems – is one of eight key curriculum areas in Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence and is thus deeply embedded in the national curriculum framework. They point out that the Scottish government recognises social studies is a subject area reliant on “very skilled teaching”¹⁶ and, accordingly, “the professionals who teach in this subject area are well-trained through their PGDE¹⁷ and registered through [the General Teaching Council for Scotland].”¹⁸

Others pointed to how the dedicated subject of modern studies in Scotland – which explores contemporary political and social issues in a local, Scottish, UK and international context – is one of the most popular subjects in Scottish schools. Modern Studies is the sixth and fifth most popular option in Scottish National 5 (equivalent to GCSE) and Higher Level (equivalent to A level) exams (Smith, 2024) respectively. This is in stark contrast to citizenship studies in England, where it is a minority subject at GCSE (JCQ, 2025) and no longer available at A level (Stewart, 2015). Marcus Flucker, vice chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, who spoke at one of the inquiry’s evidence sessions, described how “taking modern studies sparked my interest in politics. So by the time I turned 16, and I was preparing to cast my first vote at the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, it was something that I felt a sense of excitement and anticipation to do.”

Learning from curriculum design in Scotland and Wales includes learning from challenges and barriers to enactment. While Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence was referred to by many as an example of a well-designed curriculum from which England could learn, there is also evidence that problems persist with quality and inconsistency in application, for example see Scottish Youth Parliament & YouthLink Scotland, 2019. This was referenced by Ellie Craig, chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, at the inquiry’s third oral evidence session. Ellie pointed out that what’s written in the Scottish curriculum doesn’t always translate into reality: “I can’t say that my experience and a lot of the experience of the young people that I speak to matches exactly what that’s meant to be on paper”.

It is clear from submitted evidence that the government would have much to gain by

16 See the ‘Social Studies: Principles and Practice document’ of the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland: <https://education.gov.scot/media/rrljwh33/social-studies-pp.pdf>

17 A Masters level qualification which is the standard route into teaching in Scotland.

18 The teaching profession’s independent regulator in Scotland.

consulting further with curriculum and education experts in Scotland and Wales about both the challenges and successes they have encountered in centering a commitment to citizenship in their national curriculum designs.

Recommendations to the government

This inquiry welcomes the emphasis on citizenship in the government's response to the CAR, including making citizenship statutory from key stage 1, strengthening citizenship across secondary, and paying explicit attention to media literacy as well as democracy and governance. To ensure this translates into substantive, high-quality curriculum offer for citizenship – and to address problems with clarity and cohesion in the current curriculum – we recommend that the government should:

1. **Ensure that upcoming changes to the curriculum in response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review create a core curriculum entitlement for citizenship** that is clear, well sequenced and incorporates citizenship as both a dedicated subject and cross-curricular theme. This in turn requires:
 - **Collaboration with relevant stakeholders** such as educators, education unions, education organisations and subject specialists to consider how political and thematic content relevant to democracy and citizenship can be incorporated within and across subjects. This should include exploring ways of incorporating priority content underscored by this inquiry and elsewhere – such as media literacy, practical information about elections, a more rigorous engagement with the concept and history of democracy (including movements by marginalised groups to fight for their democratic rights), and current affairs.
 - **Supporting greater access to citizenship as a dedicated subject**, for example by taking steps to increase the number of trained specialist citizenship teachers and addressing subject hierarchies arising from current accountability measures like Progress 8.
 - **Drawing on and learning from other national contexts** where citizenship has been made central to curriculum design, such as Scotland and Wales.
2. **Explore changes to initial teacher training and invest in continuing professional development** to support more teachers to feel confident effectively incorporating citizenship content and themes, for example around media literacy into their subject teaching across the curriculum.

The importance of experiential learning for democracy and democratic engagement

“Schools aren’t just places to learn about democracy. They are places to practise it too.”

Marcus Flucker MSYP, vice chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament (oral evidence)

The government response to the CAR places a strong emphasis on a “knowledge-rich” curriculum (2025:12), echoing the claim in the CAR that “subject-specific knowledge remains the best investment in preparing young people for [the] challenges and opportunities” of living in a rapidly changing world (2025:34). As was made clear throughout Section 1 of this report, subject-specific knowledge – and high-quality curriculum content more broadly – is of vital importance for preparing young people for their lives, including democratic citizenship. However, evidence submitted to this inquiry also makes clear that, when it comes to supporting young people to be democratically engaged citizens, a great deal is missed if we focus on curriculum content or subject knowledge alone.

Specifically, submissions highlighted the importance of schools not only teaching young people about democracy but also enabling them to experience and actively practise it. This was viewed as a crucial part of developing the skills and understanding to participate in deliberation and decision-making, engage in civic action, and navigate the challenges these entail in a democratic society. The importance of experiential learning is reflected in the way citizenship and democratic education

is framed in other UK nations’ national curriculums – for instance, the Curriculum for Wales identifies that democratic education should involve “teaching learners about democracy but also giving them opportunities to learn through democracy by creating a participatory school culture”. The importance of active and experiential learning about democracy is also underscored by research (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2025). The next two sections explore the ways in which this commitment – to providing opportunities for students to experience and practise democracy – might be realised in schools and colleges. Section 2 explores the importance of participatory pedagogies and a democratic approach to teaching and learning. Section 3 explores student involvement in governance and decision-making.

2

Embedding democracy in teaching and learning

“For me [democratic education is] about having discussion-based, collaborative lessons. [...] How we practise that every single day with the way we’re teaching. [...] It’s not just about what we learn. It’s about how we learn. [...] How do we actually structure our lessons to allow young people to feel like they’re always actively participating?”

*Ava James, Not A Trend
(oral evidence)*

A large number of submissions to the inquiry argued that a key way of embedding experiential learning about democracy in schools and colleges is through participatory and dialogic approaches to teaching and learning. These can be broadly understood as approaches in which students are actively engaged in dialogue with the teacher and one another in the classroom – in questioning, deliberating and discussing curriculum content and themes, as well as their perspectives and ideas. In other words, while contributors were clear that – as outlined in Section 1 – curriculum content and knowledge related to democracy, politics, and citizenship is important, they also called for attention to be paid to how that content is taught. The Chartered College of Teaching, for instance, suggested in their written submission that teaching critical thinking

– a key democratic skill – requires both a commitment to curriculum knowledge and a commitment to pedagogical approaches emphasising student participation, dialogue, and critique. They write: “knowledge is the basis for critical thinking as it allows students to assess the validity of any claims they may come across and which may inform who they wish to vote for. [...] However, knowledge alone is not enough. Research focusing on the development of critical thinking skills has repeatedly highlighted the need to provide opportunities for students to apply this knowledge through project and research work, design thinking, dialogic teaching or metacognitive approaches.”

There is extensive research evidence that participatory and dialogic approaches to teaching and learning support democratic skills, engagement, and understanding (for example Hoskins et al, 2012; Jerome et al., 2021; Arellano et al., 2026). The Politics Project pointed in their written submission to research showing that “an ‘open classroom climate’, where political issues can be discussed openly and respectfully is associated with higher levels of civic knowledge and engagement” (see Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Siegel-Stechler, 2021). Dr Christine Huebner and Dr Jan Eichhorn, in their written submission, pointed to evidence (Neundorf et al., 2016; Weinberg, 2022) that participatory approaches are particularly impactful at supporting civic outcomes – such as political participation – for “young people from disadvantaged

and less politically engaged backgrounds” and thus “can help address gaps in political participation between advantaged and disadvantaged groups of young people.”

Examples of participatory teaching

Evidence submitted to the inquiry outlined some excellent existing practice in schools and colleges – including through partnership with external organisations – around participatory and dialogic teaching and learning.

Some examples focused on participatory approaches to teaching political issues and themes, for example:

- I Have a Voice outlined their peer education programme which supports young people to “lead or co-facilitate political discussions and activities that they co-create”. I Have a Voice summarised feedback on the positive impact of the peer-led programme: “participants [...] say that learning from peers makes politics more relatable and less intimidating, both normalising participation and boosting confidence.” They point to how “87 per cent of young people who attended a peer-led workshop [...] last year said they knew more about registering to vote and elections and 89 per cent said they now plan to vote as soon as they can” because the workshops had helped them feel “confident fact-checking and where to find trustworthy information”. I Have a Voice suggests these outcomes demonstrate “that youth-led, relatable delivery can quickly build knowledge, confidence and intention to participate.”
- Dr Christine Huebner and Dr Jan Eichhorn described approaches to democratic education in Austria (which has had votes at 16 since 2007) where schools aim to support political literacy through participatory approaches to teaching and learning. They describe

how “some substantive themes form a core part of the [citizenship] curriculum in Austria (such as human rights education, European policy, and gender equality)”, but that the key focus is on a teaching approach that supports political awareness and reflection, through participatory discussion of “political case studies” and “taking into account the pupils’ realities and experiences”.

Other evidence submissions highlighted the embedding of participatory approaches to teaching and learning across a range of subjects and curriculum areas:

- John Murray, teacher and head of art and design at a sixth form college, described various participatory approaches that he incorporates in his classroom teaching, including: “allowing choice and agency, for example allowing students to negotiate their own briefs, select themes, audiences and choice of media. Group crits¹⁹ with clear protocols such as respect, evidence, a focus on challenging ideas not people and etiquette of taking turns allow critique as democratic practice. Studying protest art, public art, socially engaged practice and asking who is seen, who is silenced, who decides allows representation and voice. Shared class agreements, co-designed success criteria/rubrics and peer assessment allow for co-creation and open discussion.”
- States of Mind outlined how they worked with schools to embed ‘action research’ – a participatory approach to learning where “learners identify problems, investigate them collaboratively, implement solutions and evaluate outcomes” – in the curriculum. States of Mind described how action research “supports democratic learning because it centres

¹⁹ ‘Crits’ or ‘critical reviews’ are a core part of art education in which students share work with peers and tutor/s to receive critical feedback.

student agency, requires shared decision-making, and builds reflection and critical thinking.” They also pointed out that action research “can be embedded in any subject area”, for example, “in science, students might explore environmental issues within the school, designing and evaluating solutions. In English, learners could examine representation in reading materials and work with staff to broaden texts so that they reflect and engage the student population. In mathematics, pupils might analyse survey data on school experience and present findings to leadership.”²⁰

The point made by States of Mind above – that participatory approaches are relevant across all subjects, including STEM – is echoed by commentators elsewhere. For instance, in the field of science education, it is widely argued that dialogic pedagogies are deeply relevant for science teaching (see Cornali, 2017; McCrory, 2017; Morales-Doyle & Frausto, 2019). Not only is deliberation at the heart of scientific inquiry, it is key to supporting students to “understan[d] the impact of science and technology in everyday life, [...] thin[k] critically about them, [...] and mak[e] informed decisions” (Cornali, 2017:132). Indeed, an audience member at the inquiry’s second oral evidence session – Dennis Charman, a retired science teacher – pointed out that “science is full of arguments, except science in schools, which is full of facts,” and lamented that “we have seen teachers lose the freedom” to centre critical debate in science teaching.

20 These examples incorporate students shaping curriculum and assessment design and institutional policy, and so cross over with examples of student participation in governance and decision-making explored in Section 3.

The move away from participatory approaches in education

“I would echo what my colleagues have said, that over time, we have seen a movement away from a student-centered approach, towards one about students being passive. I think that has had a rather negative effect upon their engagement.”

*Alexander Ramiz, teacher
(oral evidence)*

A large number of contributors felt that while examples of good practice – such as those outlined above – do exist, participatory teaching approaches have been generally sidelined within the education system. A key finding of the Young Lives, Young Futures study, highlighted in their submission to the inquiry, is “that traditional, ‘transmission’ approaches to teaching and learning are the norm in most schools” in England. This was echoed by teacher contributors at the inquiry’s second oral evidence session, who described an increasing emphasis on teacher-led pedagogies, leaving little room for democratic teaching. For instance, Richard Hand described how “the curriculum reforms of 2014 were very teacher-led, exam-focused. It gave verbal participation [by students] minimal focus – it was ‘shut up and listen, be told’.”

Education researchers and commentators have widely raised concerns about the rise of didactic teaching approaches over more active or dialogic pedagogies in recent decades, with many pointing to the way this has been accompanied by restrictions on teacher autonomy and the prioritising of standardised curricula, test performance, and content transmission (see Reay et al., 2024; Wheldon & Dobson, 2024). The NEU report *Are you on slide 8 yet?* specifically highlights how growing standardisation in curriculum and pedagogy and reduced professional autonomy in the classroom

has led to an emphasis on “teacher-centred delivery of content” whereby “teaching (and learning) [is] understood as transmission rather than co-construction” (Traianou et al., 2025:13). This was echoed by contributors, such as Alexander Ramiz – a secondary English teacher and former sociology teacher with a doctorate in education. At the inquiry’s second oral evidence session, Alexander highlighted how top-down mandates around teaching have led not only to curtailing student agency, but also the agency of teachers who want and have the skills to teach more responsively and collaboratively: “at the school I’m at now, [...] I don’t plan my lessons. They are provided to me from the Trust. I’m not allowed to teach my classes in groups. I have to have them facing me towards the front. It’s mandated. I have very little say over what I do, despite being someone who is a trained expert with years and years of experience.” Alison Peacock of the Chartered College of Teaching made a similar point in her audience contribution at the inquiry’s second evidence session: “If we don’t have agency as teachers, it’s very difficult for us to encourage agency amongst our students. [...] If [the] government really wants to make a difference in terms of citizenship education, [...] we also need to change the climate for the teachers who are being expected to teach it. They can’t do it when they’re being told how they’ve got to organise their classrooms.”²¹

There is evidence to suggest that participatory pedagogies have been particularly sidelined in state education and especially in schools in disadvantaged areas, while private schools are more likely to make student participation and engagement – for instance, through dialogic teaching and oracy – central in the classroom (Oracy APPG, 2021; Reay et al., 2024). Research highlights the considerable structural and material challenges faced by more disadvantaged schools – such

as underfunding (Drayton et al., 2023), high teacher turnover (Cardim Dias et al., 2025), and pressure to prioritise exam performance and other standardised outcomes (explored more in Section 4). These challenges make participatory teaching – which relies on investment in training and staff development (Jay et al., 2017) and space for focusing on non-standardised outcomes – much more difficult to prioritise. The implications are that considerable demographic inequalities exist in who gets access to teaching approaches that support democratic skills and confidence. This was noted by Richard Hand at the inquiry’s second oral evidence session, reflecting on oracy education specifically: “oracy skills and debating carried much greater importance and kudos in private education than in state education, and perhaps [that’s] why we see a disproportionate number of private school members in the chambers [of parliament]”.

“Participation ought to be taught *through* participation; it is very odd to teach a group of young people from the front of the classroom about democracy while they all sit in their seats in silence. This is a contradiction.”

José Mario Dellow, pastoral lead, The New School

Submitted evidence also suggested that the trend towards didactic teaching has a negative impact on student engagement and educational outcomes more broadly, especially for those already experiencing marginalisation within the system. For instance, the written submission from the Young Lives, Young Futures (YLYF) study highlighted how their large-scale research findings show that a very large proportion of young people – particularly those from historically marginalised groups – feel “profoundly alienated from school” and are being “systematically

²¹ Issues around agency and autonomy are explored further in Section 4.

disadvantaged at school” as a result. The YLYF submission notes that while the causes of this alienation are complex, “our research suggests that these young people’s lack of control over their own learning and over the conditions which shape their learning is a major contributing factor”. Specifically, for many students, their “sense of alienation from school was rooted in a mismatch between their preferred – more practical and interactive – approaches to learning and what they saw as the didactic, exam-oriented teaching approaches they encountered, which were dominated by rote learning. This mismatch resulted in them feeling unfulfilled, bored and frustrated.” This was echoed by young people contributing to the inquiry. For instance, at the inquiry’s first oral evidence session, Ava James, founder of Not A Trend, pointed to how “so many people find no joy in education” and how more participatory teaching cultures – in which young people “have a say” in their learning – would help “make education a more joyous place”.

The importance of teacher training

Above, Alexander Ramiz described being a teacher who has the skill to enact participatory teaching but isn’t given the agency to do so. Yet Alexander also raised concerns about new teachers in the profession being denied the opportunity to develop these skills, due to a narrowing of the focus of initial teacher training and training in general. Alexander stated at the inquiry’s second oral evidence session: “I feel sad that a lot of things we’re discussing [about democratic practice] [...] [have] decades of research, really good research, tonnes of it. You know, Ivan Illich, Freire²² – these people were my gods when I was training. [...] And all of that’s been cut out

22 Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich are widely considered two of the most influential writers in the field of education. Freire’s work emphasises the importance of dialogue-based, participatory learning. Illich’s work focused on the power of self-directed and community-based learning as an alternative to formal schooling.

for this model of efficiency, where all these trainings are about how to count down to three to make [students] be quiet.”

This concern is echoed in broader commentary around the narrowing of the scope of teacher training in recent years to focus on behaviour management or content delivery, with limited attention to more expansive notions of pedagogy (see Maguire, 2014; Rock, 2023; Lam, 2024), including more participatory and dialogic approaches (Hordern & Brooks, 2023; Rock, 2023; Reay et al., 2024). Several evidence submissions accordingly called for changes to be made to Initial Teacher Training, and an investment in CPD, to support knowledge and skill in participatory, dialogic teaching. For instance, States of Mind suggested that “professional development should support democratic pedagogy”, while the Chartered College of Teaching called for time “for teachers to engage in high-quality CPD that allows them to expand their repertoire of teaching strategies to include these approaches.”

It was noted by several contributors that training is important because effective dialogic teaching relies on considerable skill. As the Chartered College of Teaching pointed out in their submission, “it is important that teachers learn how to implement these strategies well” because “poor understanding and implementation can lead to lower student outcomes (as is indeed the case with any other teaching approach that is poorly implemented)”.

One key challenge of participatory teaching noted by a number of contributors was how to tackle ingrained inequalities in classroom participation. Ava James from Not A Trend pointed to how training can help educators work towards their classrooms being spaces where everyone feels able to talk, and where patterns of exclusion are actively challenged. Ava explained her work at the inquiry’s first oral evidence session: “We work on anti-racism education and supporting schools and universities to equip their young people

and their [initial teacher training] team [...] with bringing anti-racist values into the education space.” For Ava, those values are about offering “a space for people who are traditionally excluded from these conversations, and really creat[ing] [...] [a] caring and intersectional environment” in the classroom. The importance of this work is underpinned by research showing that who speaks, who is encouraged to speak, and who is validated in classroom discussion is affected by intersecting factors such as gender, race, and class (see Archer, 2008; Archer et al., 2019; Simpson, 2025). Accordingly, without skilled facilitation, classroom discussion can be dominated by particular voices (Arnot & Reay, 2007).

Dialogic teaching around sensitive and contentious issues

“I think that we forget that politics is not just a daunting subject for children, it’s a daunting subject for adults. [...] It’s really important that we not only empower our students, but we empower those who are teaching our students to have these conversations.”

Canada Jenkins, Shout Out UK Youth Policy Development Group (oral evidence)

Several contributors suggested that ensuring schools are places where politically contentious or sensitive issues can be explored through open discussion is crucial for supporting democratic skills and engagement. For instance, in their written submission, the Association for Citizenship Teaching pointed to the results of their National Citizenship Education Study (NCES)²³ which found that “students experience stronger democratic attitudes and civic confidence where teachers create

open classroom climates for discussion of controversial issues”. Dr Christine Huebner and Dr Jan Eichhorn highlight in their written submission that, crucially, evidence suggests open discussion of politically sensitive issues “does not bias students towards a particular political view”. They point to their 2014 study (Eichhorn et al., 2014) about young people in Scotland’s perspectives on the independence referendum, which found that those “who had discussed the Scottish Independence referendum in the classroom were neither more nor less likely to favour one side or another”.

Evidence submitted to this inquiry makes clear that young people want to talk about these issues in the classroom. For instance, Daniel Selwyn, head of geography at School 21, described in his submission how students at his school “consistently demonstrate desire, motivation, and capacity” to discuss and address challenging political issues, such as “global migration, human rights, climate change, natural hazards” as well as “violations of inherent and inalienable rights around the world”. For Daniel, it is vital that schools offer a “safe space” to discuss these issues and that this is also “a brave space” for young people to learn how “to be active agents of change making”. Yet concerningly, research suggests that many young people do not feel schools are places where they can share their perspectives and opinions about politics. For instance, the Economist Educational Foundation’s recent Vote Confident survey report – cited in their written submission – found that just under a quarter of 10-17 year olds “say they have been asked to stop speaking about their political views at school” (EEF, 2026:3).

Contributors underscored a key issue that many teachers – in particular, non-specialists – “do not feel trained to engage with and teach controversial issues” (Dr Loughran, Dr Mycock and Professor Tonge). This is echoed in The Missing Link report by Dr James Weinberg, which points to data showing “that 48 per cent

23 Final report due to be published later this year.

of teachers feel ‘quite’ confident, but only 15 per cent feel ‘very’ confident” (Weinberg, 2021:29) teaching politically sensitive issues. As above, contributors were clear that inclusively facilitating discussions of sensitive topics relies on extensive pedagogical skill, a point echoed in research literature (McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Segal et al., 2017). Contributors offered examples such as the challenges involved in facilitating discussions around topics that implicate particular students. For instance, when giving oral evidence to the inquiry, Richard Hand described facilitating a discussion around feminism and Andrew Tate where some boys in his class became very vocal and opinionated, and started sharing views that he felt led to girls in the class feeling intimidated and not wanting to speak up. These contributions underscore the importance of high-quality training for teachers in supporting diverse voices to be heard, valuing people’s perspectives whilst constructively challenging harm, and modelling openness and balance. Accordingly, the Economist Educational Foundation argued in their written submission that “educators need specific training in the skills of facilitation—particularly when they are not subject experts—to lead discussions on complex, sensitive, and evolving topics”.

Submitted evidence indicated that, when well designed, even short-term or one-off training can make a real difference to teacher confidence and skill. Some contributors noted that this is especially the case when training combines supporting general skills in facilitating discussions of sensitive topics with high-quality resources that teachers can draw upon and adapt. For instance, in their written submission, the Economist Educational Foundation outlined a project they undertook with the Kent Catholic Schools’ Partnership to build “teacher confidence in facilitating student-led discussions on difficult topics.” Teachers described how the training made them feel “empowered” to be “bolder in choosing more challenging and complex topics” for students to discuss in the classroom. One

noted how high-quality resources meant she could introduce “just the right amount of content” to support her students to have empathic conversations about challenging global events.

It was also noted – linking back to Section 1 – that more specialist citizenship teachers across schools could support upskilling colleagues in inclusive facilitation through in-school CPD and informal support. Sera Shortland, chair of the Association for Citizenship Teaching Council, described her view that teaching sensitive topics “should be a big part of the initial teacher training course” for all practitioners, but also pointed to how more teachers with specialist knowledge and skill in this area can benefit wider teaching teams: “I’ve been trained in how to facilitate controversial issues – a big part of the [citizenship] PGCE was how to frame very difficult issues. [...] So in my school [...] I’m able to train teachers. I’ve been into English classes, I’ve been into maths classes, and we looked at how we can get the politics in and debates going in those safe frameworks.”

Political impartiality guidance

Several contributors underscored the importance of political impartiality when teaching political issues. It was noted that “most teachers [...] are motivated to [...] engage with political issues in the classroom” and “aim to apply a great deal of caution in ensuring that their teaching is not biased” (Dr Huebner and Dr Eichhorn). However, many contributors also noted widespread fears among teachers of pushback from school leadership, families or students for covering sensitive issues, and that this has led in some cases to educators and schools not engaging with important political themes. Widespread reports of clampdowns on teaching and discussion of specific contentious and political issues – for instance around the war in Gaza – are reflective of these concerns (Fazackerley, 2023; Reay et al., 2024; Weale, 2024).

Several contributors specifically raised concerns about the government’s current Political impartiality guidance (DfE, 2025c), which it was felt is unclear and can disincentivise engagement with important political issues and current affairs in schools. These concerns have been mirrored in broader critique of the guidance elsewhere (see Begum, 2022; Hazell, 2022; Young Citizens, 2022). Referring to concerns about the government’s impartiality guidance, John McLaverty from Send My Friend to School – an audience member at the inquiry’s second oral evidence session – described how “in my engagement with schools in the last two or three years, I’ve seen a lot of frightened teachers and frightened head teachers who just don’t want to deal with any of this stuff at all.”

It is clear from submitted evidence that political impartiality – including party political neutrality – is crucial in teaching, but that work is needed to ensure official guidance is supportive and facilitates open discussions of important issues. For instance, a key recommendation in the written submission by Send My Friend to School is to “revise the ‘Political impartiality in schools guidance’ to encourage the active real-life ‘doing’ of citizenship in a safe and supportive school environment.” Similarly, the Politics Project notes widespread “uncertainty about how impartiality guidance should be interpreted” and calls for “clearer guidance and practical training” to “help schools feel more confident delivering democratic education while maintaining appropriate impartiality.” It is notable that organisations such as the Association for Citizenship Teaching have developed their own impartiality guidance for teaching sensitive issues; this and other examples of organisational expertise around this issue could be drawn upon for redeveloping the current guidance, in collaboration with teachers and other education stakeholders.

The government's new commitment to oracy

In light of the above concerns about the sidelining of dialogic and participatory teaching, several contributors welcomed the government's emphasis on oracy in its response to the CAR – specifically, its commitment to “create a new oracy framework to sit alongside the national curriculum” at primary, and a “combined secondary oracy, reading and writing framework” at secondary (2025:26).

At the same time, contributors' calls for dialogue-based, participatory teaching – outlined throughout this section – go beyond how oracy appears to be understood by the government. Oracy can sometimes be defined as simply the teaching of speaking and listening skills (Cushing, 2025; Ehiyazaryan-White, 2025). This is mirrored in the government's response to the CAR and in the schools white paper, in which the government describes its oracy ambitions as about supporting “children to become confident, fluent speakers” (DfE, 2026) who are capable of “expressing [themselves] fluently and communicating well” (DfE, 2025:26). While an important educational aim, the examples of participatory and dialogic teaching explored throughout this section go beyond simply encouraging students to speak ‘confidently’ or ‘well’.²⁴ Rather, dialogic teaching was presented by many contributors as about creating a classroom environment in which students' perspectives, feelings, and ideas are genuinely heard and valued, and students can enter into deliberative discussion and critical questioning with teachers and one another in exploring issues, questions and themes. This reflects definitions of dialogic teaching in broader education literature (see Alexander, 2008; Boyd and Markarian, 2015; Ehiyazaryan-White, 2025).

24 Which research literature suggests can in fact be done in a relatively rote or teacher-led fashion (e.g. see Boyd and Markarian, 2015; Segal et al., 2016) for instance, through text recital, oral assessment, or discussions that are highly teacher-controlled.

Dialogic teaching was also (as noted above) presented by several contributors as requiring attention to who speaks and is heard in the classroom and to disrupting patterns of inequality in participation (Segal et al., 2017; Archer et al., 2024). Dialogic teaching by this definition is concerned with transforming power dynamics in the classroom and building a space that is more democratic and egalitarian (Shor & Freire, 1987).

Dialogic teaching is meant to be a key part of oracy (Oracy APPG, 2021; Ehiyazaryan-White, 2025; Snell, 2026) and more complex and rich definitions of oracy account for the involvement of dialogic pedagogies that support collective, inclusive critical discussion. For instance, the Oracy Commission defines oracy as “articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication” and point to how “oracy is intrinsic to [...] the sharpening of thinking” including “the ability to listen critically – and to disagree agreeably” (Oracy Education Commission, 2024). The Oracy Commission also underscores the importance of ensuring “all voices are equally valued” through oracy education,²⁵ and that this includes “work[ing] to dismantle existing inequalities” (2024b:43).

25 The Oracy Commission notes in their 2024 report that this should include attention to diverse forms of communication and dialects, many of which have been historically sidelined or devalued (see also Oracy Education Commission, 2024c and Snell, 2026). They also warn against equating oracy skill with ‘fluency’, which they suggest risks disadvantaging students who stammer or have other forms of speech difference. Despite this, the government uses the terms ‘fluent’ and ‘fluency’ when outlining its commitment to oracy in its response to the CAR and in the schools white paper.

Case study

Oracy and dialogic teaching

Daniel Selwyn is head of geography at School 21, where a commitment to an expansive understanding of oracy is embedded across pedagogy and the curriculum. In his written submission, Daniel described how a key part of his approach to oracy is ensuring “every child has the opportunity and capacity to articulate their thoughts and ideas”. To support this Daniel uses critical discussion practices such as “consensus circles to reach agreement through use of evidence”, “probing pairs” that develop clarifying and probing questioning, role-play, and discussions based on the Harkness method ²⁶ – a small-group, student-led approach to critical discussion. Daniel underscored that a key part of his practice is about ensuring “students from marginalised backgrounds” feel heard and empowered and that their lived experiences are valued in school as a form of “powerful knowledge” that is enriching to the collective learning experience. By contrast, for Daniel, teaching approaches that focus solely on centrally prescribed ‘knowledge’ are insufficient for facilitating meaningful forms of oracy and dialogue in the classroom.

26 For more information about the Harkness method (see Areaux, 2018).

More expansive enactments of oracy – that account for the role of dialogic teaching – can be missed through narrow understandings of the term. Thus, while the inquiry welcomes the government’s renewed focus on oracy, it is vital that this is enacted in a way that goes beyond simply supporting skills in speaking and communicating and also recentres critical dialogue, equitable participation, and collective deliberation in the classroom.²⁷ The schools white paper does briefly signal a broader commitment to dialogic pedagogy, describing a vision of students as “active participants in their learning – debating, questioning, challenging and pursuing their own inquiry – set up for a lifetime of learning, not passive recipients of information” (DfE, 2026). However, there is no further substantiation of how this vision will be realised. We would encourage the government to be as ambitious as possible in delivering on this vision, in light of evidence submitted to this inquiry outlining how policy and philosophy shifts have sidelined participatory teaching approaches, and the considerable work needed to recentre them.

27 This point is echoed by responses to the CAR elsewhere (see Snell, 2026).

Recommendations to the government

This inquiry welcomes the government's renewed focus on oracy, which can be understood as a key part of supporting civic and democratic skills and engagement. However, the relationship between oracy and broader participatory, critical, and dialogic pedagogies is not foregrounded in the government's response to the CAR or schools white paper (beyond a brief broader commitment to active learning in the latter). Moreover, evidence submitted to this inquiry suggests there has been a general sidelining of participatory teaching and learning approaches within the sector, despite their clear and evidenced relevance to supporting democracy and democratic engagement. We recommend substantive steps are taken to upskill the workforce and allow teachers the agency, confidence and skill to teach in more participatory and democratic ways, for instance by:

1. **Ensuring that participatory, dialogic teaching is embedded in initial teacher training** so that teachers are equipped as critical educators with the confidence and skills to facilitate debate, discussion, and participatory learning. **This must include supporting confidence in facilitating inclusive discussions around sensitive/contentious topics.**
2. **Funding high-quality continuing professional development to support participatory pedagogies – including in discussion of sensitive and contentious issues** – to upskill the existing workforce.
3. **Consulting with sector stakeholders on improving the current DfE impartiality guidance**, so that schools and educators feel supported in engaging students in participatory discussion of political – including politically sensitive – issues in the classroom without fear of sanctions and negative repercussions.
4. **Examining and seeking to address the broader underlying reasons why participatory and critical pedagogies have become sidelined** within the education system, for example by actioning the recommendations outlined in Section 4, which include suggestions for reducing broader systemic barriers to embedding democratic teaching in schools.

3

Embedding democracy through student voice

“Democratic education requires more than classroom instruction. It depends on a school culture that routinely involves students in shaping their environment, curriculum and policies.”

States of Mind

In the last section we explored how students can develop skills and experience in democracy through active, participatory and dialogic approaches to teaching and learning. A large number of submissions argued that another key way of embedding experiential learning about democracy is through students directly participating in decision-making, governance, and policy-making in schools and colleges – sometimes referred to as ‘student voice’. The Jack Petchey Foundation, for instance, suggested in their written submission that “democratic practice is strengthened” in schools when there is a culture of “student voice meaningfully influenc[ing] significant and wide-ranging aspects of school life.”

Evidence from young people also emphasised benefits to involving students in governance and decision-making. For instance, at the FEA Youth Summit, a key takeaway from one group in the inquiry’s discussion session was that students need a meaningful way to make change in school, and that this experience of empowerment will filter

into the rest of their lives. This was echoed by other contributors pointing to how direct participation in school and college democracy can help tackle a culture of disenfranchisement or perceptions of the irrelevance of politics among young people, by giving them first-hand experience of the power of democratic processes and how these can inform decisions directly affecting them. Jack Park – a primary school teacher and speaker at the inquiry’s second oral evidence session – suggested that student participation in decision-making processes can foster a sense of ownership over decisions, with further benefits for school culture and community as a whole: “when young people choose something, they care more about it. So [in my class] we have discussed playground equipment, for example, and they do take care of equipment that they’ve had a say on. That’s a huge benefit to us as teachers and to a school with really limited resources.”

“Being involved in making change in my school, and having an opportunity to campaign on the education system nationally increased my engagement with and satisfaction in school – my grades and confidence went up, and I wouldn’t be who I am today without it. All school students should have a chance to see themselves as agents for change, and that means the education system providing a real student-led space for collaboration, peer learning, and productive campaigning.”²⁸

Joe Brindle, Founder of Teach the Future and NUSS

Wider research indicates that student participation in decision-making and governance in schools and colleges has a significant positive impact on democratic engagement and the development of democratic skills and citizenship (Torney-Purta, 2002; Hoskins et al., 2012; Mager & Nowak, 2012). In their recently published review of 359 studies of education and democratic competences, Arellano et al. conclude that “student voice initiatives, and opportunities for shared decision-making, [...] are frequently associated with both higher [democratic] competence levels and lower inequalities” (2026:21).

Current limitations and ideas for improvement

Submitted evidence made clear that opportunities for students to engage meaningfully in governance and decision-making in schools and colleges are currently limited. In their written submission, Dr Thomas Loughran, Dr Andrew Mycock, and Professor Jonathan Tonge summarise 20 years of their research on youth democratic socialisation and political participation in the UK. They

identify a key common problem as “limited opportunities for young people to engage in non-classroom democratic activities in schools and communities”. This is reflected in other research, such as a large-scale survey study of English secondary schools in 2022 which found “only 18 per cent of students had voted on topical issues at school once a fortnight or more in the last year [...] and 32 per cent had never been given the chance to participate in decision-making about how their school is run” (Weinberg, 2022:18).

Even where structures for student participation do exist, contributors raised concerns about their effectiveness. School councils were cited by a large number of contributors as the way in which most schools seek to embed student participation in decision-making. While contributors recognised some good work around school councils, many – including students and staff directly relating their own experiences – described a reality in which students’ power is strongly curtailed, students’ ideas and suggestions are often not implemented, or students are only allowed to shape minor decisions. The word “tokenistic” occurred with striking regularity across submissions discussing student councils and other mainstream enactments of student voice. There is also extensive academic research highlighting student experiences of tokenism in relation to school councils across the UK (see Maitles & Deuchar, 2006; Whitty & Wisby, 2007; Barrance et al., 2025).

“While school councils exist in most schools, they are fragmented, limited in power, rarely develop meaningful democratic participation and are often experienced by students as tokenistic rather than transformative.”

National Union of School Students

28 Quote from written submission by the National Union of School Students (NUSS).

Contributors accordingly called for moves to ensure school councils are “transparent and meaningful” (Public First). Some contributors made suggestions around the way school councils could be structured differently to support this, including:

- Rather than a single ‘council’ with a broad remit, instead having dedicated representative committees for different areas of school or college life – such as equality and inclusion, curriculum, or behaviour – that work with dedicated staff members to contribute to and develop policy and decision-making in these key areas.
- Running elections for representatives from specific groups within the student body – such as students with SEND – to make student councils more inclusive and representative.
- Ensuring there is “reflective, listening buy-in from leadership” (Jo,²⁹ teacher) to ensure school council decisions have institutional weight and are embedded in governance and leadership structures.

Others called for broader resourcing and support from the government to strengthen student councils. This included calls for:

- “Stronger guidance around school councils” (Liam,³⁰ teacher) to help teachers understand ways that school council structures can be improved, empowered, and embedded, according to research and examples of best practice.
- “Proper training for relevant staff to facilitate such initiatives more effectively” (Taylor,³¹ teacher).

- “Proper time and remuneration to run school councils” (Taylor, teacher), in recognition of the fact that a lack of dedicated resourcing, staffing, and time in the school day undermines the possibility of more meaningful work with and through student councils in many contexts (also widely acknowledged in research literature on school councils, for example Whitty & Wisby, 2007; Bragg, 2021).

Other forms of student participation in governance and decision-making

In addition to ideas for strengthening school councils, contributors raised concerns about how student councils offer just one version of democracy – representative democracy, where direct participation is for a chosen few – rather than more expansive enactments of democracy that support participation for all. At the FEA Alliance Youth Summit, young people contributing to our inquiry’s discussion session shared experiences of certain types of students – such as the most academic – being chosen for the school council. The phenomena of student representatives reflecting particular demographics, rather than being representative of a diverse range of students and voices, is reflected in academic research (see Maitles & Deuchar, 2006; Arellano et al., 2026).

“When participation opportunities are limited to leadership roles for a small group of students, this can unintentionally reinforce the idea that democratic participation is primarily for a select group of confident or high-achieving individuals.”

The Politics Project

29 Pseudonym – anonymous contributor via a National Education Union survey.

30 Pseudonym – anonymous contributor via a National Education Union survey.

31 Pseudonym – anonymous contributor via a National Education Union survey.

While there are ways of improving and strengthening school councils – such as those outlined above – that may help mitigate these issues, many contributors also argued we need to go beyond school councils and explore more diverse enactments of student voice.

Contributions drew on real-life examples as well as other ideas, including:

- Opportunities for direct democracy in smaller groups – such as at the level of a class or tutor group – whereby students hold meetings, make decisions, and collaborate with their teachers and one another to shape the immediate classroom learning environment.
- Mechanisms for students to co-create curriculum content or be part of consultation processes around curriculum development and review.
- Students being supported to engage in peer conflict-resolution or restorative practice.
- ‘Town hall’ assemblies in which members of leadership answer ‘any question’ about how the school is run and why certain decisions are made so students can understand more about the context of decisions affecting them and how decisions are made.
- Young people being part of elements of school budget management and decisions.
- Young people being on trustee/governor boards.³²

Some contributors noted that this kind of more radical student voice work is not new but rather has a rich history in education philosophy and practice³³ and that learning from this history would be of great benefit to effectively embedding this work in mainstream schools. As with school councils, however, contributors were also clear that broader constraints – such as funding, time, workload, and institutional priorities – shape the extent to which these more expansive forms of student voice can be realised. Real term funding cuts (NEU, 2025b), excessive workloads (Morris et al., 2026), and a packed curriculum (Gibson, 2024) mean that many schools and colleges feel forced to narrow their focus to the core curriculum and statutory responsibilities. In such a context, it is challenging to enact student voice initiatives of any kind – let alone explore new and innovative forms.

By contrast, at the inquiry’s first oral evidence session, Cosima Wiltshire from Shout Out UK’s Youth Policy Development Group pointed to how she “went to an independent school, and so they had their own time and money to go into [student voice]” and to provide infrastructure and support for students to “be part of decision making”.

32 Derry Hannam, an expert on school democracy and former teacher, highlighted in his written submission that the 2002 Education Act made it possible for students to be associate members of school governing bodies. Derry pointed out that despite research demonstrating that this improves quality of governance (e.g. Hallgarten et al., 2004), very few schools and trusts have student governors.

33 For more on this (see Shotton, 1993; Gribble, 1998; and Apple & Beane, 2007).

Case study

‘Clubhouse Democracy’ in a mainstream classroom

Leonard Turton is a retired teacher with over 50 years of experience in both state and alternative education. In his written submission to the inquiry, Leonard described his work embedding democratic meetings in a mainstream school classroom in Canada.

When he joined the school, Leonard was told that one of his classes – the equivalent of year 8 – was struggling with disruptive behaviour. Leonard went to the head and asked for permission to try out some new ideas in the classroom.

Leonard introduced to his students the idea of ‘Clubhouse Democracy’: a mini-democratic community embedded within a broader institution. He explained to the students that there were certain things they had to do, and that he as a teacher had to ensure they did. But there were also other things that they could make decisions about collectively – where he as the teacher could share his power. He instigated a system of daily student-led meetings: “every morning we met and talked about the day with a whiteboard at hand and discussed [...] issues the students brought forward. A student chaired.” The young people would elect a chair on a rotating basis, and Leonard would support the young people to develop the necessary deliberative and organisational skills to run the meetings independently. Writing elsewhere about his work, Leonard explains: “You don’t just dive into the complex changes. It comes gradually within a solid scaffolding” (Turton, 2019).

With practice and support, the students became more and more adept at running the meetings. Ultimately, Leonard found that introducing elements of democracy in the classroom “transformed class behaviour. [...] I realised ownership over their classroom empowered them and increased their self-respect.” Leonard shared some of his teacher journals from the time, and in one he shares the comments of a 13-year-old student, describing some of the decisions their class had made:

“We voted we could chew gum only in our classroom and made laws about that and went to the principal with our laws and she said okay.

We voted on a different way to do spelling and on changing the timetable for maths.

We voted to get rid of a really boring book of stories and Mr T got another.

We voted that Robbie could get up and move around during lessons and do quiet somersaults on the carpet because he just has to move.

We voted that Kelsey could stay longer at the back to do art because she is an artist.

We voted to rearrange the workshop and the lounge.

We voted on being able to come in early and stay in at lunch and recess so we could have more art area and project time.”

Case study

Sociocratic decision-making in a progressive school classroom

Jack Park, a primary teacher who contributed to the inquiry's second oral evidence session, works at The New School – a fee-free, independent progressive school in South London. The school uses 'sociocratic'³⁴ decision-making at various levels across the school. Sociocracy is a form of democracy based on collective 'consent', rather than majority vote. The idea is to reach a position that everyone can consent to, even if it is not their particular preference; a strong emphasis is placed on the discussion process – on hearing every voice and trying to reach common ground that everyone can live with. The concept in its modern form originates in the Netherlands, and the Netherlands has a number of 'sociocratic schools'.³⁵

Jack describes how this works in his classroom (where he teaches a combined year 5 and 6 class): "Every week, we spend at least 30 minutes on a consent-based deliberative democracy process. Basically, someone brings a question [...] and we do a round of views on that question. We might be ready to make a proposal at that point, and then there might be various amendments to the proposal, or we might need to do another round, and then when we've got a proposal that feels like it could work, we check for consent. The question is: 'is this something you can work with?' Not, 'is this your favorite option?' And that can take a little bit of unpicking. We use consent rather than voting. We rarely vote on things because we really prioritise the fact that everyone should be heard, and if you're not part of the majority decision, that doesn't mean that your voice is silenced in our classroom. [...] It's about being seen, heard and valued as part of a social group".

Jack suggests that "young people often know a lot more about their wellbeing and their learning than we do as teachers. That can be a little bit of a hard thing to reckon with sometimes. [...] I don't shy away from my expertise – I use it when it's useful – but I do think putting [young people] at the centre of a process which is about them and which affects them more than anyone else is really important."

34 For more information about sociocracy, see Rau, 2020.

35 For more information see Osorio & Shread, 2018.

External organisations and partnerships

A number of evidence submissions underscored the importance of looking beyond the school gates in considering ways of strengthening school democracy, through collaboration with third-sector organisations, local authorities, and the local community. In their written submission, for instance, Dr Andrew Mycock, Dr Thomas Loughran and Professor Jonathan Tonge call for the creation of ‘Civic Schools and Colleges’ which centre “collaboration between students, teachers, parents, communities, and decision-makers” to support “civic learning, engagement, and activism”.

One example was provided at the inquiry’s final oral evidence session in parliament by Selma Abdalla – Electoral and Democratic Services Officer at Cardiff Council. Selma developed Cardiff’s Democracy Ambassadors Programme, which works with schools to facilitate opportunities for students to participate in local government. Selma described how the programme works: “we ask schools to put forward a Democracy Ambassador – so in primary schools, that’s a teacher, and in secondary schools, it can be a pupil of Year 9 and above, [...] supported by a teacher – and it will be that Democracy Ambassador’s role to promote the democratic process as a whole within the school, and we work with them to provide authentic learning experiences.” Delyth Jones – Principal Officer of Llanelli Town Council in Wales – spoke at the same evidence session about the success of the Council’s Come and Meet the Mayor project, which supports young people to learn about voting and elections and to participate in local politics. Delyth described how cohorts of children come into the council on a regular basis throughout their school careers and spend time talking to and asking questions of local decision-makers: “We generally start at [age] seven, and we work with [the students] throughout their educational

career. We’re starting now to see young people that we worked with a number of years ago coming through, and I’m starting to see them in college also as well.”

“Expanding [...] access to [meeting decision makers] [...] is one of the very foundations [to supporting democratic engagement]. [...] [It] is a way of learning. Just sitting there and bombarding [young people] with tonnes of info about ‘here’s what a political party is’ [...] is not helpful. [...] Actually getting them engaged, getting them to see the process firsthand [...] is a hugely important way of educating.”

Django Perks, Votes at 16 ambassador for My Life My Say (oral evidence)

On a connected note, it was suggested by several contributors that young people having access to political spaces outside of school makes the broader world of politics feel more accessible, gives them confidence that they have the right to access these spaces, and also transforms how they view and understand policymakers. This was noted by Selma Abdalla who stated that politicians visiting schools is, in her experience, “one of the easiest ways to make [politicians] more human and for people to understand that they actually care. [...] It helps young people to possibly identify a way for them to get involved in democracy themselves and stand for office.”

A particularly powerful example of supporting democracy in schools and colleges through external partnership was provided by the National Union of School Students (NUSS). The NUSS is a new organisation being established with support from the National Union of Students and Students Organising for Sustainability. At the inquiry’s first oral evidence session, young people involved explained how the NUSS will act as an

external but embedded partner in all schools and colleges, using the existing mechanism of school councils to support scaled-up, mass student participation in educational decision-making and advocacy across the country. In their written submission, the NUSS highlights that the model they are proposing already exists in many other countries across Europe – including Ireland, Norway, France, Germany, and Belgium. They point to how, in Ireland, the Irish Secondary-level Students Union “represents about 70 per cent of secondary school students, has driven policy change, and is primarily funded by the Department for Education and Youth.”

“A National Union of School Students would do three things: First, it would give the government a single point of contact – a single credible body to consult on education policy and any policy impacting school students, consistently and sustainably. Second, it would [offer] development opportunities for school councils, helping them to become more effective hubs of democracy and citizenship education by connecting them to that national network, but also giving [them] guidance and support. And then [third] it would be also about supporting students themselves on the ground to raise issues that they identify as priorities, walking them through their campaign, supporting them to make a change.”

Amira Campbell, president of NUS UK and Chair of the Youth Shadow Panel for the CAR (oral evidence)

Derry Hannam is a retired educator who taught for over 20 years in mainstream secondary schools, and has contributed to UK and European policy initiatives for citizenship education, democratic education, and human rights in schools. In his written submission, Derry explained how well-established school students unions are in many European countries – with support across the political spectrum – and how much England would have to gain by following their example: “The Nordic countries all have highly effective school student unions actively involved with their ministries of education in developing school democracy policy at national level. [...] EoN [The School Student Union of Norway] is part funded [...] but in no way controlled by the Norwegian government. It is routinely consulted by government in education policy making.”

Enrichment

What this section has outlined is directly connected to enrichment – that is, learning and activities that both go beyond and supplement the core curriculum. Contributors highlighted how, beyond direct involvement in school and college governance, enrichment activities can offer students a range of opportunities to engage in decision-making and democratic processes. Highlighted examples included: mock elections and hustings, Model UN, debating clubs, school trips to parliament or local councils, and civic engagement programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award or the Electoral Commission's annual Welcome to Your Vote Week. Research clearly demonstrates the positive impact of high-quality enrichment activities of this kind on political engagement and voter turnout (see Keating & Janmaat, 2016; Weinberg, 2022). Yet, there is also extensive evidence of deep inequalities in access to enrichment activities – including those related to politics and civic engagement – especially between private and state schools (Social Mobility Commission, 2019; Weinberg, 2022; Montacute et al., 2024).

This inquiry therefore welcomes the government's renewed focus on enrichment – including civic engagement – in its response to the CAR and in the schools white paper, and the emphasis on supporting equal access to enrichment through a common enrichment entitlement. However, concerns have been raised that the government's newly announced enrichment funding (DCMS, 2026) – which targets 400 schools – is insufficient (Turner, 2026). There is widespread evidence of schools cutting enrichment due to resource constraints (The Sutton Trust, 2024; NAHT, 2025) and it has been argued that significant, dedicated cross-sector funding is needed to reverse the trend (CSJ, 2021; NCFE, 2023; Hallgarten et al., 2025).

Moreover, this inquiry has concerns that in both the white paper and its response to the CAR, the government has framed school and college democracy predominantly as a sub-area of enrichment. This section of the report alone has gone beyond mainstream enactments of enrichment in calling for student voice to be embedded as an integral part of school and college governance. We would urge the government to take on board the recommendations outlined below to help ensure its commitment to school and college democracy – and to citizenship education more broadly – translates into substantial opportunities for students to experience and practise democratic governance and processes throughout their school and college careers.

Recommendations to the government

This inquiry welcomes the government's focus on enrichment as a key part of citizenship education in its response to the CAR and its emphasis on supporting parity of access to enrichment activities, including those related to civic engagement and democracy. It is this inquiry's view that the government should go further by providing cross-sector funding for enrichment and by supporting schools to embed meaningful democratic structures and processes across school and college governance and decision-making. We would urge the government to:

- 1. Develop non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges on a) strengthening school councils and b) embedding student voice beyond school councils** – for instance, through direct democracy at classroom level, involving students in curriculum co-creation and co-development, or supporting students to be governors or trustees. In developing this guidance, the government should seek to learn from existing and historic practice by collaborating with relevant experts and stakeholders.
- 2. Support the creation of a National Union of School Students (NUSS)** so that a powerful structure for student voice and participation in policymaking is embedded across the education system. The government might look to countries with existing school for ideas on how a newly-created NUSS could be supported and formally consulted on education policy development.
- 3. Allocate resources to support effective and expansive student voice work.** The government should expand the targeted enrichment funding to enable all schools to embed extracurricular engagement with democracy and democratic processes, both through enrichment activities such as clubs, trips and events, and through building structures for meaningful student participation in school and college governance and decision-making.

4

Broader systemic barriers to embedding democracy in schools and colleges

“There are structural barriers that restrict meaningful democratic participation. Curriculum constraints, accountability systems and exam pressures narrow what is possible.”

States of Mind

Evidence submitted to this inquiry has made clear the breadth of support for embedding democracy in schools and colleges. Yet, contributors also consistently underscored broader sector barriers to carrying out this work in a sustained and meaningful way. Some of these barriers have been touched on in earlier sections and will be explored further below. These are complex issues and exploring them in adequate detail is beyond the scope of this report. Therefore, this section should be understood as a brief signposting of issues raised by contributors that deserve further scrutiny and consideration by the government as educational reforms are developed and enacted in the wake of the CAR and schools white paper.

An overloaded compulsory curriculum

Across submissions, one of the most consistently cited barriers to embedding democracy in schools and colleges was a prescriptive and overloaded curriculum. Contributors pointed to ways in which extensive mandated content leaves insufficient space for the kinds of democratic work explored in previous sections. For instance, Liam,³⁶ a teacher contributor to the inquiry, pointed to “too much workload” and the curriculum being “too broad and full of too much knowledge” for democratic work to take place, and suggested that “as a result, only lip-service is paid”. VotesforSchools cited “curriculum time constraints” as a key factor preventing schools from teaching effectively about democracy and democratic participation.

It was noted by several contributors that participatory, dialogic pedagogies, in particular, rely on time and flexibility in the curriculum. As the Chartered College of Teaching noted in their submission: “an important caveat to consider here is time” to “implement [dialogic and

36 Pseudonym – anonymous contributor via a National Education Union survey.

participatory] teaching approaches in an already crowded curriculum. They are typically more time-consuming because students need to engage with multiple sources of information, conduct their own research or engage in dialogue with peers or teachers instead of being presented with the 'right' response." These more critical and engaged processes of learning, while slower, come with extensive benefits in terms of students' learning and skills, as outlined in Section 2. Yet there is limited time to engage students in discussion and deliberation, to take on board their perspectives and voices and to support collective exploration, when teachers are under pressure to wade through extensive amounts of mandated content.

Accordingly, the Chartered College of Teaching argued in their submission that "it is vital that ongoing curriculum reform puts as much emphasis on content that can be removed as on content that needs to be added". Similarly, Leonard Turton, a retired teacher with over 50 years of experience, argued that embedding democracy in schools "depends upon the courage of adults" to commit to a "reduced formal curriculum". In short, while contributors made clear – for instance, in Section 1 – that some content additions are needed to ensure the national curriculum incorporates key democratic themes and political knowledge, they also underscored the need for space and flexibility within the curriculum to make room for meaningful democratic practice to take place.

Concerns about "an excessive amount of content" (Gibson, 2024:1) and prescription in the national curriculum in England are well-established in education policy research (OECD, 2020; EDSK, 2024; The British Academy, 2024) and broader education commentary (Hallgarten, 2024; NAHT, 2024; Gould, 2024). Accordingly, calls for a degree of reduction in curriculum content – especially content associated with GCSEs – are becoming increasingly common in mainstream policy spaces. For instance, a 2023 report by the House

of Lords Education for 11–16 Year Olds Committee, Chaired by Lord Johnson of Marylebone, calls on the government to "reduce the amount of content in the 11–16 curriculum, particularly in GCSE subjects" as a matter of "priority". The report suggests that "a revised curriculum should enable schools to offer a more varied range of learning experiences, with the aim of promoting the development of a broader set of knowledge, skills and behaviours" (2023:4). This latter point is echoed in the recent government-commissioned interim report on Young People and Work by former Health Minister Alan Milburn, considered further below.

The government's response to the CAR makes some limited commitments to reducing duplication and overload in the curriculum, echoing the ambitions of the CAR that "the content of the revised national curriculum should be teachable within school time" and "that the national curriculum is only part of a wider school curriculum" (2025:14). However, the government response to the CAR has not outlined any concrete steps for how this ambition will translate into reality. Moreover, it makes a series of suggestions for adding in new content to the national curriculum, without a clear commitment to requisite changes and reductions elsewhere to avoid exacerbating issues of overload.

Teacher workload

All the issues cited in this section – curriculum overload, exam pressure, and accountability systems – have been associated with the broader problem of teacher workloads, both by contributors to this inquiry and broader research literature (see Ball, 2021; Towers et al., 2022). Several contributors also independently noted workload issues as an obstacle to embedding democracy effectively in schools and colleges. The submission by the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, for instance, pointed to the fact that 43 per cent of teachers and school leaders in England reported an unacceptable level of workload in 2025 (DfE, 2025b). The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award suggested that this has led to civic engagement activities “not being prioritised” in schools because of teachers having to “absorb [...] delivery on top of their day job or schools having no one to deliver enrichment at all.” Similarly, at the FEA Youth Summit, young people reflecting on how to embed democracy in schools raised concerns that teachers are under significant pressure and cannot simply be asked to do more. In short, contributors made clear that democratising schools must go hand in hand with a sustainable working environment for teachers, both to make democratic work possible and effective, and to ensure it isn’t happening at the expense of teacher wellbeing and sustainable working patterns. Addressing this requires a joined-up approach to transforming school and college cultures and the demands placed on teachers and education leaders. The issues outlined in this section do not constitute an exhaustive list of causes of workload problems in the sector, but they are important themes for consideration in striving to embed democracy across the education system sustainably and effectively.

Exams and standardisation

“The strong emphasis on grade outcomes is the key issue which frustrates the capacity to educate democratically. [...] While we exist in such a blinkered, streamlined education system, education for democracy will always be an afterthought, as it is not seen to support young people to get good qualifications.”

*José Mario Dellow, Pastoral Lead,
The New School*

A significant number of contributors suggested that a focus on exams and standardised testing also undermines efforts to embed democracy in schools and colleges in meaningful ways. For instance, the Young Lives, Young Futures study shared that a key finding of their research is that “pressure on schools and teachers to get students through exams is limiting opportunities for the development of more inclusive, supportive and participatory school cultures”, while I Have a Voice pointed to both “timetabling and exam pressures” as key barriers to democratic work in schools.

It was suggested that a key problem is that a considerable amount of democratic work in schools – whether in the form of participatory, dialogic classroom environments, student voice projects, or civic engagement activities – falls outside of what most exams are seeking to, or are able to, measure. As one teacher contributor, Tom,³⁷ put it in their submission: “democratic participation is not (and should not be) examined, and hence is inevitably less of a priority in a system dominated by exam results-based accountability”. Similarly, Simon Lightman, a philosophy, politics and religious studies teacher and education researcher, raised concerns in his submission that a focus on standardised assessment outcomes “risks overlooking” other important educational aims, such as “preparing citizens capable of ethical reasoning, democratic deliberation and participation in collective life.” This point was also echoed by young people in the discussion session at the FEA Youth Summit, who reflected that, in their experiences of school, a focus on exams felt like it came at the expense of developing valuable life skills. These young people called for a shift towards seeing education as about developing life skills and civic awareness, not just achieving grades.

Contributors’ concerns around a focus on standardised assessment curtailing opportunities for embedding democracy in schools and colleges are echoed in academic and policy research. For instance, there is widespread acknowledgement that high-stakes testing cultures encourage more didactic pedagogies and ‘teaching to the test’, at the expense of more active or engaged learning experiences (Neumann et al., 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2023; EDSK, 2024).³⁸ The dominance of exams crowding

out space for other important educational outcomes is also strongly foregrounded in the recent government-commissioned interim report on Young People and Work by Alan Milburn. The interim report notes that in its large-scale teacher survey “three-quarters agreed that the curriculum put too much emphasis on passing exams” at the expense of supporting students to develop other important skills (Milburn, 2026).

Research suggests that the sidelining of democratic learning experiences in school is particularly stark for ‘lower achieving’ students, whose school lives too often become defined by attempts to ensure their attainment in ‘core’ subjects (Hargreaves et al., 2023) at the expense of their engagement, interests, and needs (Neumann et al., 2016). This was echoed in the written submission by the major youth cohort study Young Lives, Young Futures (YLYF). The YLYF submission outlined a key finding of their research that students with more creative and practical interests routinely feel “boxed in” by a focus on academic routes and an “emphasis on attainment in exams, particularly in traditional academic subjects like maths and English”. The YLYF submission notes that their research shows this leads to “a profound sense of feeling unheard and unseen at school”. A similar point is made in Milburn’s recent interim report, which states that “the limited range of assessment approaches in key stage 4 in England means that some students are effectively set up to fail. Overwhelmingly they come from less advantaged backgrounds. That is not because they lack ability. It is because the system defines ability in ways that exclude them” (Milburn, 2026). The interim report explicitly does not set out many policy solutions to the challenges it identifies, making it all the more notable that it calls directly for a reduced emphasis on standardised outcomes in education and a greater investment in listening to and engaging in dialogue with young people. Reflecting on the experiences of the NEET young people

37 Pseudonym – anonymous contributor via a National Education Union survey.

38 Research also suggests the dominance of high-stakes assessment is a key reason for content overload in the curriculum (see Gibson, 2024). Thus, curriculum overload and high-stakes assessment culture – and the implications for embedding democracy in schools – should be seen as interconnected.

who contributed to his investigation, Milburn suggests that “what [they] needed at 16 was not more speeches about the importance of qualifications. It was a conversation that started from what they were actually capable of and interested in. [...] In most cases, that conversation never happened.” This evidence of the extent to which current approaches to assessment – and education more broadly – are alienating and exclusionary for a significant proportion of learners has clear and concerning implications for attempts to build more democratic cultures in schools and colleges.

There are widespread calls to reduce standardised testing and exams through assessment reform. For instance, the APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment’s last inquiry, which focused on assessment (APPG for SLA, 2023), called for alternatives to both SATs and GCSEs to be explored, such as random pupil sample tests, and a more holistic, lower-stakes secondary baccalaureate qualification similar to those used across Europe. A 2024 briefing paper for the cross-party thinktank Social Market Foundation recommends that “GCSEs should be slimmed down” and “involve less assessment” and that “alternative approaches such as online assessments” or “annual testing of randomly selected students to measure [school] performance” should be explored (Gibson, 2024:1).

In light of submitted evidence – which reflects these cross-sector calls for change – this inquiry welcomes the government’s plans in the schools white paper and its response to the CAR to reduce time spent on GCSE exams and to abolish the EBacc performance measure – which has been cited as exacerbating the focus on high-stakes assessment in schools. However, the inquiry maintains concerns that this doesn’t go far enough in reducing the narrow focus on standardised assessment outcomes and ensuring that other outcomes – such as democratic education and democratic learning experiences – are valued. For instance, the

government’s commitments to reducing time spent on GCSEs are modest (it has suggested a reduction of 2.5-3 hours of exam time, which still leaves England’s average well above comparable national contexts).³⁹ Moreover, the government has proposed introducing new assessments such as a compulsory year 8 reading test. The government’s response to the CAR seems to generally echo the CAR report’s assertion that “the system must maintain the important role of exams” and “that the [assessment] system is broadly working well” (2025:12), stating that “we will maintain the existing structural architecture of [...] assessments and qualifications” (2025:8). Similarly, the aspirations for young people outlined in the schools white paper are still strongly predicated on raising attainment in standardised tests, rather than a more expansive understanding of valuable educational outcomes. This is concerning in light of evidence received by this inquiry, which has made clear the challenges of embedding democracy in meaningful ways within an education system so strongly shaped and governed by high-stakes assessment outcomes.

39 In England, students currently spend an average of 24-31 hours in GCSE exams. In other “high-performing” nations, the time spent in equivalent exams is much lower – e.g. in New Zealand, the average is 18 hours, in Ireland, the average is 16 hours and in Alberta, Canada, the average is 10 hours (government response to the CAR, 2025:44).

School accountability

“Accountability systems such as school league tables put pressure on school leaders to focus on exam results over and above other aspects of education. [...] Such a focus is increasingly leading to the implementation of centralised school curricula and reduced autonomy and freedom for educators to take risks in the way required of democratic and participatory pedagogies.”

Dan Whittall, teacher

Across submissions there was a broad concern that “accountability systems, inspection frameworks and performance metrics [are] shaping school culture in ways that leave little room for democratic practice” (Sands School). In particular, concerns were raised about how current approaches to school accountability cause and/or exacerbate the issues described above through incentivising a narrow focus on high-stakes assessment, prescribed curriculum content, and content-transmission teaching approaches.

These perspectives are echoed in research pointing to how the drastic expansion of “performativity” (Ball, 2003) measures for English state schools in recent decades has increased the intense focus on assessment and related curriculum content (Neumann et al., 2016) and ‘teaching to the test’ (APPG for SLA, 2023). This is particularly the case for schools in disadvantaged areas, which are under much greater pressure to ‘perform’ in league tables due to the high impact of factors related to socioeconomic disadvantage on how they score in key metrics, such as the government’s headline accountability measure Progress 8 (Gill, 2018; Leckie & Goldstein, 2018). With the accountability system stacked against them, disadvantaged schools are less well-positioned to take the risk of broadening their curriculum or pedagogical approach

in ways that aren’t necessarily captured in league table performance (Reay et al., 2024). This point is echoed in Milburn’s recent interim report on Young People and Work, which criticises the “distortion” effect of “school performance tables” that “rank schools by exam results”. Milburn suggests that the direct impact of league tables on “parental choice, resource allocation and reputational reward” mean schools inevitably prioritise what they measure – grades – at the expense of broader educational aims.

Most contributors to the inquiry who discussed school accountability specifically underscored the way the current system curtails agency and autonomy for teachers and schools – and how this agency and autonomy is fundamental to enacting more democratic, participatory approaches. This point was explicitly outlined by the Chartered College of Teaching, who wrote in their submission: “democracy requires agency. We will need to ensure that students have agency at the classroom and school level to prepare them for the important act of casting their vote in an election. Teachers also need the necessary agency to decide on the teaching strategies and content best suited to develop their students’ understanding of democratic values and their critical thinking skills. In turn, school leaders need to be equipped and empowered to enable agency at the student and teacher level (as many already do), which requires the accountability system to allow for this to happen.” There was accordingly a powerful argument made by several contributors to reform school accountability structures in ways that better support and value democratic work and democracy in schools. States of Mind, for instance, argued in their submission that “schools require space to experiment with participatory approaches without fear of negative accountability consequences.”

Some contributors argued that because democratic practice – such as taking seriously young people’s voices in shaping

school governance and classroom learning – is incompatible with top-down, standardised metrics, it requires a “form of school accountability” that is “more democratic and participatory” in its own right (Dan Whittall, teacher). This was specifically highlighted by the submission summarising findings and recommendations arising from the Young Lives, Young Futures (YLYF) study. The YLYF submission argued that building more democratic school cultures “will only be a realistic proposition if it is connected with a rethinking of the policy drivers that shape what counts as school success, particularly England’s narrow, top-down results-driven system of school accountability. [...] As we know from a wealth of scholarship, any purely top-down system of accountability is likely to have perverse effects – de-professionalising teachers, and distorting practice in directions that are unresponsive to the needs of, or indeed may positively harm, the very communities they are designed to serve.” In their submission, the YLYF study explicitly called on the government to commission a pilot of alternative, more “participatory approaches to school accountability” that involve “teachers and other school community members in helping to define accountability expectations and not just in delivering on top-down standardised expectations.”

Calls for reforms to school accountability are becoming increasingly widespread (see APPG for SLA, 2023; Gibson, 2024). Many of these calls echo those above in specifically recommending more participatory and collaborative approaches to school accountability. The 2023 Beyond Ofsted inquiry, for instance, “recommend[s] removing Ofsted from direct contact with schools” (Perryman et al., 2023:63) and instead devolving more power to school groups and trusts to enact evaluation processes. This more localised, participatory approach would rely on self-evaluation by schools – supported by an independent ‘school improvement partner’ as well as processes of ‘peer review’ – and would

be “based on a list of contents agreed at national level, but [which] schools can add/adapt according to context” (Perryman et al., 2023:63). It is worth noting that recent changes to Ofsted were intended, at least in part, to ensure schools are not judged on too narrow a set of criteria.

In the government’s response to the CAR, it outlines plans to support “access to civic engagement” through adding a new “enrichment framework” (DfE, 2025:11) to the Ofsted inspection framework. The schools white paper adds in a further new set of outcomes it will require schools to “measure” in the form of a new “pupil engagement framework” (DfE, 2026). This inquiry is concerned that these moves will not address the need for more fundamental changes to school accountability underscored by contributors to this inquiry. Submitted evidence makes clear that if we wish to meaningfully embed democracy in education, then we must accord schools and colleges greater space and flexibility, rather than adding to an already extensive list of standardised outcomes they must demonstrate to the inspectorate.⁴⁰ Moreover, additional outcomes measured by Ofsted may not address the dominance of exam results as the primary factor in school evaluation, while Progress 8 remains the headline performance measure and determines school league table performance.

40 It is notable that this report has outlined – particularly in Sections 2 and 3 – submitted evidence highlighting the ways in which more participatory and democratic teaching and governance could help support student engagement and address disengagement and alienation. Yet, ironically, attempting to measure this through a standardised ‘engagement framework’ risks undercutting the very agency and autonomy that contributors have said schools need in order to enact this more inclusive, democratic work.

Recommendations to the government

Evidence submitted to this inquiry over the previous three sections has outlined a broad range of ways in which democracy could be more effectively embedded in schools and colleges through student voice, curriculum changes, and participatory teaching and learning. However, submitted evidence has also made clear that embedding this valuable work relies on broader, systemic changes across the education system. These issues are complex and we have only been able to touch on them briefly in this report, but we would urge the government to recognise their significance in supporting young people's democratic engagement and citizenship. Without a recognition of the importance of joined-up policy, there is a risk that the government's intentions to embed democracy in meaningful and substantive ways to support young people's enfranchisement and broader democratic citizenship might not be realised. In light of evidence highlighted by this section, we would urge the government to:

- 1. Ensure its commitments to tackling curriculum overload, as indicated by its response to the CAR, translate into a meaningful reduction in core content overall,** especially at secondary/GCSE level. This would align with cross-party calls elsewhere such as the House of Lords inquiry chaired by Lord Johnson of Marylebone, and should be done through consultation and collaboration with independent subject specialists and sector stakeholders. A reduction in current curriculum demands would both make space for new core content related to democracy and political literacy (as outlined in Section 1) and ensure sufficient flexibility and space for schools to do the important, time-consuming work of embedding democratic governance and pedagogy more broadly.
- 2. Substantially reduce the focus on standardised assessment outcomes within the education system,** which evidence suggests is sidelining other important educational outcomes and processes including the development of civic skills and participatory learning experiences. This would echo widespread sector calls for change including by the recent interim report on Young People and Work by Alan Milburn. This could involve: consulting on alternatives to SATs and GCSEs (as called for in this APPG's inquiry report on assessment in 2023); reducing statutory testing (including reconsidering the introduction of a new statutory reading test); broadening and modernising the assessment approaches used; and moving away from a sole reliance on terminal exams.
- 3. Consult further on transforming approaches to school accountability,** echoing calls elsewhere such as by the Beyond Ofsted Inquiry and Milburn's recent interim report. In particular, the government should explore moving away from solely top-down, standardised approaches – which evidence has suggested are barriers to democratic practice and culture in schools – and towards an approach in which schools and colleges are active partners in co-creating processes and criteria for evaluating success. This would help with enabling democratic work – by valuing a broader range of educational outcomes beyond exams and other top-down mandates – and also support school and college level democracy by involving students, staff, and other community stakeholders in collective processes to shape and determine educational priorities.

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Appendix 1

Types of evidence considered

Interested parties were invited to submit written evidence over a period of three months ending in February 2026. The APPG received 50 submissions of written evidence (including seven responses to a survey run by the National Education Union). Three speaker sessions, during which oral presentations were heard, were held in Parliament between January and April 2026. In addition, members of the APPG inquiry team ran a discussion session at the 2026 Fair Education Alliance Youth Summit, which gathered evidence from over 180 young people aged 11-21 who have experienced barriers in education for a day designed, curated and led by young people determined to reshape the education system.

APPG meetings

Each of the three oral evidence sessions was addressed by a panel of speakers with expertise and experience in democratic, political and citizenship education. Each session focused on a specific stakeholder group: 1) The first session focused on young people's perspectives and experiences. Young people and representatives from four youth-focused organisations gave evidence on what democracy means to them, how schools and colleges teach about democracy and embed democratic values in everyday school life, and how this could be improved to ensure all young people are prepared for votes at 16. 2) The

second session focused on teachers and educators. Four educators gave evidence on their experience of championing democracy and democratic participation in the classroom, including opportunities and barriers in terms of ensuring that young people are prepared for the vote. 3) The third session focused on democratic education initiatives and practices in Scotland and Wales, which already have Votes at 16 for devolved and local elections. The session heard from representatives of the Scottish Youth Parliament and organisations working with young people in Wales to explore the lessons learned from Votes at 16 in those contexts, including the role schools play in preparing students to participate in democratic life.

Written submissions

There were 50 submissions of written evidence. These came from a wide range of interested parties which included young people, youth organisations, campaigns, and movements, schools, educators and school leaders, academic experts, education charities, NGOs, and social enterprises and professional bodies. Contributions reflected a wide range of expertise and interest, ranging from those with first-hand experience of the education system to those whose evidence was informed by extensive research. Seven evidence submissions were in response to an online survey run by the National

Education Union (NEU), in which NEU members were invited to respond to the key questions in the inquiry's call to evidence.

Outlier themes

This report is intended to reflect the core themes within the broad range of oral and written evidence received by the inquiry. There were a few outlier perspectives and themes that it has not been possible to incorporate into the report. This was because they were only raised by a very small minority and felt out of step with majority perspectives, and/or because they were beyond the scope of the inquiry. For example:

- Several contributors highlighted the importance of settings outside schools and colleges for supporting democratic education, such as charities, youth work, community groups, and informal learning spaces (especially for young people not in formal education or training). The importance of third sector partnerships and organisations in supporting democratic activities and extracurricular opportunities for students is touched on in Section 3 of the report but broader engagement with this point was beyond the scope of the inquiry.
- A number of contributors called for the creation of more integrated and collaborative approaches to how policy around citizenship education is formed, for instance through the Government more formally collaborating with academics, youth organisations, and independent research organisations, and building open-access hubs for data and evidence to support more robustly evidence-based policy. A related call was made for the greater involvement of parents/carers and broader local communities in education policymaking and decision-making. One submission specifically highlighted the importance of intergenerational dialogue for supporting democratic citizenship among young people (and the benefits of this for adults/older adults also).
- A very small number of contributors called for more formal assessment, and more Ofsted scrutiny or mandates, to ensure political literacy is being achieved. These calls were out of step with the very strong call across other submissions for less prescription in the curriculum, and greater flexibility and localised agency for schools to be responsive and participatory in delivering democratic education.
- Several contributors, especially young people, raised concerns about the Government's proposed social media ban and the impact on young people's access to political information.
- One submission was oriented around critiquing the significant role of religion in schools in England, which it described as exclusionary and undemocratic.
- Some contributors underscored the need for broader electoral system changes such as automatic voter registration and a review of photo ID requirements as part of supporting young people's enfranchisement (automatic voter registration is included within the Representation of the People Bill 2026).

Appendix 2

Meetings of the APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment

Votes at 16 Inquiry Oral Evidence Session: Young people and youth advocates - January 2026

Cosima Wiltshire

Youth Policy Development Group member for [Shout Out UK](#), a social enterprise focused on countering disinformation by promoting media and political literacy and amplifying youth voices.

Canada Jenkins

Youth Policy Development Group member for [Shout Out UK](#).

Django Perks

Votes at 16 ambassador for [My Life My Say](#), a youth-led, non-partisan movement on a mission to encourage young people to participate in democracy.

Manel Bansada

Votes at 16 ambassador for [My Life My Say](#).

Alishba Amir

Member of the [Youth Shadow Panel](#) for the Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) and representative of [I Have a Voice](#), a social enterprise that equips young people with the tools and confidence to speak up effectively, and take action, on the issues that matter to them and their communities.

Amira Campbell

President of the [National Union of Students](#) (NUS) UK and Chair of the [Youth Shadow Panel](#) for the CAR.

Joe Brindle

Founder of [Teach the Future](#), a youth-led campaign for climate education, and now setting up a National Union of School Students (NUSS).

Ava James

Founder and operations lead of [Not a Trend](#), a youth-led anti-racist campaign working to ensure that the fight against racial injustice is not just another hashtag.

Votes at 16 Inquiry Oral Evidence Session: Teachers and educators - February 2026

Richard Hand

English teacher across key stages since 1992, as well as a former Head of English and Head of Sixth Form.

Alexander Ramiz

English teacher at a college for 11-18 year olds with a doctorate and a master's degree in education.

Sera Shortland

Citizenship teacher, Chair of the [Association for Citizenship Teaching](#) (ACT) Council and Co-Editor of the [Teaching Citizenship journal](#).

Jack Park

Primary teacher (Key Stage 2) at [The New School](#), a fee-free progressive school with a comprehensive intake.

Votes at 16 Inquiry Oral Evidence Session: Scotland and Wales - April 2026

Ellie Craig MSYP

Chair of [Scottish Youth Parliament](#).

Marcus Flucker MSYP

Vice Chair of [Scottish Youth Parliament](#).

Rosy Burgess

Head of Participation and Programmes for the [Scottish Youth Parliament](#).

Grant Poiner

Chief Executive of [Boys' and Girls' Clubs of Wales](#) and a qualified Youth Worker.

Delyth Jones

Principal Officer for Llanelli Town Council.

Selma Abdalla

Electoral and Democratic Services Officer leading on public awareness at Cardiff Council.

Appendix 3

Contributors who submitted written evidence to the APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment

AQA

[AQA](#) is an independent education charity and the country's largest provider of GCSEs and A-levels.

Arts Emergency Youth Collective

[Arts Emergency](#) is a charity supporting young people from underrepresented backgrounds to get a fair start in the arts and humanities. [The Youth Collective](#) is a group of young people who work closely with the charity to help ensure that young people's voices are at the heart of everything they do.

Dan Whittall

A school teacher of 14 years, currently teaching at a sixth form college in Halifax, West Yorkshire.

Daniel Selwyn

Head of Geography at [School 21](#) - a pioneering 4 to 18 school in East London for children from all backgrounds that operates with the conviction that schools need to ensure a focus on Head (academic success), Heart (character and well-being) and Hand (generating ideas, problem solving, making a difference).

Derry Hannam

A former teacher with over 20 years of experience in English state secondary schools and a former Ofsted accredited inspector. Derry Hannam also worked with Sir Bernard Crick on the development of Citizenship Education in England and has been rapporteur/adviser/trainer to the Council of Europe Education for Democratic Citizenship/Human Rights Education project.

Dr Andrew Mycock (University of Leeds), Dr Thomas Loughran (University of Lancaster), and Professor Jonathan Tonge (University of Liverpool)

Academic experts who made two submissions with different focal points, drawing on over twenty years of research they have undertaken on issues of youth democratic socialisation and political participation.

Dr Christine Huebner (University of Sheffield) and Dr Jan Eichhorn (University of Edinburgh)

Academics whose submission drew on findings of five major studies they led into the implementation and outcomes of Votes at 16 in Scotland, Wales and internationally, as well as expert research on the lowering of the voting age in countries around the world.

Dr Deborah Outhwaite (University of Liverpool), Dr Alpesh Maisuria (University of the West of England Bristol), and Penelope Williams (University of Bristol)

Academics with respective specialisms and wide experiences in citizenship education, Government and Politics, parliament, and teacher education.

Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE)

DofE is a charity that, since its founding in 1956, has supported over 8 million young people across the UK to build confidence, resilience, and skills for life and work.

Economist Educational Foundation

The **Economist Educational Foundation** is an independent charity that creates teaching resources and events to support the development of news literacy in students around the world.

I Have a Voice (IHAV)

IHAV is a social enterprise that equips young people with the tools and confidence to speak up effectively, and take action, on the issues that matter to them and their communities. IHAV works with young people from backgrounds that are under-represented in democratic processes.

Internet Matters

Internet Matters is a not-for-profit dedicated to supporting parents and professionals to keep children safe and well online.

James Gordon

John Murray

A teacher and head of Art and Design at a sixth form college.

José Mario Dellow

Pastoral Lead at **The New School** in Croydon, a fee-free progressive school that has a relational, non-punitive approach.

Kristina Lewis

A Deputy Head (Academic) and History & Politics teacher

Leonard Turton

A retired teacher with over 50 years of experience in both state and alternative education, and founder of [Summerhill Democratics](#), an NGO that helps start and advises democratic free schools.

Public First

[Public First](#) is a policy, research, opinion and strategy consultancy working with global companies, governments, start-ups, institutions and foundations around the world to tackle major public policy and strategic challenges.

Raffaele De Faveri

A Year 8 student who has started his own campaign called Start Smart, Vote Smart to encourage the teaching of politics in schools.

Reggie J Dovener

Political campaigner and founder of [The 8 Principles](#), a Wales-focused organisation based around democracy and getting young people to make their voices heard.

Sands School

[Sands School](#) is a small independent democratic secondary school in Devon.

Send My Friend to School

[Send My Friend to School](#) is a UK civil society coalition of international development NGOs, teachers' unions and charities, bringing together young people, politicians, teachers, civil society and the media in joint campaigning to demand quality education for all children across the globe.

Sheryl Morris

Shout Out UK and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Political and Media Literacy

[Shout Out UK](#) is a multi-award winning social enterprise that provides impartial Political and Media Literacy training and campaigns focused on democratic engagement. Shout Out UK is the official secretariat for the [All-Party Parliamentary Group](#) on Political and Media Literacy.

Simon Lightman FRSA FCCT

A teacher of Philosophy, Politics and Religious Studies with over a decade of experience teaching democratic theory, political participation and controversial issues in secondary education.

Skills Builder UK

[Skills Builder UK](#) is a not-for-profit founded by former teachers with a mission to ensure that one day everyone builds the essential skills to succeed.

States of Mind

[States of Mind](#) is a social enterprise dedicated to improving young people's mental health and wellbeing. Their work centres on creating authentic opportunities for young people to investigate issues that affect them, co-produce solutions, and engage in democratic practices that genuinely matter.

The Conduit Club

[The Conduit Club](#) is a Private members club situated in Covent Garden, London, committed to creating a just and sustainable future, with a mission to convene, inspire and catalyse action to accelerate solutions to the world's most urgent challenges.

The Day News & Media Ltd

The Day News & Media Ltd is the publisher of [The Day](#), a current affairs-based literacy resource for schools with a mission to support learners by building global awareness, cultural capital, critical literacy, functional literacy and oracy through interesting, engaging and relevant articles and debates about subjects that matter to young people.

The Electoral Commission

[The Electoral Commission](#) is the independent body that makes sure elections in the UK are fair, open, and well run.

The Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT)

[ACT](#) is the national subject association for Citizenship education in England.

The Independent Schools Council

The [ISC](#) brings together seven associations and four affiliate associations to represent almost 1,400 independent schools.

The InSECT Project (Investigating Science Education, Citizenship and Truth)

[The InSECT Project](#) was founded in January 2024 to consider how science education bears on democracy, and the erosion of truth in Western Democracies.

The Jack Petchey Foundation

[The Jack Petchey Foundation](#) is a charitable trust, set up by Sir Jack Petchey CBE in 1999 to inspire and motivate young people across London and Essex to do their best, reach their full potential and have a positive impact on society.

The National Secular Society (NSS)

[NSS](#) is a not-for-profit, non-governmental civil society organisation that advocates for separation of religion and state and promotes secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively.

The National Union of Students (NUSS)

A new Union, currently in its design phase, being developed by students with support from the [National Union of Students](#) and [Students Organising for Sustainability](#). The NUSS is a democratic, student-led organisation that will act as the national representative body for secondary school students (including sixth forms and colleges) across England, Scotland and Wales.

The Politics Project

[The Politics Project](#) is a non-partisan democratic education and engagement organisation supporting young people to use their voice. The evidence submission by the Politics Project drew on [A Roadmap to Votes at 16](#), a report published by [Democracy Classroom](#) (led by the Politics Project) in 2024, which sets out 16 key recommendations to ensure that lowering the voting age becomes a transformative step for UK democracy. The report is endorsed by over 40 organisations and 7 academic experts, including several who submitted evidence to this inquiry.

The UK Democracy Fund

[The UK Democracy Fund](#) is a pooled Fund hosted by the [JRSST Charitable Trust](#) that is helping build a healthy democracy – one in which everyone can participate and where political power is shared fairly.

The UK Youth Parliament (UKYP)

UKYP is the democratic body representing young people aged 11–18 across the United Kingdom.

The Chartered College of Teaching

The Chartered College of Teaching is the professional body for teachers with a mission to empower a knowledgeable and respected teaching profession.

VotesforSchools

VotesforSchools is a personal Development Resource for Schools, empowering young voices, building oracy, confidence, and critical thinking.

Young Lives, Young Futures (YLYF)

YLYF is a six-year longitudinal study investigating how England's education and training system can better support the school-to-work transitions of young people who don't go to university (currently 51% of 18-24 year olds). The study – funded by the **ESRC** and conducted by researchers from King's College London and the **Edge Foundation** – consists of a 3-wave nationally representative survey of more than 11,000 young people and qualitative interviews with 123 young people and 75 local policymakers and practitioners.



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