



*Building on
consensus*

SSAT'S POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS
2015

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ABOUT SSAT

SSAT is the Schools, Students and Teachers Network. SSAT's work in helping transform education in England started in 1987. Back then our role was to support and nurture the first city technology colleges – the initiative that first proved the value of employers and schools working together to drive up standards. As specialist schools and then the first academies came into being, our brief was extended to supporting them as well.

That work, underpinned by our 'by schools, for schools' ethos, laid the foundations for many of our activities today... the innovative leadership and teacher CPD programmes, the commitment to thought leadership and research and, of course, the network of school leaders and innovative teachers which still drives all that we do. Over this time, SSAT raised over £350 million of sponsorship for schools.

For 25 years our work was largely government-funded. In 2012 that funding ended and we changed our status. As a new limited company, owned entirely by employees, we are now independent of government – and proud of it – but still as committed as ever to changing education by encouraging innovation and collaboration between schools and stakeholders.

SSAT continues to support and challenge schools in four key areas: teaching and learning; curriculum, subjects and assessment; leadership; and governance and accountability. At the heart of SSAT is our membership network, which remains the largest and longest-standing independent network of schools in England.



BUILDING ON CONSENSUS

This paper explores the key areas of educational policy that are likely to be pursued by any political party post May 2015. Rather than create a manifesto suggesting a whole new set of policies, we believe that it is more valuable to look for areas of consensus, agreement and compromise across the main parties, and build on these.

Through our conversations with school leaders and teachers in the SSAT network, policymakers and other stakeholders, we have identified 10 key policy areas. For each, we have explored what politicians, academics and school leaders say is important, before suggesting some practical recommendations to help any future government build on these ideas.

These ideas have been informed by our wider consultation and dialogues in the lead up to May. SSAT hosts regular reform discussion dinners to which a group of practitioners, academics and policymakers are invited to debate a particular topic, introduced by an expert.

Dinners in the lead up to the election have included:

- ❖ The importance of school collaboration in driving system improvement, with **Professor Sir Tim Brighouse**
- ❖ The effectiveness of academy chains within a self-improving school system, with **Professor Daniel Muijs**
- ❖ The role of vocational education, with **Professor Alison Woolf and Lord Baker**

- ❖ How can schools develop ‘character’, with **Professor James Arthur and Sir Anthony Seldon**
- ❖ How to mend the fragmented careers system, with **Dr Deirdre Hughes**
- ❖ Evidence-informed practice and policy, with **Dr Jonathan Sharples**
- ❖ The effectiveness of pupil premium, with **Sir John Dunford**

Education will always be a political issue. However, SSAT believes that government policies should not hinder the profession from leading its own direction. As such, this publication has been launched in conjunction with a forward-looking pamphlet written by nine practitioners from the Vision 2040 group. *Redesigning Schooling: A vision for education – beyond five-year policy cycles* articulates their vision for education over the next 25 years. Vision 2040 reflect many of our wider beliefs which we articulate through our Redesigning Schooling campaign.



COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING

WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS?

At the core of an effective self-improving school system is sound collaboration and partnership working to improve student outcomes.

There is agreement on the importance of good pooled leadership and the need for collaboration to drive improvements between leaders, within and between schools, and within partnership arrangements, both formal and informal. Partnerships can spread expertise, evidence and best practice between schools.

There are many examples of effective partnership working and different models that work, but it is patchy across the system and there are gaps in effective partnership working, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas. These need to be addressed.

We need to better establish what forms of collaboration and partnerships work best to improve student outcomes, we need to better disseminate best practice in this area and we need to incentivise schools and groups of schools to collaborate.

The fact is that good collaboration remains the exception not the rule. The best chains, for example, are not always collaborating with the weaker chains. It is possible and desirable to incentivise better collaboration through funding agreements and the accountability framework.

WHAT DO WE THINK?

SSAT's history of collaboration and networking means that we understand the value of schools and practitioners working together to raise standards. Crucially, for collaboration to be effective, it has to have a hard edge. Networks and collaboratives have to have clear tangible outcomes, should be time-sensitive, and closely managed. At any one time, a school may be in several collaborative arrangements and networks, with discrete aims and objectives.

Chains and federations are important in this (discussed later on), but schools also need a national and international perspective. While we don't advocate chasing PISA tables, we do believe it is important to look to other education systems in order to adapt and adopt the best practices.

In an increasingly competitive market, we also believe that schools must be incentivised to collaborate to improve outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support the development of an enabling environment in which schools can collaborate with one another to raise student outcomes.

Create incentives which promote collaboration and regulate perverse disincentives.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED PRACTICE AND POLICY

WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS?

Evidence-informed, or led, policy and practice, is a frequently repeated mantra.

The importance of high-quality evidence to raise the quality of teaching, to improve a teacher's professional development and to raise pupils' attainment is well established.

There is a dual need now to identify high-quality, independent research to help inform policy and practice and to identify priority areas where new research is needed.

There is a growing consensus that we have, within the teaching profession itself, a considerable resource that can be better harnessed in service of research – to identify where more research is needed and for teachers and groups of teachers to undertake collaborative research that can benefit them, their students and the school system.

We also know that although many schools are engaged with research and evidence, there is a lack of clarity about where this is happening and how the outcomes are being shared.

WHAT DO WE THINK?

We think that teachers' and leaders' practices should be informed by a range of evidence, including academic research, and that they should be allowed to make professional decisions about how best to use this in their own context. As such, we promote the notion of evidence-informed practice rather than just evidence-based practice.

In terms of government policy, future ministers should ensure that the decisions they make about education are rooted in evidence while still allowing schools to make their own professional decisions that are right for their contexts.

We think a key issue is knowledge management and dissemination. Although in some places this is working well, it is by no means embedded in the system.

There is also an unhelpful gap between the research needs of school practitioners, and the research agenda of universities. We would welcome a change in the system that allows academic research to speak more closely to the needs of teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Change the way that research is currently funded and commissioned so that it becomes closer to school needs.

Design policies that allow school leaders to make their own professional decisions informed by a range of evidence, including local context.

Support a more strategic and comprehensive system of knowledge management, dissemination and sharing.

SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS?

Structures remain important. There is a highly diversified supply side, with a majority of secondary schools now academies, either sponsored or converter. When commenting on the system it is important not to make generalisations about academies, as the two types often operate very differently. Autonomous schools operating within a strong accountability framework are one side of the reform coin. The other side of the coin is what happens in the classroom: improving the quality of classroom teaching. Arguably there has been too much focus on the former at the expense of the latter.

Due to a capacity shortage, there is a big ongoing challenge to build and fund new capacity, particularly and specifically in the primary sector over the short term. It is important to ensure that there is a place in a good school for every child. This is a current goal, and must remain a firm one.

It is important that the process of establishing a new school is fair, open and transparent, and subject, where possible, to competition.

Increased regionalisation and decentralisation are likely to be important in school improvement, as is the role of academy chains.

WHAT DO WE THINK?

While SSAT has always supported the development of academies and promoted the notion of school autonomy, we believe that the decision to convert to an academy must be made by the school in consultation with all of its stakeholders.

Furthermore, when autonomy is given, it must also be accompanied by support. Schools need to work together, for a range of reasons, to ensure that teachers and leaders are focused on education and student outcomes.

We know that academy chains can be effective in raising standards across schools. SSAT believes that medium-sized chains, where the chain is outward looking and lead by a small central team, are often the most effective at working with other schools. The best chains share an agreed set of values and principles.

SSAT is concerned that vulnerable, small schools are sometimes perceived as undesirable for a chain to work with. There should be incentives for chains to take on these schools, if it is in the school's interest for them to do so. Where strong schools have done considerable outreach work as academy sponsors, this should be recognised. We must not penalise schools that take on additional challenge and responsibility. However, we are firmly against forced marriages.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Where increased autonomy is given to schools, also give increased support.

Incentivise chains to take on smaller, vulnerable schools.

TEACHER QUALITY AND PROFESSIONALISM

WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS?

Good initial teacher training is the first step in a journey to becoming a good teacher. High-quality continuous professional development, informed by evidence, supports deeper learning, improved pedagogy and allows teachers to refine their practice.

It is important to ensure that high-quality, continuous professional development is identified and is accessible to all teachers to improve their practice, to improve pupil outcomes and to raise the status of the profession.

There is cross-party support for a College of Teaching, due to open in 2017. It is an important initiative that aims to set standards and to enhance professionals' development by informing professional practice, standards and policy with evidence.

It is important that the college is seen to be independent of the government and, if managed properly, should raise the status of the profession.

WHAT DO WE THINK?

SSAT is supportive of the College of Teaching and believes that it could be an important step in establishing a truly profession-led system. We hope that government will fund this in such a way so as to support the initial start-up, without compromising the college's independence.

We believe that teaching schools can be a powerful driver in raising teaching quality, through exceptional ITT and CPD. The best teaching schools are those that work closely with higher education and other agencies to ensure their provision is

comprehensive. SSAT promotes an agreed curriculum for ITT, with a strong emphasis on partnership between schools and schools of education.

Government should continue to use teaching school networks as a driver for improving teacher quality. Support should be given to help TSAs share and disseminate knowledge and research.

We know that the most effective CPD is that which changes teachers' practice and has an impact on student outcomes. This is why we are supportive of CPD models that promote collaborative learning to embed practices – such as joint practice development.

Due to likely real-time budget cuts across education, SSAT thinks that government must fund some professional development centrally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue support for the independent College of Teaching as a body to inform teaching standards and develop teachers' education.

Continue support of teaching schools as a vehicle to improve teacher quality locally.

Agree a common curriculum for ITT, with schools and universities working in partnership.

SOCIAL MOBILITY

❧ WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS? ❧

All stakeholders in education are committed to closing the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged students and their peers while continually striving for better outcomes for all. Regardless of their background, students should achieve highly and be able to go on to further study or employment.

The pupil premium grant has been somewhat effective in raising achievement for disadvantaged students. However the gap continues to exist and is unacceptable. When the pupil premium is used well, disadvantaged students have achieved as well as, or better than, their peers.

We need to systematically track the achievement of different groups of students, and intervene appropriately when gaps appear. In particular, attention must be paid to white working-class boys of British origin who are currently the most under-performing group in the country. Research suggests that particular interventions and strategies can be used to buck this trend.

As well as academic achievement, social mobility relies on equity of opportunity, with schools planning experiences for disadvantaged students to help develop their confidence, social skills and cultural capital.

❧ WHAT DO WE THINK? ❧

We support the continuation of dedicated funding for disadvantaged students at a school level. However, schools should be given freedom to determine how best to spend this money, and on whom, based on their knowledge of the cohort.

More research and development is needed to explore the most effective ways of closing the attainment gap and increasing social mobility. Schools should be supported to find the best strategies for their students.

Giving every student a personalised learning experience is key to social mobility. We need to ensure that individual students are on appropriate curriculum pathways, receive excellent advice and guidance, feel well supported and mentored, and are taught in a way that meets their needs. Furthermore, students need access to high-quality role models and mentors.

We hope that during the next parliament the gap between the most disadvantaged students and their peers is closed. This should be an ambitious goal for the new administration.

❧ RECOMMENDATIONS ❧

Continue to fund disadvantaged students at a whole school level in order to close the achievement gap while ensuring that interventions are informed by sound research.

RURAL AND COASTAL CHALLENGE

WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS?

Much of the focus for school improvement has to date been on urban schools (London Challenge, Manchester Challenge, etc.) although many of the underperforming schools are in rural and coastal areas. Although coastal and rural areas are different, that doesn't mean we can't learn from some practice in urban areas. It is important to build a coalition for change among stakeholders across parents, governors, schools, and employers.

Because we all know that good teachers (to a large extent) make good schools, there must be an unremitting focus on classroom practice. Any policy on coastal and rural improvement must be about learning, and not focused on structures.

That being said, geographical clusters are crucial and we need more of them, particularly at primary level in rural areas. Bottom-up flexibility is key. Clusters and partnerships could break across existing geographical and political boundaries. Schools could belong to more than one type of cluster, in order to draw in different expertise.

The challenge of attracting high-quality teachers and their partners into deprived areas must be addressed. Attracting good headteachers and middle leaders is crucial. Good leadership of partnerships is needed, either by regional commissioners or executive leaders.

Partnerships need to be locally structured and incentivised. Effective partnerships reduce costs through economies of scale, pool resources, improve synergies and add value.

Resources are currently skewed in favour of urban areas.

WHAT DO WE THINK?

A more nuanced approach to understanding rural and coastal deprivation is needed. Current measures largely target urban poverty and fail to give a detailed picture of rural and coastal areas.

When this new approach is adopted, funding and resource arrangements should be reviewed in order to ensure that rural and coastal schools are receiving appropriate support for their needs.

Schools in these areas need to be incentivised to work together in collaboratives to overcome some of their challenges. This might involve the recruitment and retention of teachers by sharing roles – particularly at middle leader level – which will help share knowledge and build a more attractive recruitment offer for potential candidates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A new approach to understanding rural and coastal deprivation is needed.

Establish more equitable funding, as well as incentives for partnership working for rural and coastal schools.

CHARACTER BUILDING AND EMPLOYABILITY

WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS?

There is a growing body of evidence that character traits and resilience are directly linked to being able to do well and contribute positively at school, in the workplace, and in the community. Employers and university admissions tutors have complained that young people have insufficiently developed 'soft' or non-cognitive skills.

The established consensus, across the major parties and society, is that schools must look beyond just exam passes and make it part of their 'core business' to nurture broader individual qualities in young people. It is not either academic or character education; it is both. Teachers play an important role in character education and development. Some form of character education takes place in most schools. But it is important that character education is intentional, planned, organised and reflective.

More research is becoming available, but more needs to be commissioned, to assist in character education – how character is caught and taught. And more research is needed on how to assess character education. Schools need support to develop their own approaches to character education which can involve cross-curricular, extra-curricular and pastoral approaches. It should not involve top-down prescription, nor should assessment of character education kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

WHAT DO WE THINK?

While character cannot be 'taught' in an instructional way, schools have an important part to play in the development of character. Specifically, they can systematically plan, deliver and track experiences and opportunities that will allow students to develop resilience, confidence and other character traits. They can also talk to students about these traits in a structured way, in order to give them the language in which to make sense of these experiences.

There is a strong link between character, leadership and employability. SSAT has always promoted student leadership as both a powerful vehicle for school improvement and young people's personal development and growth.

We strongly believe that schools' curricula and extra-curricula activities should be broad and balanced, with opportunities for students to develop their creative, practical and sporting faculties as well as their academic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish more systematic efforts to identify and share best practice in character education.

Conduct research into how to measure or assess character education.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS?

There is a hierarchy in education with academic routes seen as superior to vocational. While this is something that should be challenged, a narrow focus on trying to create parity of esteem would not be enough to solve any problems – a broader approach is needed.

Vocational education is an important means to provide students and the economy with the necessary skills to thrive. However, while in some instances there is a very clear path to a practical qualification where skills are highly defined, there is a less distinct 'wedge' between the hard technical skills and academia. Our system is yet to provide clear pathways.

Governments have a poor track record of predicting and anticipating skills gaps and addressing these through education. The government must get its incentives right as well as getting better at bringing out the best in what we have. Currently funding is not transparent; nor is it fair. Too often too little money is put into vocational education and consequently the quality of education that students receive on these courses is not as good as it could be. Universities on the other hand receive significant advantages which make it difficult for vocational education to compete.

Qualifications must be of a high calibre and be accepted by all stakeholders – including parents and employers. It is important to learn the lessons from the diploma – endless design and redesign is not helpful.

Experience of the working world is absolutely critical for young people. It enables them to develop skills and begin to work out for themselves what type of career they might enjoy and be suited for.

WHAT DO WE THINK?

There is some confusion about what vocational education means. Policies that attempt to reform vocational education must clearly define what they mean by this.

Politicians and school leaders should stop striving for parity of esteem between vocational and academic education; they are different and these differences should be valued for their own sake.

The practical elements of vocational and technical courses have been lost, to their detriment. Practical assessment, particularly for technical awards, is crucial in developing young people's skills and capabilities. These need to be assessed at a local level: teachers must be suitably trained and trusted to do this.

It is vital that employers are involved in the design and assessment of vocational courses in order to ensure they are fit for purpose and credible to industries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure that all accredited vocational courses have a significant practical assessed element.

Implement vocational education courses that are valued by schools, employers and young people for their own sake.

CAREERS EDUCATION, INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS?

Evidence from the education select committee and from the regulator, Ofsted, amongst others, suggests that provision of careers education and guidance in the school system is both patchy and fragmented. Although there are examples of good practice, this is not widely or evenly distributed across the system.

Ensuring that young people have access to high-quality, personalised careers advice at crucial times in their lives will help reduce the number of NEETs, promote inclusion, improve social mobility, and improve access for the most disadvantaged to higher and further education and training options, including apprenticeships.

CEIAG has got to be linked to local and national economies, and to productivity, through consideration of where we are and where we are going in the coming years. Our economy has been growing since the start of 2013 and looks set to continue. But the recession was deeper and longer than ever before, and for various reasons productivity was set back greatly and has yet to recover. Productivity is falling behind where it would have been if it had kept its pre-recession trend. While job creation trends are on the increase, real wages fell in the recession and have declined and stagnated at least until the end of 2014, when we have seen some limited growth.

The UK is below western European average levels of temporary and involuntary part-time work. Signals to young people (and parents) about the added-value of learning and work are becoming more blurred.

WHAT DO WE THINK?

It is more important to think about careers development than education per se. With the job market changing so rapidly we need to give young people the tools to look at their career options – mapping routes for them, rather than giving generic advice about types of jobs.

The system needs impartial and independent support which is focused on schools' needs and informed by those of employers and large businesses.

The decline of part-time jobs and work experience has left a system where students are not fully prepared for employment when they leave school. Most employers appear to want to work with the education sector, but the ways in which they can meaningfully do so need to be streamlined and simplified.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop a brokerage system that is effective and ensures a good interface between young people, employers, careers advisers and other stakeholders, based on an open, collaborative approach.

The system must offer easy access to face-to-face independent professional careers advice and guidance to all young people.

ACCOUNTABILITY

❧ WHERE'S THERE CONSENSUS? ❧

Evidence-informed, intelligent accountability should remain firmly on the agenda, along with the desire to create an accountability framework that allows teachers to teach and to use their professional judgement.

It is now accepted that direct accountability to the secretary of state through funding agreements alone provides an insufficient level of accountability. It is important that struggling and 'coasting' schools are identified early and given the necessary support. Middle tier accountability may have the potential to do this, but this is work in progress.

Although the regulator Ofsted has recently made significant reforms, some would still argue that it has been losing the confidence of key stakeholders. Criticisms range from inspectors promoting particular learning styles, to unwarranted interference, to the inconsistent and variable quality of inspections, to accusations that the whole system is put in a straitjacket, stifling creativity and innovation, because of the requirements of Ofsted inspectors. Ofsted has sought to address many of these concerns – for example by being clear that it does not have a preferred method of school improvement – but some schools report that the reality feels different from the rhetoric. How to further reform Ofsted and the future shape and tone of inspections is a major issue that must be high on the agenda.

❧ WHAT DO WE THINK? ❧

SSAT knows that it is important for schools to be held to account for the safety, well-being and outcomes of their students.

We believe there will always be a need for an external inspectorate, but the current inspection framework needs further reform. Greater efforts must be made to increase faith in the accountability framework.

This could be achieved, in part, by the promotion of peer reviews and professional learning dialogues between schools. Challenging yet supporting conversations between school leaders can be a powerful driver for school improvement.

Ofsted must continue to be clear that they have no preferred way of teaching or leading, and are focused on a range of outcomes for students. Schools must feel free to make their own decisions based on the needs of their students rather than attempting to make decisions based on the perceived direction of Ofsted. We know that not all schools feel free to follow the former route at the moment.

We are concerned by the ways in which schools' results will be judged in the next few years of change. It is hard to make year-on-year comparisons because the goalposts have been changed. The government will need to find more nuanced ways to monitor trends over time that take these changes into account.

We are also concerned by the impact of the published points allocation for the legacy GCSEs. In 2017, when we move from an 8 point to a 9 point scale, the gain between lower grades will be less than the gain between higher grades (moving from F to E is a gain of 0.5, whereas moving from B to A is a gain of 1.5). This will unfairly disadvantage schools that have a majority of students predicted lower grades, and undermines Progress 8's principle that every child's progress should count equally.

ACCOUNTABILITY (CONTINUED)

Furthermore, each school will have an estimated point score, based on the 2016 results. The estimated point score (for example 44 points) will be the same for each school in 2016, 2017 and 2018. But because each grade is worth fewer points from 2017 onwards, schools will have to get better grades from 2017 just to reach their expected point score. The table below shows that the year-on-year impact will be so much greater on schools with a low ability cohort.

GCSE grade	G	F	E	D	C	B	A	A*
2016 points	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
2017 points	1	1.5	2	3	4	5.5	7	8.5
Difference	0	-0.5	-1	-1	-1	-0.5	0	+0.5

Again, this will mean schools that have a majority of students predicted grades G to C will get fewer points in 2017 than in 2016, even if their students achieve the same grades. This needs to be reviewed to ensure these schools are not unfairly impacted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further reform the inspection framework to ensure schools have real autonomy to make decisions in the interests of their students.

Undertake a review of the legacy GCSE points allocation, and make a public statement confirming how this data will be interpreted.

CONCLUSION

These recommendations are not an exhaustive list, but we believe that their implementation would begin to move us towards a more intelligent, less-fragmented system, in which the key drivers of school improvement come from the profession itself.

We know that there are examples of excellence happening across the SSAT network. Visionary practitioners are already sowing the seeds of change. Our system needs to work to make this easier, and to make it easier for our teachers and leaders to do what's best for their young people.

SSAT continues to work with our members to lead school improvement through innovation and collaboration. For more information about our work, including our campaign to redesign schooling, visit www.ssatuk.co.uk.

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