

Teaching about climate change

A report into climate change and sustainability education in schools

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Introduction

Summary of findings

This report seeks to improve our understanding of climate change and sustainability education in schools, through understanding the views of teachers, school leaders, young people and parents.

Through the polling and focus groups undertaken for this project it is clear that climate change - and education about climate change - is an important issue to parents, teachers, school leaders and young people.

An overwhelming majority of parents (72%) see schools as the best place for this education to happen. However, it is also clear from our research that the availability and consistency of climate change and sustainability education at the moment could be higher, and that teachers would benefit from further support to facilitate this.

We heard very clearly from the young people we spoke to that they are keen to learn about climate change and sustainability, but that they sometimes feel their teachers aren't interested.

However, what we found when we spoke to teachers was a desire to teach these issues more, but a sense that their schools did not give them the time, confidence or resources to teach about climate change to a high degree of quality. As such, they were worried about leaving their students more confused or anxious.

In order to improve climate change and sustainability education, teachers reported that they needed both the time and space in curriculum terms to teach it, as well as the right tools and support to feel confident in teaching about it to a high standard.

The key policy implications from our findings are:

1. That we believe there is space for an external body or organisation to provide the support that teachers and leaders say they need to improve the availability and consistency of climate change and sustainability education, free of charge.
2. That across schools and academy trusts, senior leaders (including sustainability leads) should think about what more can be done to embed climate change and sustainability within the wider ethos and culture of their school(s).
3. That Government may wish to consider including climate change and sustainability more substantially and in more detail across the national curriculum and within GCSE criteria. By this we mean ensuring they have both sufficient time and space in the curriculum and are embedded across a wide range of subjects.

Background and context

Previous polling of teachers' attitudes indicates that almost 30% of teachers are not confident teaching about climate change, with 18% citing underconfidence or lack of expertise as a barrier to teaching about climate change in their lessons.¹ In addition, research conducted by the Children's Commissioner for England found that 39% of children aged 9–17 felt the environment was one of their main worries about the future, making it the second most common answer, with a 12-year-old and 15-year-old respectively saying:²

"If we don't fix climate change, we won't have a future."

"The effects of it may be irreversible, and it is very daunting for young people to have the responsibility of dealing with its effects."

But until the research summarised in this report, we had very little understanding of what was driving those views from teachers and young people, or what the views of parents were. We wanted to know how much parents think about the role of schools in teaching about climate change and what they want from their children's schools in this area – and we wanted to hear directly from young people themselves about what they want.

This project was therefore commissioned to better understand what parents, teachers and young people think about the teaching of climate change and sustainability, and what can be done to improve the teaching of these vitally important issues.

Methodology

To this end, the IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, commissioned Public First to carry out a programme of quantitative and qualitative opinion research. Public First conducted a poll of 1,007 parents of children in school (aged 5–18) between the 18th and 24th of January 2022, with the results weighted by region and socio-economic group to nationally representative proportions. We believe that this is the first time parents have been asked what they think about climate change education on this scale.

Secondly, in order to delve deeper into the reasons behind people's views on climate change education, Public First conducted five in-depth focus groups with primary school leaders, primary school teachers, secondary school leaders, secondary school teachers, and young people in Years 12–13. Our teachers and leaders were predominantly based in the North West and South East/London. These teachers and leaders were not recruited on the basis of any previous knowledge or understanding of the subject matter, and in fact they did not know the topic of the focus group discussions in advance.

The remainder of this report sets out Public First's findings and recommendations in more detail.

¹ <https://www.teachthefuture.uk/blog/new-research-shows-nearly-three-quarters-of-teachers-havent-received-enough-training-on-climate-change>

² https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/occ_the_big_ask_the_big_answer_2021.pdf

There is demand for high quality climate change education in schools

Climate change is considered an important issue

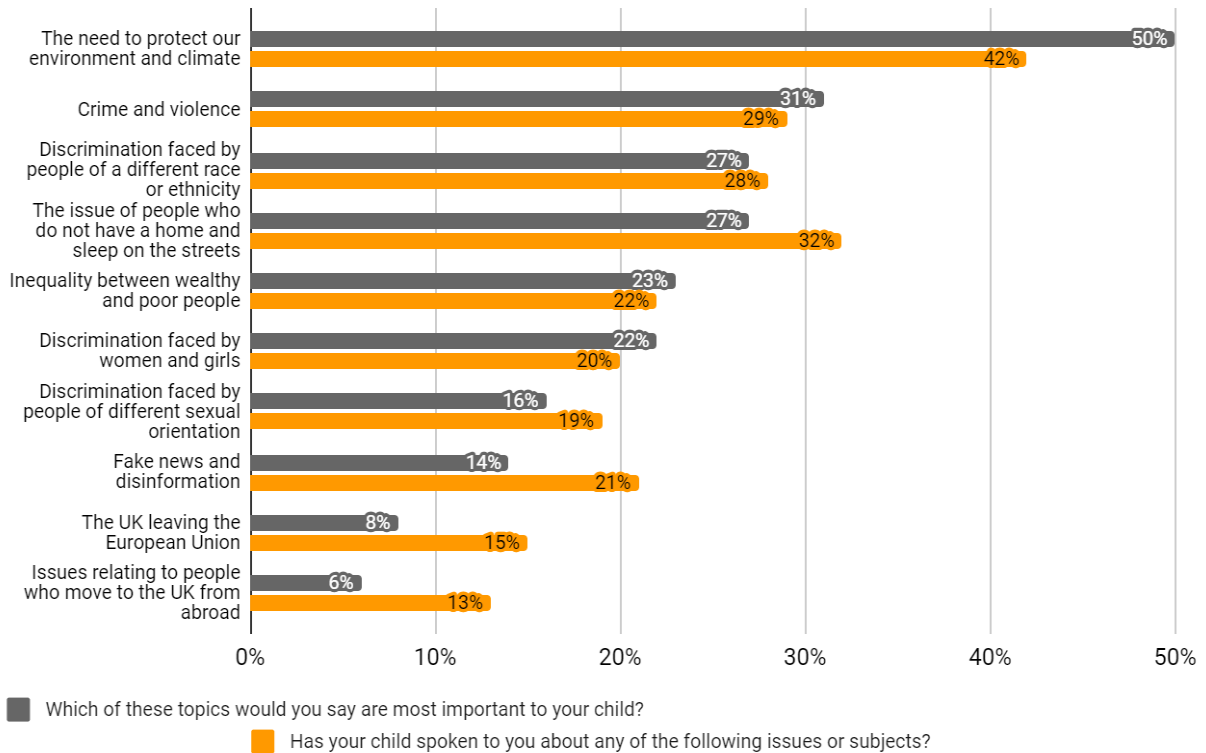
"I don't think anyone is going to disagree that it's important. I think all staff, all students, all stakeholders of the school know that it is an important conversation."

Secondary Assistant Head Teacher, North West.

"I think it is a big problem, but I think it is also very understated... people sometimes try and sweep it under the carpet and I don't think that's something we can really do anymore."

Student, South West.

From both the poll of parents and conversations with young people and their teachers, there is a strong consensus that climate change and sustainability are amongst the most important issues for children right now. For example, among the topics tested in parent polling, climate change was considered the most important issue to children, cited by 50% of parents. Environmental and climate concerns were also the top issue (among the ones tested) that parents reported their child speaking to them about, cited by 42% of parents. This is far above other issues, with 'crime and violence' being considered the second most important (31%) and 'people who do not have a home and sleep on the streets' being the second most talked about issue (32%).



Exploring this further through focus groups, our young people told us that climate change was indeed a big problem that they think needs more attention paid to it. Teachers in our focus groups were also aware of this, identifying that climate change was a top priority for their students – much more so than for older generations.

"It's quite obvious to see young people often speak up about it more than older people."
Student, South East.

"I would say they are much more aware of it than I would have been at their age. It's much more of a discussion and a topic for them."
Secondary Teacher, South East.

"I know for a fact that it is certainly very high up on the agenda for students, and I think generationally it feels like young people are much more concerned with it than older people are."
Secondary Head of Department, London.

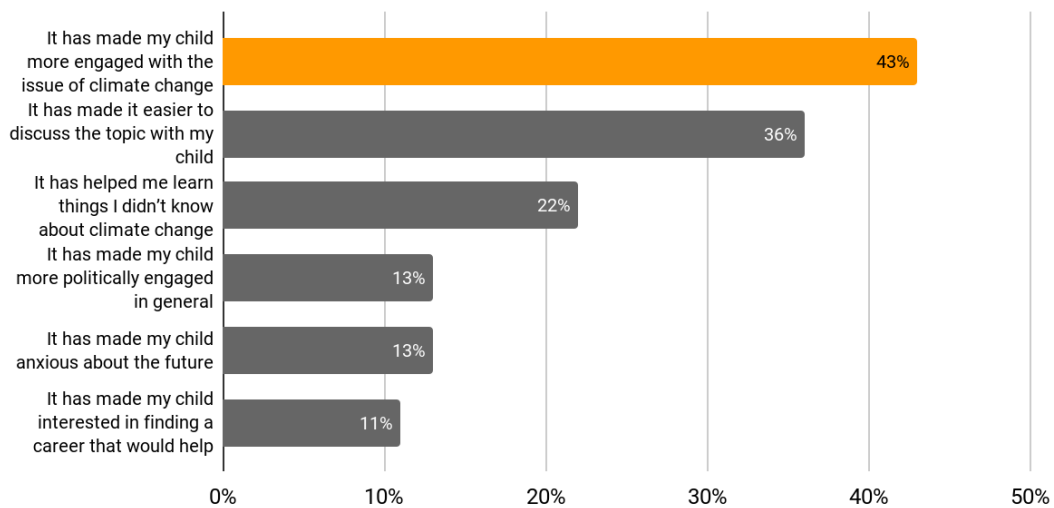
Learning about climate change is therefore important, and people think schools are the best place for it to be taught

"I think it is important that school does educate about it and I don't think that there's any age that's too early. It's just how you introduce it."
Primary Teacher, North West.

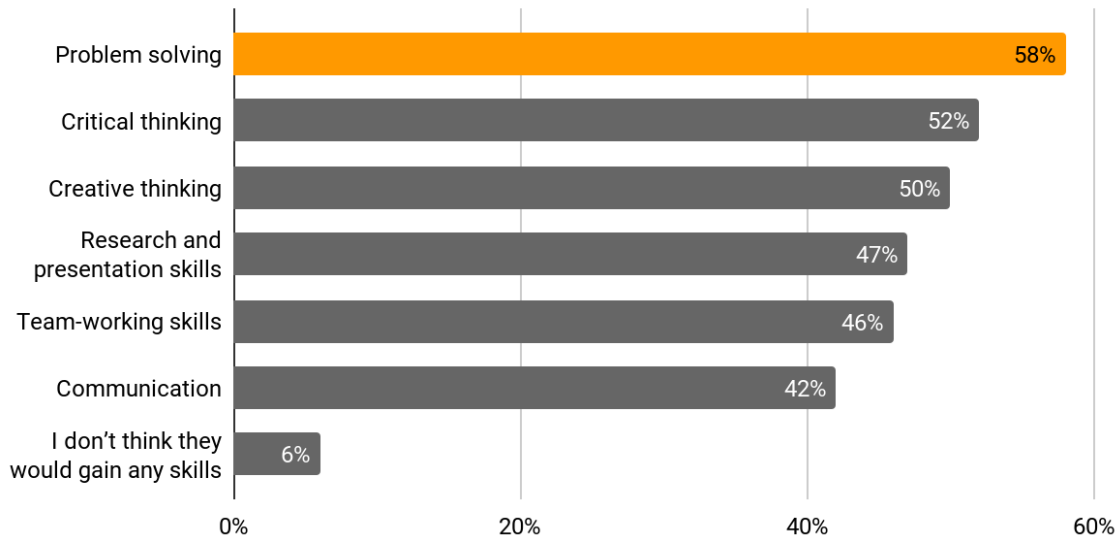
With climate change being considered the most important issue for young people, it follows that the vast majority (84%) of parents thought that it was important that their child be taught about it. This is not to say that parents don't want their children to be taught about other issues too, as polling data also shows that, for example, 92% of parents think it is important for their children to be taught about online safety. It is clear, therefore, that parents think learning about current issues in the world – including climate change – is important for their children as part of their overall education.

Delving deeper into *why* 84% of parents thought that it was important that their child was taught about climate change, it became apparent that increased climate change education was considered by parents to have many benefits for young people, such as making them more engaged with the issue (43%). Many parents also agreed that climate change education provides transferable skills, such as problem solving (58%) and critical thinking (52%).

Which of the following have you experienced as a result of your child learning about climate change in school, if any?

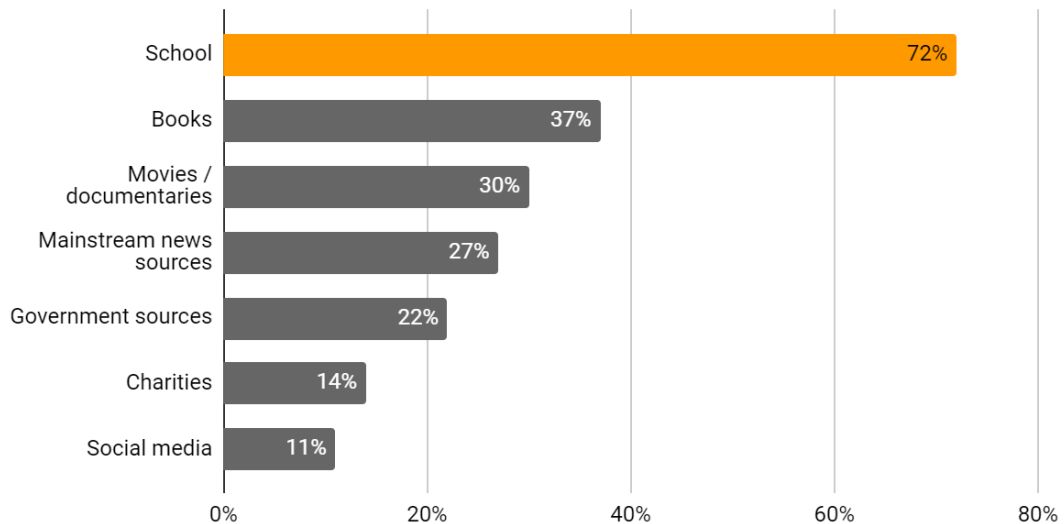


What, if any, transferable skills do you think children would gain from Climate Change Education?



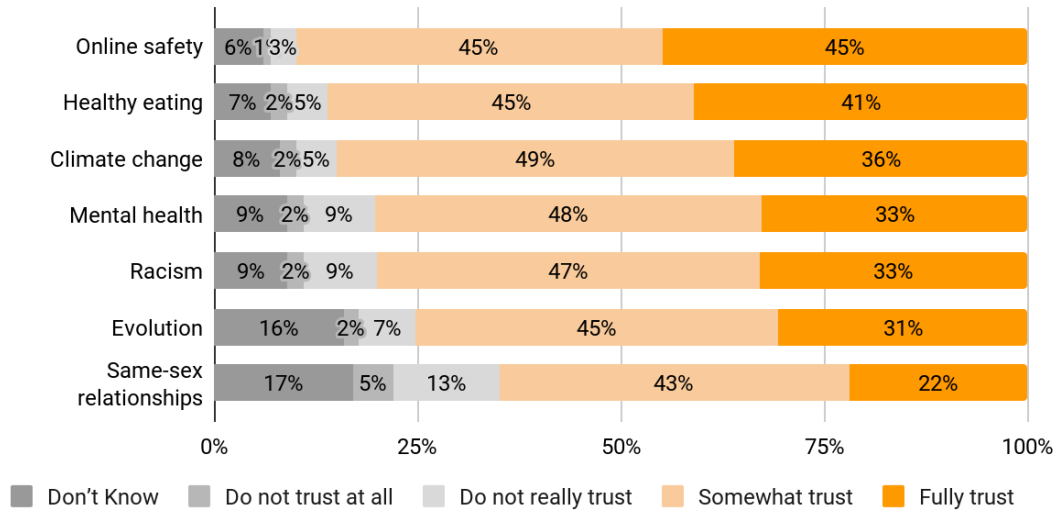
In terms of *where* parents would like their children to learn about climate change, schools were by far the most popular source (72%), with books coming a distant second (37%) and social media being the least preferred (11%). This was even the case across groups of parents with lower levels of concern for climate change, where schools remained the top preferred source.

Which would you most prefer your child to learn about climate change from, if any?



This is because parents overwhelmingly trust schools as the place where climate change education should take place, with 85% of them trusting schools and teachers to be fully equipped to teach the topic. This was the third highest score among topics tested, above mental health (81%) and just behind online safety (90%) and healthy eating (86%).

To what extent do you trust, or not, schools and teachers to be fully equipped to teach about the following?



Focus group discussions also confirmed that teachers and young people think it is important for climate change to be covered in schools, with primary teachers specifically stressing that early exposure to climate change education in schools is important for children. It was thought that this is especially true in the present day where there is so much information available on the internet and through social media, making it important for school to act as a filter for what is potentially unreliable or biased.

"I think early exposure is a good thing, because it opens the channels for further on into school when they can talk about it in more detail and perhaps when they have a greater understanding of it. I think it is good to sow the seeds while they're in early years...and if it sticks in their long term memory, when it's brought up further on in school, they've had a gateway to it."
Primary Teacher, North West.

"Early exposure can change lifestyle choices."
Primary Teacher, North West.

"The earlier the better."
Primary Teacher, North West.

"I think there is a wealth of information that is easily accessible, but unless it is the top hit on google and the first click that students go to, there's a real danger that they're getting a potentially biased opinion."
Secondary Assistant Head, North West.

However, the current availability and consistency of climate change education could be improved

Climate change is discussed in schools less than people want

"I wouldn't say that it is something that is regularly talked about in our school."

Primary Teacher, North West.

"You just don't get taught about it at all...you'd never hear about it from a teacher."

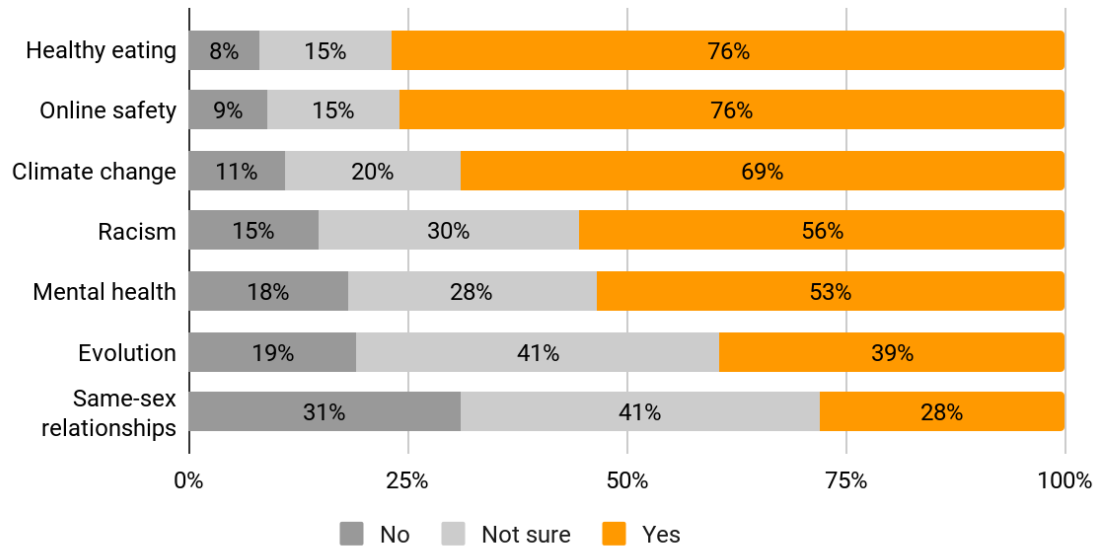
Student, North West.

The majority of parents (69%) think that their child has been taught about climate change in school, with only one in ten (11%) thinking that their child hasn't. This means that climate change is considered by parents to be taught more in schools than racism (56%) and mental health (53%). Senior leaders were also in agreement with this, mentioning how climate change and sustainability might appear in lessons such as geography, chemistry, biology or PSHE. The young people we spoke to (as well as the teachers) gave a different perspective, with many saying they had gone years without anything being taught to them on climate change, and we discuss this in more detail later in the report.

"It's definitely mentioned in the science curriculum, it's definitely mentioned within our form time programme, and it is touched on in a PSHE manner as well...it also partly overlaps with some geography work as well."

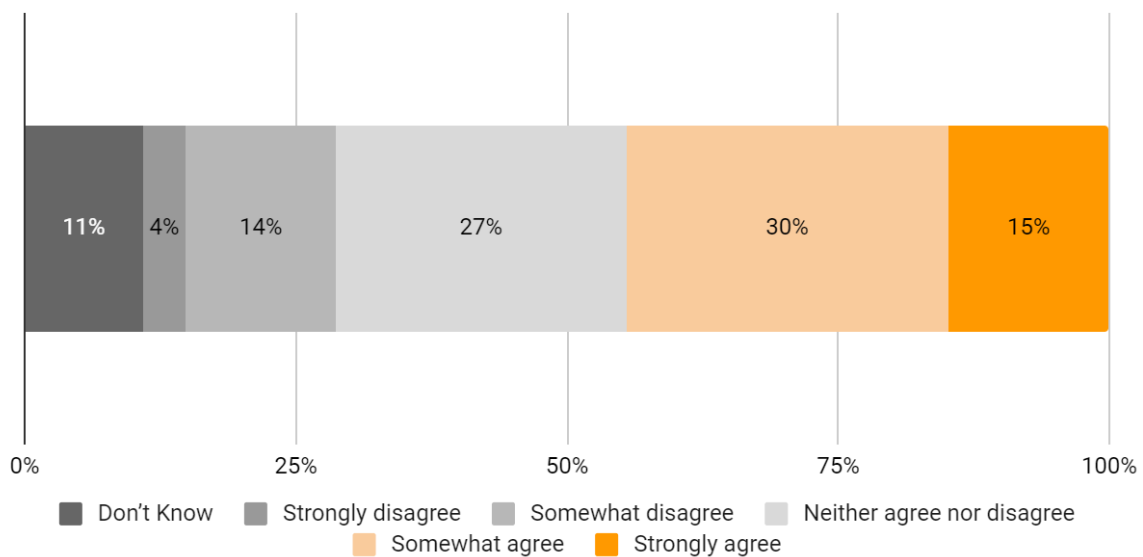
Secondary Assistant Head, North West.

Has your child has been taught about the following topics in school?



45% of parents agreed with the statement that there is not *enough* education about climate change in school. When asked what they would like to see more of, the highest scoring topics were 'environmental initiatives in their school (e.g. composting, cycling schemes, food growing)' with 42% and 'discussions and activities to encourage personal action for the environment (e.g. how to recycle, how to not waste energy, composting, green transportation)' with 33%. In our focus groups students and teachers alike expressed concern about the level of climate change education in schools and an interest in increasing this amount.

Do you agree or disagree with the following: There is not enough education on climate change at schools



"I feel like it is not discussed enough [in school]. I feel like it may be a tick box, a one lesson thing, if that."
Secondary Teacher, London.

"I don't think it gets talked about enough in schools."
Student, North West.

"It doesn't get taught an awful lot in my school."
Student, South East.

"I think the last focus I had on climate change was in primary school. I don't even think I did anything proper on it in secondary school at all. I didn't take geography as one of my options, so the second I stopped doing it, that was the last time I heard about climate change for ages."
Student, North West.

Even though social media was the least preferred (11%) platform by parents for their children to learn about climate change from, students expressed how social media was actually one of the most common sources of information for them on climate change.

"Where I get most of my information from is online and social media... because even though it's pushed in my school, they're not really doing anything. They just mention it every once in a while."
Student, South East.

"The media is one of the main sources of education for young people nowadays, whether it's TikTok, Facebook, TV, YouTube."
Secondary Teacher, London.

We heard from teachers that a consequence of this availability of information on social media led to - despite climate change being considered the most important and most spoken about issue for children by parents - these issues often following trend cycles for young people. As a result, there were reports from teachers that there was a risk climate change might drop down the agenda at the expense of COVID or other social issues. One teacher even mentioned there was a risk that climate change might be avoided as a conversation for some young people because they have accumulated so much anxiety about other issues that they don't even have the capacity to think about something as long-term and existential as climate change.

"For me personally, it's always been something that is at the forefront of my thinking and how I lead my daily life. But when COVID hit, it really took a backseat."
Secondary Teacher, South East.

"I think so many students now have so much anxiety, post COVID, that they don't really have the capacity at the moment to think about something like climate change. Actually, they're trying to get through the day."
Secondary Head of Department, London.

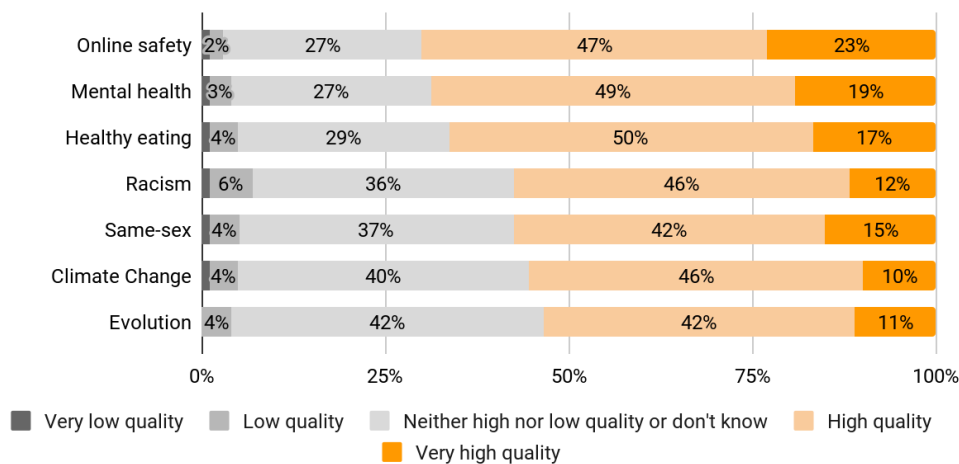
As well as concerns about the amount it is taught, teachers and young people are concerned about the quality of teaching too

“If you asked me now to try and recall something specific from a climate lesson I’ve been taught, I couldn’t.”
Student, West Midlands.

“I’ve taught a range of humanities. Even within geography it’s covered lightly, but not in enough depth to make an impact on the children.”
Secondary Teacher, South East.

Even though most parents (69%) reported that their children are taught about climate change in schools, many did not have a clear sense of the quality of that teaching. For example, when asked how they would rate the quality of the education their child received on climate change in school, 40% of parents felt neutral or didn’t know. Whilst over half (56%) of parents said that the quality of teaching on climate change their child received in school was either high or very high, this was still the second worst topic tested. In contrast, online safety and mental health received 70% and 68% respectively.

In general, how would you rate the quality of education your child has received at their school on the following topics?



Furthermore, despite 85% of parents trusting schools and teachers to be fully equipped to teach about climate change, through conversations with teachers we found that they did not think their school provided them with the right tools to teach about climate change properly. This follows a survey conducted by Opinium in 2020, on behalf of Teach the Future, which found that almost a third (30%) of teachers are not very or not at all confident in teaching about climate change, with 18% citing underconfidence or lack of expertise as a barrier to teaching about climate change in their lessons.³ Building on this, in our focus groups teachers reported feeling ill-equipped and unconfident in answering questions asked by their students and said they felt worried that they would leave their students more worried or anxious than they were before.

³ <https://www.teachthefuture.uk/blog/new-research-shows-nearly-three-quarters-of-teachers-havent-received-enough-training-on-climate-change>

"I could talk about climate change in the sense that this is my opinion on what's happening, and also in the broad sense. But statistically I don't know enough. I would need to have the information taught to me to be confident...mine would only be based on what I've just read, in my own time."

Secondary Teacher, London.

"I couldn't be questioned on the science of it confidently at all...I definitely do not feel comfortable 100% in being able to answer all of their questions, or not to leave them more confused than when they perhaps started. Which is not great."

Secondary Teacher, London.

"I think as educators, being equipped with knowing the balance between what to give them and then what would cause more anxiety is the real play there."

Secondary Teacher, North West.

"I would have to go off on my own, at home, do my own research, do my own resources. There is no time at school."

Secondary Teacher, London.

Whilst only 13% of parents reported their child being more anxious about the future since learning about climate change in school, there was consensus in focus groups that poor quality climate change education, coupled with the difficulty of schools/teachers acting as the necessary buffer against unreliable and biased sources, could lead to potentially detrimental effects on students' mental health and wellbeing. Whilst it was important for children to know about it, many teachers were afraid that teaching about climate change without the right resources would just add to students' already high anxiety levels and feed into a general feeling of hopelessness. At the same time, they felt that teaching about climate change without the right resources, support and training would also impact their own wellbeing, with one teacher mentioning how it seems "hard to see the point in your daily life" when you focus too much on climate change.

"I think a lot of young people are aware, and there is consensus to do your bit. But a lot of the time, it just feels out of your control. We're not the policymakers, we can't stop the big corporations that contribute more to the crisis than we do in our whole lives. It just feels disproportionate."

Student, West Midlands.

"I think individuals know about it and they want to change it, but because they feel like they can't change it on their own, they won't spread awareness on their own, so it won't ever go anywhere."

Student, North West.

"You feel quite helpless. There is nothing that you feel like you can do."

Student, North West.

"I think it is a massive issue and something that I think is so big that if I thought about it all the time, I wouldn't be able to go about my daily life."

Secondary Teacher, London.

Students feel their teachers are not interested in teaching about climate change and sustainability...

In talking to our group of young people it became apparent quite quickly that whilst the students did indeed want to learn about climate change and sustainability, especially in school, they felt like their teachers simply weren't interested in teaching about it. There was a feeling that teachers only wanted to focus on the core essentials of their job and did not have the desire or inclination to do anything outside that.

"I feel like they [the teachers] are not that bothered about it [climate change], unless it is involved in what they do."

Student, North West.

"I think there is a real culture in schools of teaching the bare minimum, for the teachers especially."

Student, South West.

"It feels like they're doing it for the sake of it, and then not really going all the way to encourage anything further than it."

Student, West Midlands.

If anything, our 17-18 year old students felt like they knew more than their teachers when it came to knowledge on climate change and sustainability, which meant that they wouldn't even want to go to their teachers if they had questions and chose instead to use other sources of information, such as social media or the news.

"I think...we know the same as our teachers or we know more than them."

Student, South East.

"I personally wouldn't go out of my way to ask a teacher to do a lesson on climate change. I don't know what I would get out of it. If I wanted to learn about climate change, I would go to the news."

Student, West Midlands.

As such, students felt like it was a lottery that depended on how interested their teacher or overall school was in climate change as to whether they would be receiving the right level and quality of climate change education.

"It depends how passionate your teacher is about it."

Student, North West.

"Depends how much the school wants to invest in it."

Student, South East.

"If a lot of students come together and they go to someone who they know is passionate about that subject, I think that's the only real way you can get something done about it."

Student, North West.

...however teachers are interested, but feel they are not given the scope to teach it.

In contrast to what the students thought, we heard that teachers were actually very interested in providing high quality climate change education for their students – across all subjects. Instead of a lack of interest, as perceived by students, teachers felt the issue was more about whether the school and the senior leadership prioritised it as an issue.

“I wouldn’t say the support is there either. Because there are bigger things going on at school. The pressure of getting results, the pressure of getting those grades for students. That’s the priority. Talking about climate change...I could do that with year seven/eight. But from year nine onwards, forget it. They [senior leadership] want to hammer everything else, not climate change – and I think that’s why it is not in the curriculum as well to begin with.”

Secondary Teacher, London.

“If it’s not a priority for SLT, it could get lost.”

Primary Teacher, North West.

For teachers, they wanted the right tools and resources to provide quality climate change education. They said that, guided by the national curriculum and content for examinations, senior leadership decides on the school’s curriculum and ethos, and therefore have some power to give teachers the scope to teach about climate change if they want to. However, it was thought that senior leadership was too focussed on academic performance and – especially at the moment – COVID catchup.

“I don’t think it has really been a priority in the last eighteen months in our school with the amount of children in and out.”

Primary Teacher, North West.

“It would be nice if it was in the curriculum more.”

Primary Teacher, North West.

Without senior leadership making it a priority for the school, teachers suggested that they would struggle to teach about climate change alongside all their other competing priorities. Teachers expressed how they are busy enough covering curriculum content, COVID catch-up and looking after the mental health and wellbeing of their students.

“As much as we’d like to teach them about climate change, time is so precious.”

Primary Teacher, North West.

“As teachers, we have a lot on our plates. Getting grades and making sure our kids’ well being is OK – all the pressures of our job. Then you throw climate change in the mix!”

Secondary Teacher, London.

“I feel like there is not enough time. Form time is really the only space where you can discuss it open endedly, but for most of us that is

only 10–15 minutes. So there’s not really enough space or time to discuss the issue, whereas it should be given so much importance.”

Secondary Teacher, South East.

“It’d be lovely to go off piste and discuss something like this [climate change] – and I’m sure the kids would generally find it quite interesting – but if it’s not on the curriculum, I’m afraid I don’t have time to talk about it.”

Primary Teacher, North West.

The conversations we had with senior and middle leaders largely confirmed this. We heard that they felt as if there was already a lot to be getting on with in schools and that climate change was not at the top of their priority lists right now. For them, even though climate change and sustainability are included in some subjects the national curriculum, they felt as if they did not have the capacity to go above and beyond the minimum.

“I’ve got enough to do. Within schools, we all have enough to get on with.”

Secondary Head of Department, London.

“I think the poor new staff have got that much to worry about that this isn’t going to hit the top of anyone’s agenda to be blunt.”

Secondary Assistant Head, North West.

Policy implications

It is clear from this research that climate change – and education about climate change – is an important issue. However, it is also clear that the availability and consistency of climate change and sustainability education at the moment in schools could be greater, and that teachers could benefit from further support to facilitate this.

As outlined in this report, we heard clearly from the young people we spoke to that they are very keen to learn about climate change and sustainability, but that they sometimes felt their teachers weren't interested. However, when we spoke to teachers we found support for teaching it more, but a sense that schools do not give them the time, confidence or resources to teach about climate change more consistently. As such, they were worried about leaving their students more confused or anxious than they might have started out.

In order to improve climate change and sustainability education, teachers therefore reported that they needed something that would both give them the time to teach about climate change and the right tools to feel confident in teaching about. We therefore believe there is potential space for an external organisation to take this on and deliver the training and support that teachers and leaders say they need.

“It would be really great as a teacher to be able to find a bank of resources, or a website or an organisation, where you can go to receive some training on how to deliver some content in an engaging way, with also some reliable facts and figures and resources, which are reliable and correct and scientifically accurate.”

Secondary Teacher, London.

We also suggest that across schools and academy trusts, senior leaders should think about what more can be done to include climate change and sustainability within the wider ethos and culture of their school(s). This could be done working in tandem with the government or another external organisation – for example in the form of some kind of climate change and sustainability accreditation, as outlined in the government's recent strategy.

Finally, we also suggest that the government may wish to consider including climate change and sustainability more substantially and in more detail across the national curriculum.

Summary of policy implications:

1. That we believe there is space for an external body or organisation to provide the support that teachers and leaders say they need to improve the availability and consistency of climate change and sustainability education, free of charge.
2. That across schools and academy trusts, senior leaders (including sustainability leads) should think about what more can be done to embed climate change and sustainability within the wider ethos and culture of their school(s).
3. That Government may wish to consider including climate change and sustainability more substantially and in more detail across the national curriculum and within GCSE criteria. By this we mean ensuring they have both sufficient time and space in the curriculum and are embedded across a wide range of subjects.

The role of an external body or organisation in supporting climate change and sustainability education

"It would take a lot of the pressure off us as teachers...because we are not climate scientists or people who have studied this on a regular basis. So being able to go somewhere that is a neutral source of research, referenced information, lessons, anything like that – I think it would be a relief and I think it would probably actually lead to me definitely talking about this in the classroom more if I knew I had a bank of resources I could call on."

Secondary Teacher, London.

In all our focus group conversations, ranging from young people to secondary leaders, there was an interest in – and enthusiasm for – the creation of an external body to support teachers in delivering high quality education on climate change and sustainability. For teachers, an organisation that could provide easy to use, practical and reliable information, as well as training, would help them save them time and instil them with more confidence to teach about climate change and sustainability.

"If such an organisation existed, I think it would be useful. Absolutely."

Secondary Assistant Head, London.

"Anything that makes us feel more prepared but will engage the kids is always going to be a hit with teachers."

Primary Teacher, North West.

"There's definitely scope for it. I'm all for having an expert in the school or a bank of resources, which are really good quality and correct and not false news to refer to when teaching climate change."

Secondary Teacher, London.

Teachers also placed great emphasis on having a single source of support rather than having to manually sift through different sources of information and training.

"There's a wealth of information out there, but it is ploughing through it to see what's valuable and what isn't."

Primary Teacher, North West.

"I am confident that there is a lot of information that is highly accurate and relevant. But there is a separate skill in sourcing that and getting a balanced opinion from different sources."

Secondary Assistant Head, North West.

We also heard from teachers an interest in practical resources that related to tangible things in the real world, subject specific and cross-curricular lesson plans, support for after school club/extracurricular activities, case studies and educational games or apps.

"Some of the best courses I've been on have been where they give you practical ideas as well, of things that work and things that people have

experienced in action and have worked for the kids. That makes it easier for the workload because you don't have to think of the ideas yourself."

Primary Teacher, North West.

One key potential barrier for such an organisation would be around releasing teachers for training. Teachers stressed that securing teaching cover for training events was almost as much of an issue as finding the budget itself. Any organisation would have to think about how it could offer training and support flexibly.

"The reality of actually implementing anything takes time...and it's not just the cost of going on the course, it's the cost of the cover for the day [and then figuring out how to implement what you've learnt]."

Primary Teacher, North West.

"For SLT staff, that's probably their biggest priority. we need to get the students through their English GCSE. I don't think they would want me taking time out to go on that course."

Secondary Teacher, London.

"I would love to have a qualification just stating that I am clued up and I'm competent enough to deliver this content."

Secondary Teacher, London.

Including climate change and sustainability in schools' wider culture and ethos

We heard from teachers that arguably the most important barrier to consider in driving change in schools is the need to get senior leadership behind the idea of supporting climate change and sustainability education in schools. Right now, the general sentiment amongst teachers is that some schools don't want to focus too much on the topic because of its complexity and the risks associated with getting it wrong. Without any actual incentive to teach it within schools, it was thought that the topic could be left untouched, even if a new organisation was set up which might help make it easier for teachers to teach about it.

"There are many great resources for many great things but you only use it if you have the time to access it, or if you're told to."

Primary Teacher, North West.

We therefore believe that the evidence presented in this report should act as a motivator for senior leadership teams to re-assess the level to which climate change and sustainability education is a core part of their school's ethos and culture. It is clear that the issue is of central importance to young people and parents, and so we believe there is a clear case for senior leadership teams to give it a greater priority within the running of the school. This applies in particular to new 'sustainability leads' for whom this will be a core part of their role.

As such, another core function of any external organisation could be to encourage senior leadership to support the teaching of climate change within schools. We heard from teachers that some of the best ways to do this might be through providing schools with some form of climate change and sustainability accreditation.

“Our headteacher loves an accreditation...I think they like having criteria to tick off...that’s how you change, it becomes a whole school ethos.”
Primary Teacher, North West.

“Anything linked to some kind of monetary reward or competitive edge would be brilliant.”
Secondary Assistant Head, North West.

“Unless there is a proper incentive for the teachers to learn more about climate change, and to teach it better, then I don’t think much is going to change.”
Student, South West.

Government may wish to consider including climate change and sustainability more broadly – and in more detail – across the curriculum.

“As teachers we have so many things that we have to worry about, I think climate change is probably not the highest on the agenda. But if it did become one of the things that the government decides should be more present in the curriculum, then of course I think all of us will be looking around and searching for places where we can get information and get resources.”
Secondary Assistant Head, London.

In our focus group discussions we heard that an external body could raise the quality of climate change education by training teachers and providing them with high quality resources, but ultimately if teachers are not given enough scope to teach about it, then there is a risk that the subject may be neglected.

“I think if money was to be invested in whichever organisation provides something for schools, it runs the risk of never having the impact or gravitas unless it was part of an individual curriculum. Because whilst it is not part of a curriculum, staff are going to say ‘I need my curriculum time to get through, and I don’t want to necessarily be diverted away from something else’.”
Secondary Assistant Head, North West.

“I don’t think it will be a top priority for schools unless it is made a priority for schools.”
Secondary Assistant Head, London.

“I think it’s not talked about because it’s not on the curriculum...I’m sure there are lots of schools which do teach it but because it’s not specifically taught outright, on the national curriculum, then it’s not something that is going to obviously come up in general conversation or general class discussion.”
Primary Teacher, North West.

As such, it became apparent from our focus groups that a top-down approach would be helpful, whereby the government considers including climate change and sustainability more widely (and in more depth) across the whole curriculum. It was suggested that doing so would

enable teachers to include the topic in their teaching, in more detail, and across a wider range of subjects.

"We don't have time to add this to the curriculum. So therefore it needs to be embedded from the government end into the curriculum."

Secondary Teacher, London.

"I don't think there is enough of it in science to be honest, we literally just teach what it is, how it works, and that's it. We don't stress the importance of and the significance of it today and the impact that it is having."

Secondary Teacher, London.

"If you put it as an extracurricular activity, some people will try and avoid it."

Student, South West.

"It was great for maybe the week we promoted it, but then beyond that it fizzled into the background until the same time next year when we're doing it with the next cohort and push it again. It wasn't a continuous issue."

Secondary Teacher, North West.

We heard from teachers that this is because the government is seen to set the overall direction for schools by deciding what is to be examined and, at the moment, the priority seems to be COVID catchup and exam grades. A way for the government to support climate change and sustainability education could therefore be to outline potential progression in understanding and responding to climate change across key stages and subjects, ensuring it is included within exam specifications. The new natural history GCSE is a welcome step in this direction although it will not be studied by all children. Actions such as these would ensure that senior leadership teams make the embedding of climate change and sustainability a priority within their schools' curricula.

"But as soon as KS4 hits and exams start, that [climate change education] is just out the window and we are back on exams skills and exam texts. And it seems because it's not part of the exam curriculum, it's just here for when we can have that creative side."

Secondary Teacher, London.

"Whether it needs to be an entire topic or unit in itself, I'm not sure. But definitely there should be more of an opportunity to discuss things like that [in the curriculum]."

Primary Teacher, North West.

"I feel that it should be embedded more in the curriculum and that it should be taught more in schools."

Secondary Teacher, London.

"I think it is one of those things where you need to constantly be reviewing the curriculum. It won't stand still, there will always be new changes in terms of new technology."

Secondary Head of Department, London.

In terms of implementation, focus group discussions also highlighted how teachers and young people want these issues to be embedded across the whole curriculum and not just in

geography and science lessons. This was echoed amongst the majority of parents (66%), who agreed with the statement that climate change education should be integrated into every aspect of the curriculum. More specifically, and reiterated in focus groups, an overwhelming majority of parents (86%) also supported their child's school taking a more holistic approach to climate change education by expanding action to the whole school rather than only teaching about it in the classroom.

"It needs to be a whole school thing. Not just discussed in lessons...SLT or teachers delivering climate specific assemblies and making sure it's being discussed in all subjects."

Secondary Teacher, South East.

"Covering it everywhere, but at different levels, would be useful. Because then you could go to the place that best suits how you want to be told about it, or what your current understanding is....To have it at different levels in different places – and for it to be spread – I think that would be more useful, it'd be more accessible as well."

Student, South West.

"I think it would be good to have one subject dedicated to it – whether it is PSHE or life skills – but...there's so much scope for it to be discussed in all subjects."

Secondary Teacher, South East.