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Towards a new generation of Community Schools – listening to parents of the Red Wall

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Research findings and policy implications

Authors: Ed Dorrell, Reza Schwitzer and Meg Price - **Public First**

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Foreword

We know first-hand the immense power of education. Our members up and down the country are united by one thing – passion for improving children's attainment, wellbeing and happiness. Education is, or at least should be, the great leveller. At its best, education ensures that our children can succeed regardless of wealth, status, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or disability.

If we want to harness education to unleash the potential of children across our nation, we need a positive vision. It is easy to get engrossed in technical policy debates about pedagogy, funding, recruitment and retention, and other vital issues, but once in a while it is also important for us to step back, consider the state of the sector as a whole, and challenge ourselves on what our vision should be for the next ten or twenty years. Too often politics is short-termist and forgets to put children and parents at the heart of policy making. Talking directly to parents forces us to think differently and creatively, setting out not just the "not that" but also the "instead this".

That is why we are delighted that Public First has drafted this report, setting out what they believe parents, and specifically parents of the 'red wall', want to see from the school system. They have focussed specifically on primary education, though we are sure many of the lessons are applicable more widely.

There is some real food for thought in the report, particularly that parents care about many of the things that go unsaid in the day-to-day debate on education policy and that they do not naturally lean towards either traditionalist or progressive education philosophies – they want the best of both.

Crucially, the report sets out that parents want schools which are connected to them and the wider community – with the word 'communication' coming up again and again. That could mean more contact time with the school staff they value above everything else – including teaching assistants who we were proud to note parents said are the backbone of the day to day for their children.

In short, this report echoes our belief that schools must return to their rightful place at the heart of our villages, towns and cities. This new generation of Community Schools, as the report calls them, could build on the best of traditional education practices, such

as a rigorous focus on core academic subjects, whilst also introducing many of the wider skills and activities which parents equally value.

We hope you find this report as interesting as we have, and we look forward to engaging in the fascinating debate it will no doubt spark.

Jon Richards

(Assistant General Secretary, UNISON)

Nick Brook

(Deputy General Secretary, NAHT)

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Methodology

Public First, a consultancy and research organisation, conducted the analysis for this report. We used a combination of national polling and 10 focus groups to better understand public opinion towards education.

The focus groups consisted of groups of between five and seven parents - of social grade C1 to D and a mixture of Labour and Conservative voters - from the areas set out below. They took place across 2021 and 2022, and we tracked minor changes to attitudes over that time.

- Milton Keynes
- Dudley
- Stoke
- Reading
- Bolton
- Teesside
- Derby
- Nottinghamshire
- Oldham
- Wolverhampton

The polling used a nationally representative sample of 1,000 parents, with a booster sample of parents from red wall constituencies. This booster sample does not skew the national results but does enable us to examine opinions specific to the red wall with greater confidence.

Throughout the analysis we focussed predominantly on primary education, with some questions on early years as well, but we have not discussed issues in secondary, further or higher education. However, we believe many of our key findings are applicable more widely.

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Key findings

1. There was strong support in general from parents for their local schools – parents were very content with the teaching and learning that happens in the classroom

2. Parents valued good communication above almost anything else – both when expressing positive and negative opinions on their school, communication was seen as key

3. Parents wanted both core academic teaching of maths and English but also wider subjects such as PE and music as well as extra-curricular activities

4. Parents had strong admiration and respect for teachers and teaching assistants, in particular for the support they offered during the pandemic. Subsequently they felt that staff pay wasn't enough given the current rate of inflation and the expectations of the role

5. There was no clear consensus from parents about what extra funding for schools should be spent on – there were a range of different opinions and ideas, such as funding wraparound care to reduce costs and/or providing more extracurricular activities

6. Parents were less convinced of the need for more tech in the classroom with a general feeling that extensive use of technology in the classroom should be limited to secondary settings

7. On the question of a longer school day, parents were typically only supportive if it was used for non-academic, extra-curricular activities

8. For some parents wraparound care was seen as extremely useful and desirable, but there were sometimes concerns about its current quality and reliability

9. Word of mouth and local reputation were king when selecting schools, Ofsted was used by some parents, whereas SATs were almost universally ignored

10. Academisation as an issue did not register with parents – they cared more about outcomes than structures

11. There was greater support for what Sure Start actually did than recognition of the brand itself, though it does still resonate in certain red wall communities

Policy Implications Summary

We believe these key findings have a number of implications for education policy going into the next general election.

a. Parties should combine focussing on life skills and extra-curricular activities with core literacy and numeracy.

b. Parties should be clear on the role of technology in education, not for the sake of it, but in areas where it can improve education and communication with parents.

c. Parties should champion open, transparent Community Schools. Parents want to be able to engage with staff, to see their children in a school environment, and to feel part of a wider community.

d. Parties should carefully consider a series of different options for how Ofsted could improve engagement with parents whilst reducing its burden on schools.

e. Parties should be pragmatic when it comes to school structures – promoting or opposing full academisation for the sake of it does not appear to land well with parents.

f. When they communicate education policy, parties should take into consideration that parents feel a strong sense of pride in the school workforce.

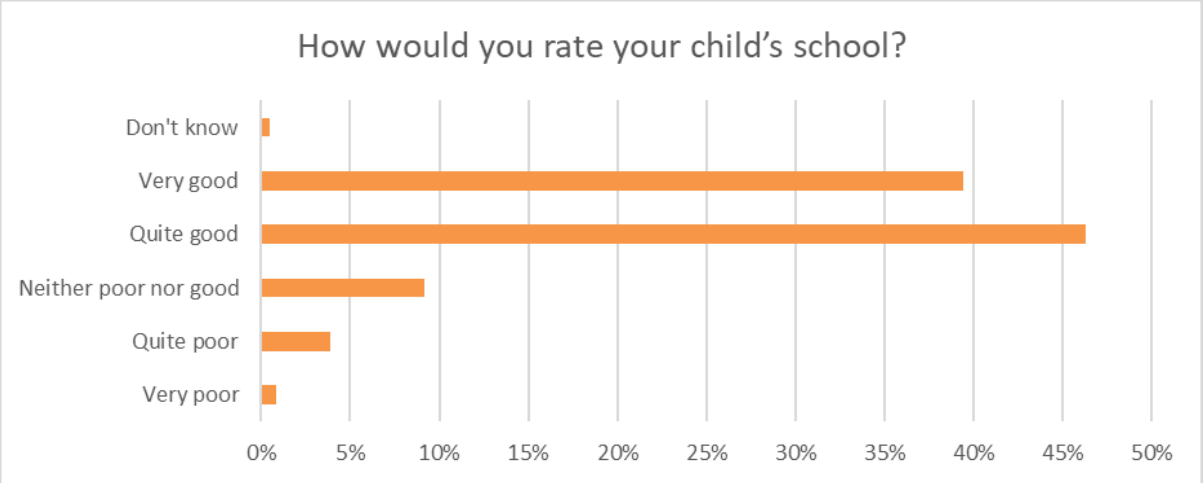
g. Parties should avoid a one size fits all approach to catch up from Covid, targeting support at where it is most needed.

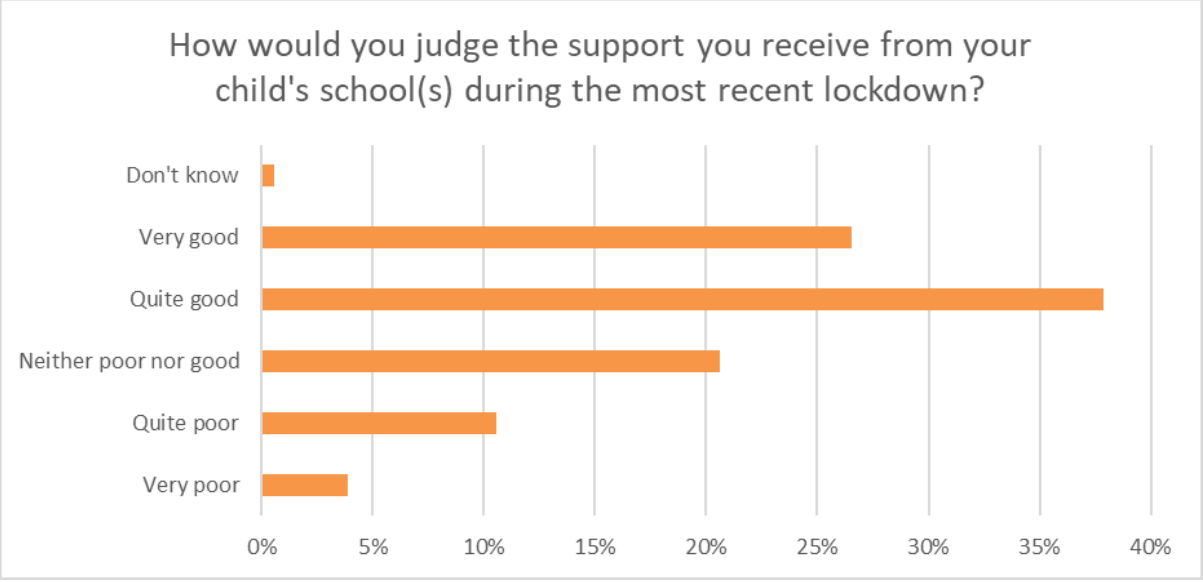
Detailed Findings

1. There was strong support in general from parents for their local schools – parents were very content with the teaching and learning that happens in the classroom

Respondents to our poll and participants in our focus groups were very positive about their schools.

86% of participants in our poll rated their child's school as quite or very good. And 64% rated the support they received from school during lockdown as quite or very good.





This was echoed in our focus groups. Parents were overwhelmingly complementary about not only their local schools but also how they had managed through the pandemic. Delving further, parents often talked about positive communication (detailed in pg. 12) and good engagement with teachers and teaching assistants. Parents also shared that they found school gave their children time away from screens and the opportunities to interact with other children within the school. Many shared positive stories about school trips and afterschool trips. There was a sense in our focus groups that parents broadly trusted the school were doing a good job and were not necessarily delving into great detail behind that – again and again parents told us that as long as their children were happy and thriving then they were content.

> *"Yeah, you get good support. He struggles sometimes with his anger a little bit. And gets really good support from the teachers and good communication from the teachers as well. And yeah, just all around a really good school."* – Female data analyst from Teesside

> *"...all our teachers are approachable. I can always get hold of the headmistress if I need, any problems, but usually it's all sorted by the teachers at the first point of contact."* – Female full-time parent from Wolverhampton

However, we did notice that two of our focus groups held at a later date elicited less positive responses. In both Doncaster and Dudley parents seemed less focussed on the heroics the school had performed through the pandemic, and were talking more about 'business as usual', being back at school. In both cases, the thing parents were most critical of was communication from the school to them. In addition to this, some parents felt that communications from the school often asked them for money to fund activities such as afterschool activities and trips.

> *"Stop teachers banging on trying to get money out of us"* - Male electrician from Milton Keynes

Some were keen to see more financial support for these types of activities in the future to ensure that all children are able to access the same experiences at school and not be 'left out'.

2. Parents valued good communication above almost anything else – both when expressing positive and negative opinions on their school, communication was seen as key

In Doncaster, parents were particularly irritated by the lack of a personal touch in engagement between schools and themselves. For example, a parent commented on the use of the generic 'your child' in a text from the school, rather than using their name. Parents added that simple things like term dates weren't always clear or easy to find. Both in Doncaster and other focus groups, a number of parents mentioned apps they used, for example for their secondary school children, which they thought substantially improved the sharing of information and would make things better if implemented in the local primary school. These apps allow parents to monitor children's progress, attendance, behaviour and a range of other datapoints.

> *"I don't seem to get as much communication as I'd like. I get the odd email every now and again. But I think communication could be a hell of a lot better …like inset days and stuff, I thought they'd be communicated out and looked on Google and stuff. It took me a long time to figure out what inset days the kids would get for this year."* – Female sales adviser from Doncaster

> *"I would say the only thing I can see for improvement is sometimes the communication and the admin side of the school. It could do with being a little bit better and more accurate and on time. And then other times we get bombarded with the same texts over and over again."* – Male apprentice examiner from Dudley

> *"…they have an app, but it's kind of gone by the wayside. They never update that app anymore. My 13 year old, so she's in year eight, now, in secondary school, and they've got an app, I think it's good for schools… So it tells me when she's got positive points, it tells me what she's done within the class, so if there's a really good piece of work, then there'll be a picture of it, or there'll be a write up about how good it was and how she understood the project and things like that. So that really, really helps me."* – Female sales adviser from Doncaster

> *"…we've got this thing called Class Dojo. So yes, the teachers obviously communicate through that. And then they just let you know how your child's progressing… So it's a good way of communicating."* – Male chef from Wolverhampton

One hypothesis, which came through particularly in our conversations with parents from Dudley, is that the pandemic actively altered parents' expectations about communication from schools. Before the pandemic, parents were not necessarily aware of what went on in the classroom, but, having had a unique insight during the pandemic, parents may now expect to continue to receive this same level of insight. Indeed, much of what was seen as positive during our earlier focus groups was that communication and approachability that schools embodied during the pandemic.

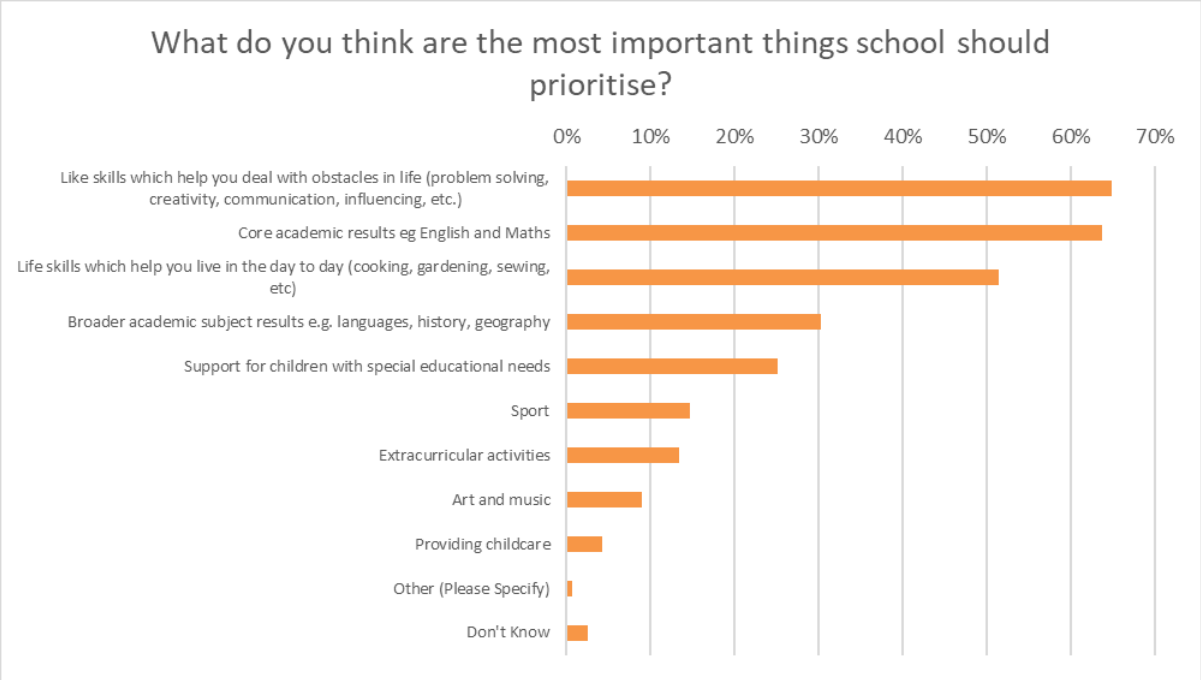
> *"So I would say if COVID hadn't have happened, I would have had less interaction than I have. But I feel I've got quite close and quite friendly. And also the mums have got a separate group as well. And we've all made contact. That's been quite nice as well."* – Female recruitment adviser from Bolton

This is in part supported by our polling which shows a broadly positive view of communication from schools. There is some discrepancy in the nature of the information being communicated, with parents more positive about academic matters than social and emotional development.

On the other hand, our polling did not necessarily support the idea that parents communicated more with each other as a result of the pandemic – with 44% somewhat or strongly disagreeing against 34% somewhat or strongly agreeing that "I engage with other parents through social media groups more as a result of the pandemic." Slightly more parents (38%) somewhat or strongly agreed that "I feel closer to my child's school as a result of the pandemic" versus those who somewhat or strongly disagreed (32%).

3. Parents wanted both core academic teaching of maths and English but also wider subjects such as PE and music as well as extra-curricular activities

Respondents to our poll seemed to reject the usual dichotomy between traditional education and '21st century skills', with the top two selected options for the most important things schools should prioritise being 1) Life skills which help you deal with obstacles in life e.g. problem solving, creativity, communication, influencing, and 2) Core academic results e.g. English and maths.



This was corroborated by our focus groups. In the Derby group, participants were fairly confident that English, maths and science were the most important subjects for their children to master at primary school, but they were also worried that there had been some narrowing of the curriculum, with something close to consensus that other subjects – especially the arts and PE – had been squeezed out, with two referring to drama and music provision becoming a box-ticking exercise.

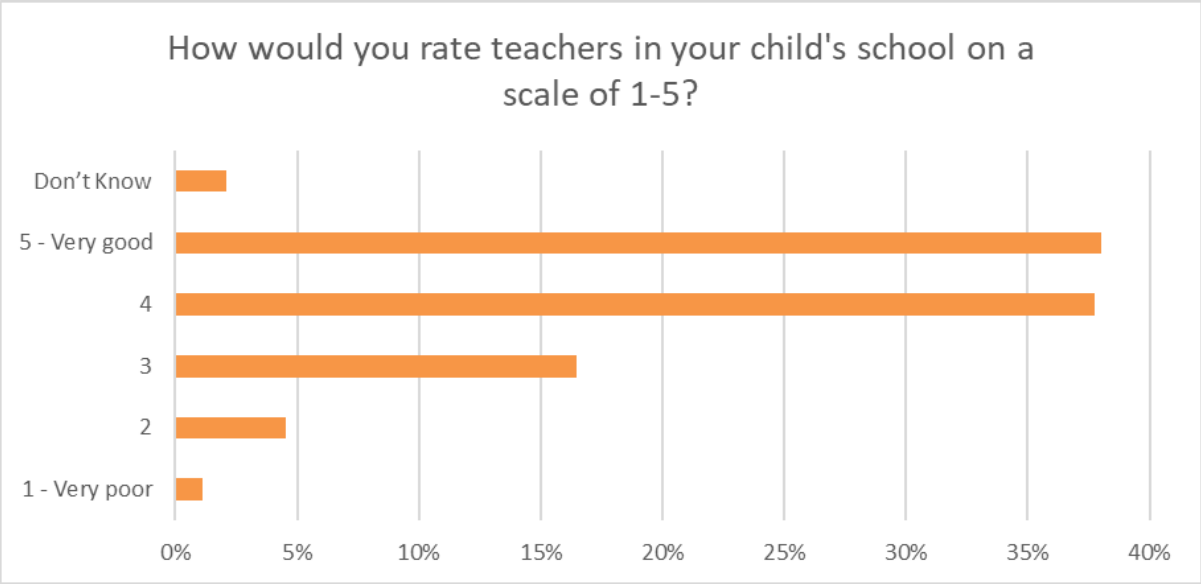
Similarly, in the Bolton group, the academic disciplines in primary school – literacy, maths and science – were the most important, but they were at pains to say that it was a lot more than that – life skills, soft skills and PE came up time and again.

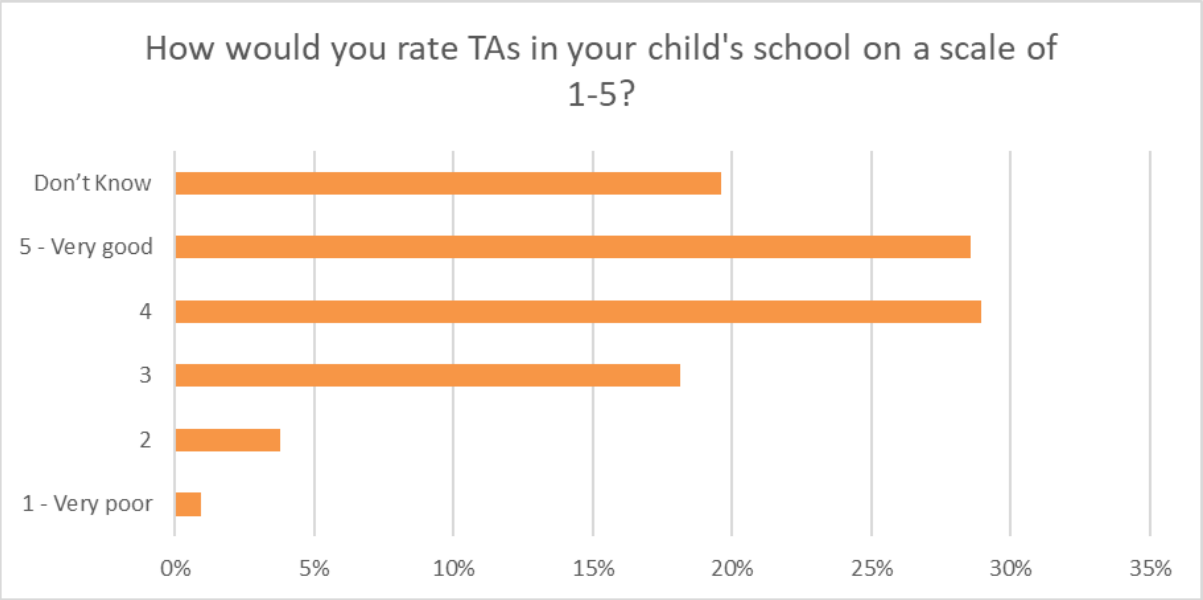
More generally, it was noticeable how often parents returned to their core priority being their child's happiness – there was no sense that they were willing to sacrifice that for academic gain or anything else.

> *"I think if the students are happy, the kids are happy, they're learning, they enjoy going to school, that's more important than, say, technology that's a few years older"* – Female full-time parent from Doncaster

4. Parents had strong admiration and respect for teachers and teaching assistants, in particular for the support they offered during the pandemic. Subsequently they felt that staff pay wasn't enough given the current rate of inflation and the expectations of the role

Parents clearly value teachers and teaching assistants. 38% of respondents to our poll rated their child's teachers a maximum of 5 on a scale of 1-5. Interestingly, this varied between primary-aged children (48%) and secondary-aged children (31%). Teaching assistants also scored a high 29% on the same 5 point scale, with a similar discrepancy between primary (40%) and secondary (21%). Only 6% and 5% of participants, for teachers and teaching assistants respectively, scored them a 1 or 2 out of 5.



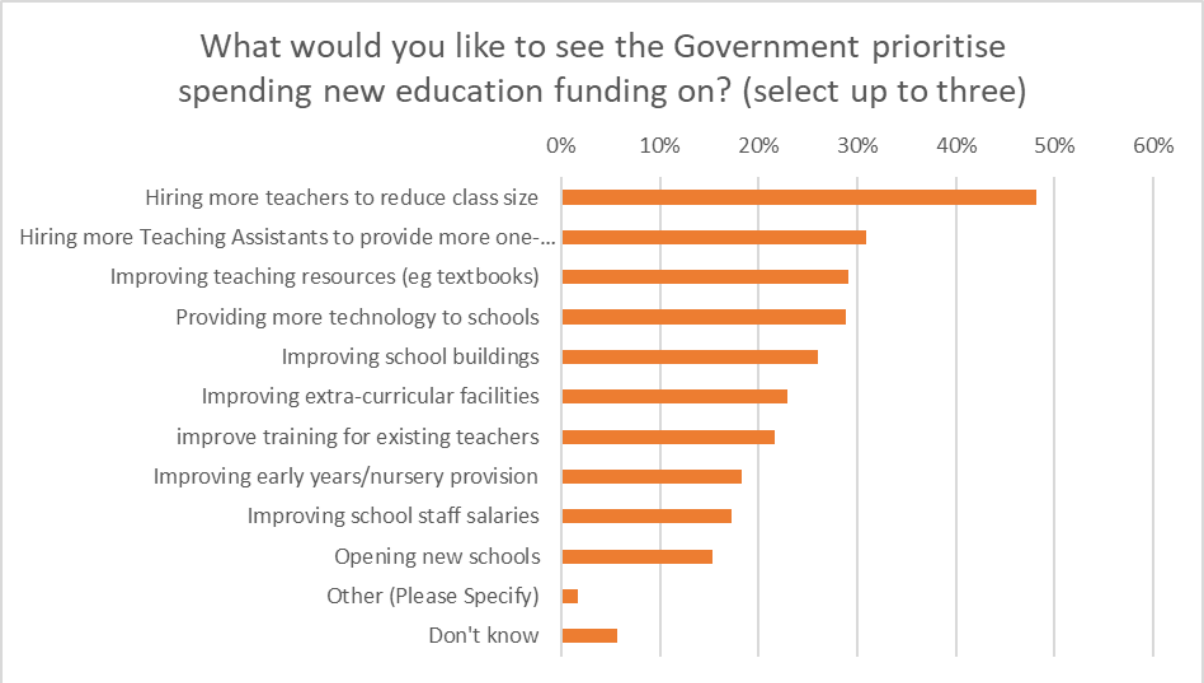


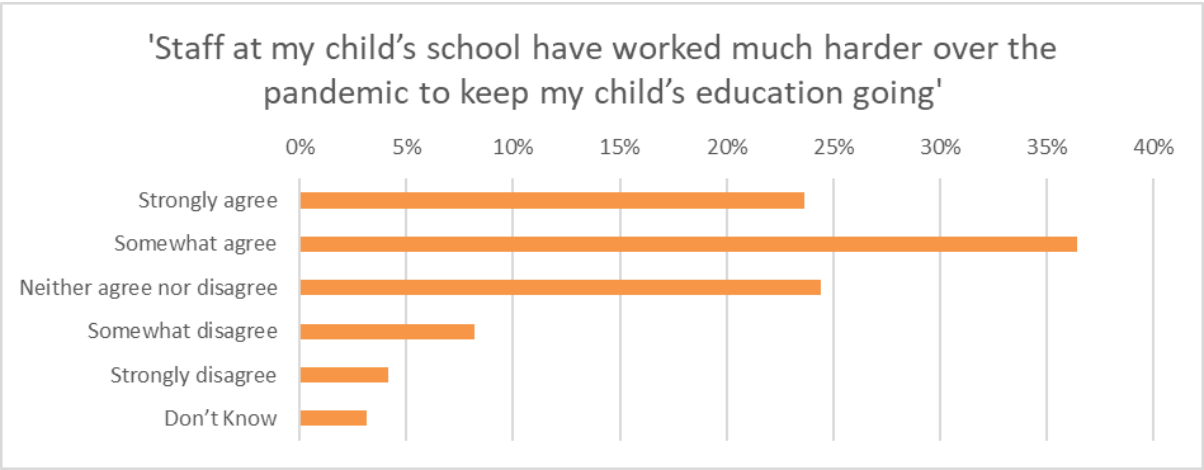
In-keeping with this, when asked what government should prioritise spending new education funding on, the top two answers selected were:

1) Hiring more teachers to reduce class sizes

2) Hiring more teaching assistants to provide more one-to-one or small group support.

And when asked whether staff have worked much harder over the pandemic to keep their child's education going – 60% somewhat or strongly agreed against only 12% who somewhat or strongly disagreed.





This was matched by the experience in our focus groups. In Derby, when prompted, the best thing about the schools their children attended was generally considered to be teaching assistants and teachers. This was a theme that came up time and again: TAs keep the whole show on the road "while the teacher just manages things these days".

"[Teaching assistants are] paid to do the things that teachers don't do" – Full-time parent from Stoke

In Teesside, participants had a huge amount of respect for what teachers had had to cope with over the pandemic and thought on the whole they were doing the best they could for

their kids. It was felt that in some schools teachers are having to reach in to their own pockets to pay for basics like pens.

> *"But there's not enough left in the budget for it. So, we have friends who were teachers and they've actually gone and put the hand in their own pockets and gone to buy extra felt tips for classrooms."* – Male framework manager from Teesside

In Stoke, participants advocated for increased pay for both teachers and teaching assistants. It was felt that the cost of living crisis and current rates of inflation meant that their relative wage did not represent the value they added to their children's lives.

> *"It [teacher pay] has stayed the same for years. It's been that sort of amount for like nearly a decade. And the TAs have always been minimum wage as well. And these are people that are all very valuable to our children's future. So, they should be paid more."* – Male IT manager from Stoke

5. There was no clear consensus from parents about what extra funding for schools should be spent on – there were a range of different opinions and ideas, such as funding wraparound care to reduce costs, increasing staff pay and/or providing more extracurricular activities

Despite the polling putting reducing class sizes as a lead candidate, as a general rule in our focus groups there was no agreement on the core issues facing education and therefore what the first priority ought to be for spending any new resources. It's true that communication was a big focus, and it's also true that many participants wanted to see more teachers and/or teaching assistants, and for them to be better remunerated. But this was not universal and there were a wide range of other opinions about what local schools most needed. Other issues that came up were better technology, more extra curricular activities, more focus on sport, and many others. One parent in our Doncaster group captured the mood well by saying it was impossible to answer because politicians would need to go and actually visit different local schools to understand their specific issues.

> *"I would say go and see the teachers, go and ask the kids, go and see for yourself what the need is, I think every school's individual."* – Female sales adviser from Doncaster

> *"Definitely more money for schools, because the teachers seemed a bit stressed and stretched as well… a bit more activities… more for the kids kind of thing."* – Male chef from Wolverhampton

> *"English and Maths are very important, and also British values. To show that we are a society that tolerates any race, colour or creed."* – Male foster carer from Teesside

> *"I do think maybe more teaching assistants to help with them because obviously there's a lot of kids and just one teacher really, I think sometimes it can be a lot of work especially with the paperwork and stuff now. I think it's a lot of work just for one teacher to manage."* – Female retail worker from Wolverhampton

> *"I think schools could do a lot more to reward kids, like little discos and stuff like that"* - Female hairdresser from Stoke

6. Parents were less convinced of the need for more tech in the classroom with a general feeling that extensive use of technology in the classroom should be limited to secondary settings

In Stoke, Milton Keynes and Reading, participants were cognisant of the importance of their children developing technological skills for the future. However, they were less convinced on the need for more tech in the classroom – particularly in primary settings. Participants consistently talked about the fact that their children's lives were going to be dominated by digital technology and that they wanted primary schools to be places where that was avoided.

> *"I don't think that children should have too much technology…if they have more social interactions, you know, there's less technology in the classroom, they have to talk to their peers and their teachers. It's better for their development…I don't really see the need at primary school. Secondary school makes more sense, but not primary school."* - Female hairdresser from Stoke

> *"I mean I personally wouldn't want my child sat at a computer all day…they can do that at home. If they're managing with the tech they've got, why change it?"* – Male software service manager from Stoke

Participants shared that they valued the use of technology in some elements of primary school – such as tracking their child's progress online – although the groups were divided on whether they favoured technology or paper-based homework, with a slim majority favouring the latter.

> *"I found Google Classroom in COVID, the most boring, draining thing, because you still have to do all your homework on paper, and then upload it, take pictures of it, and it was just too much effort. I'd rather just write it down on a piece of paper that you get sent home with."* - Male software service manager from Stoke

Finally, there was some concern amongst participants about the use of technology for homework without investment in devices.

> *"I think it's more about skills around tech rather than it being around "we need some fancy tech" because then otherwise, you are saying go home and do your homework [online]. We as a school are not funded to give you guys the things to do that on*

[devices]. But you need to do it that way. I think it just makes things more uneven [between different children]. And nothing is unnecessary spending to upgrade tech for the sake of it." - Female travel agent from Stoke

"I think it's more important to have more support within the classroom, than a tablet in front of your face." – Female delivery driver from Milton Keynes

7. On the longer school day, parents were typically only supportive if it was used for non-academic, extra-curricular activities

The overwhelming view of our focus group participants was that the longer school day would mean more stress and exertion for both children and staff. Participants only warmed more to the idea if it was for wider activities that might help children's mental health, such as sport or mindfulness. Some parents were also keen to emphasise that they did not necessarily think their own children needed this support, but they knew others who did.

Our Doncaster group very much followed this model. Parents were opposed to a longer school day for academic purposes, with the sense being it wouldn't be good for children to put more pressure on them. But there was more support for a longer day if it was for extra-curricular activities, as long as there was enough choice for the children and they could do an activity they really enjoyed.

> *"I think there's a lot of pressure on kids as it is. And speaking to my children's teachers, there's going to be even more pressure this year or next year, because they've missed out on so much work already. Because of COVID... So they've got catch up to do so there's more pressure on the children now than ever, to try and catch up... And I think to make the school days longer, it's just not giving the kids time. And I think they're going to be tired more, and it's going to affect them more mentally. And I think it's a really, really bad idea."* – Male food production manager from Doncaster

In our Derby group, all but one of the participants were keen on the extended school day, but specifically to help with "lost socialisation" or "targeted tuition." Parents of younger children were very worried they would be too tired at the end of a normal school day to take part. In Wolverhampton, there was agreement on the need, given the year children had had, for there to be support, either extra-curricular/after school or otherwise, for time for children to re-socialise and do activities like mindfulness to deflate anxieties that had built up over the pandemic. There was a bit more support for a longer school day than other groups, but there was again a recognition that there wasn't a need for a universal catch-up programme but that the longer school day would be necessary and beneficial for those children (not their own) that had fallen behind.

> *"If you're going to extend the school day, he doesn't want it. It shouldn't be taking over the after school clubs because, you know, if you extend the school day, it should be you're extending the school day and after school clubs, like your football teams, your netball teams, your music clubs, your chess clubs, whatever, that might still be on*

after school, you know, because not everybody, not every class of 30 children aren't all going to do the after school club." – Male postman from Wolverhampton

8. For some parents wraparound care was seen as extremely useful and desirable, but there were sometimes concerns about its current quality and reliability

As you would expect, there were a variety of views on 'wraparound', given not all parents have ever had any use for either before or after school provision. However, there was a sense, particularly from those who had used it, that there was the potential for improvement in how they were run.

In Doncaster one of the parents desperately wanted better breakfast club provision, particularly as he's a single parent, but said it was too unreliable so he couldn't use it. Another parent, who had also separated from his partner, said he did use after school clubs as much as possible but the "kids don't really like it." When pushed, he and other parents said that was because the food wasn't very good.

> *"They've been constantly cancelled, all through COVID, they were cancelled. And same for the Breakfast Club. If they were reliable and it was definitely every day then I would use them a lot more... You'll get a text message. It'll be no breakfast club tomorrow. You know, you'll get a text in the afternoon saying no after school clubs today, it's all been cancelled. So you know, when you work, the amount of times they cancel, you can't be changing your plan."* – Male groundworker from Doncaster

> *"I've used them in the past. But like, yes, my kids didn't really like going to them. None of their friends went and the food, they weren't too happy about it, either. They would just rather come straight home."* – Female sales adviser from Doncaster

In the Derby group, access to wrap-around care was patchy, with some participants mentioning using breakfast clubs and after-school clubs. They were clear that when it was on offer it was good and in high-demand but it was evident that provision was unreliable and sporadic.

In Wolverhampton, few parents utilised breakfast and after school clubs, mostly because they didn't need to but also one who cited cost as a factor. Those who did were positive, especially as, after Covid, it gave children more time to socialise.

> *"I used to take one of my brothers to college in the morning so, because they started at the same time, I used to drop the kids at breakfast club that gave them some toast and some squash. It was run by the teachers. I think they used to take it in turns*

and after school clubs, they do as well, I think, there's about half a dozen different activities to choose from. And a teacher's responsible, but I think they do have the TAs in to help depending on the size. And my kids enjoy it." – Female full-time parent from Wolverhampton

In Bolton, while only a minority had ever accessed breakfast clubs and after school clubs, there was general enthusiasm for them – that they were useful, and that the support and service provided was a good one.

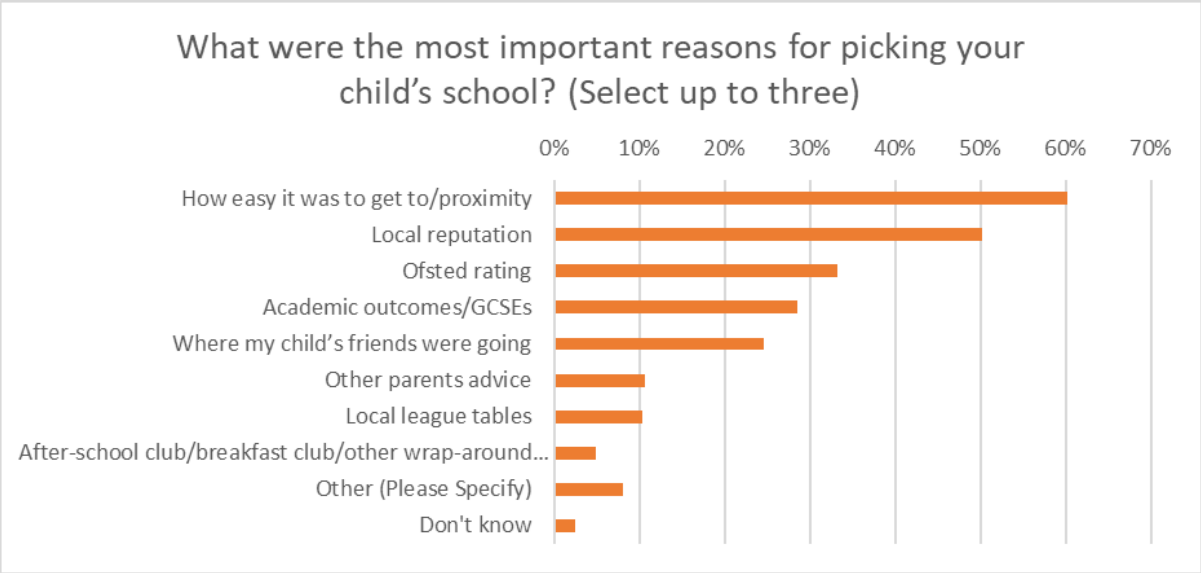
"Yeah, we used to use them [breakfast clubs] a while back. It just gives you more flexibility with work really, when I was working. I think they're a really good idea." – Male small business owner from Bolton

In Stoke, there was a high degree of enthusiasm for free and better organised wraparound focussed on sport and the arts. Food was mentioned across two different groups as a key part of wraparound support – "as long as they get a good meal." Many found wraparound care facilitated their ability to work more hours – however, the cost was a barrier to some.

"So it kind of contradicts itself really, one minute they're saying more taxes, more [higher] interest rate, more electricity bills…we're going to work more hours to pay for it. And then it's like, well, now I've got to pay for this wraparound care as well." - Male IT manager from Stoke

9. Word of mouth and local reputation were king when selecting schools, Ofsted was used by some parents, whereas SATs were almost universally ignored

Our polling showed very clearly what existing research has previously demonstrated, that proximity and local reputation is key to how parents choose primary schools for their children – these scored 60% and 50% respectively. We were interested to see that Ofsted still scored relatively well at 33%, compared with league table results which scored much lower at 10%.



When asked in our poll whether parents knew their child's school's Ofsted result off the top of their head, 48% said they did against 52% who did not.

This matched our experience in focus groups. In Doncaster, awareness of Ofsted was relatively strong, compared to very low awareness of schools' SATs results. None of the parents seemed to be interested in league tables, but two (of five) of them had read their schools' Ofsted reports in detail and two more were aware of the headline findings. The parent who did not use Ofsted ratings at all said he'd heard schools get time to prepare for them so he questioned what the point was – which other parents did have some sympathy with. As ever, parents wanted clear, concise communication about Ofsted results to help them understand how their school and children were progressing.

> *"I think it's Ofsted, to be honest with you. It tells you what the school's doing, where they're at, how good they are etc. And I think that's first and foremost where I've*

looked… and obviously word of mouth from people." – Male food production manager from Doncaster

In Dudley, Ofsted reports and verdicts were of more marginal concern. None of the participants had read a report in detail and only one had a high degree of confidence in the rating of their school. We heard views such as "Ours is inadequate but I don't mind" and "I've never read a report because I can see that my children are contented." Again, SATs and league tables did not really register at all.

In Wolverhampton, most parents when asked said they had read their school's Ofsted report although there was scepticism about how accurate an outstanding school rating was and if it meant that the school was potentially less caring in some way. On SATs, again this was not an issue that much concerned parents, only one said their child had become stressed due to how the school handled them, the rest were accepting of this being part of their child's life.

"I always used to think that the Ofsted thing was kind of like the rule to live by. So you need to go to like an outstanding, really good Ofsted school, then my friend had her children at an outstanding one and had real issues so she's moved to one that was kind of lower, I think good or maybe very good. She's moved her children to a good school and actually the children are happier, they're learning more because they're happier, they're less worried about the paperwork and all the other kind of things and more focussed on the children, she's found. So it kind of swayed my judgement, because I used to think only outstanding would be the best place for them to go. And now I'm questioning that a little bit and looking at the other things as well." – Female retail worker from Wolverhampton

While there was often a high-level understanding of what Ofsted did and its 'value add', there was less understanding about what they do specifically, how often they inspect, and what judgements really mean.

10. Academisation as an issue did not register with parents – they cared more about outcomes than structures

Across our focus groups it was clear that parents just did not engage with debates about academisation, except in a minority of cases. Other than one parent who had commercial dealings with MATs in his job, no-one knew much about what an academy was other than them being a bit separate and more independent. Fundamentally, parents cared about whether schools were good for their children and were not really interested how they achieved that. In the Doncaster group most parents were not interested in academy status – and interestingly, some did not see 'privatisation' as necessarily a bad thing.

> *"Yeah so mine's an academy. And the secondary one is as well that my eldest goes to, I don't know exactly what that means, really… I don't really get anything different."* – Female sales adviser from Doncaster

> *"I thought academy just meant it would have been privatised… [that] could definitely be a good thing. As long as they're getting results… I think you need some schools to do things differently to other schools anyway. So then you can, you know, down the line, you can choose which one works the best, and most schools can adopt their policies and stuff."* – Male groundworker from Doncaster

Similarly, in Dudley, academisation could barely have been less important to parents. Only one participant had any idea what being an academy meant and the others were completely non-plussed by the issue. Even when explained, they struggled to summon up any opinion on the subject. "I'm not bothered if it's an academy or not – I can honestly say I've never worried about that at all."

11. There was greater support for what Sure Start actually did than recognition of the brand itself, though it does still resonate in certain red wall communities

Our polling demonstrated some interesting variation with regards to recognition of Sure Start as a brand. As you would expect, more potential Labour voters had heard of Sure Start compared to those intending to vote Conservative, at 47% to 62%. However, our red wall crossbreak of voters had greater recognition than the rest of our sample. 70% of red wall respondents had heard of Sure Start against 54% of the rest of the sample.

We saw a similar variation in our focus groups. In Derby, knowledge of Sure Start was very vague but it remains something of a brand (but diminishing) with the majority having a rough idea what a Sure Start Centre might try to do. They became angered that funding cuts might have resulted in closure for many.

In Wolverhampton, on reflecting back on the early years of parenting, there was frustration, and agreement that support for new parents was inadequate and had gotten worse over time. This was the only topic of the session that really rallied the group to pitch in – access to midwives, health visitors, support groups as your child grew older was deemed woeful and like a 'conveyor belt'. When Sure Start was mentioned there was a little recognition of the name, no one had ever used one, although they had heard good things about them.

> *"I think, from when you get discharged from the midwife, and then they send you over, and then it kind of just like drops off. Really, it's not regular enough, I don't think support wise."* – Female retail worker from Wolverhampton

> *"Yeah, with my older four, I had them all quite close together. And you had the midwife out every day for the first seven to 10 days. When I had my last one, I think I saw the midwife a couple of days after I came out of hospital. And then for the heel prick and hearing test and that was probably it… there seems to be even less support now than there was 13/16 years ago."* – Female full-time parent from Wolverhampton

This contrasted quite highly with the Teesside and Bolton groups who had much more brand recognition and passion for the concept. Indeed, in Teesside, Sure Start was remembered by everyone in the group and in an entirely positive way as a 'one stop shop' for parents and children to get the support they needed in a really accessible way, and a return would be welcomed.

"When I was pregnant with my son, I actually went and booked myself in at a Sure Start centre to do this free course, like a one day course on child safety. And then you could buy all these different things like a medicine cabinet for five pounds and it was amazing. I thought it was brilliant those Sure Start centres. And now, the one that I went to is called a hub. And it's not the same." – Female school photographer from Teesside

Policy implications

Across all of our focus groups there was a theme of parents being unable to explain what better looks like. They often had individual things they were interested in - funding, more teachers, more sport, or better equipment - but this often needed gentle probing and discussion to bring it to the fore.

This means there is the space to offer a genuine vision to parents which is new and optimistic. The parents we spoke to did not have entrenched views about structures or pedagogy – what they wanted was to feel that people cared about their children and that their children would be happier after any proposed change.

With this in mind, and building on our detailed findings, we believe the following are the key implications for party manifestos going forward.

a. Parties should combine focussing on life skills and extra-curricular activities with core literacy and numeracy. The parents we spoke to were almost always supportive of their children having good opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities, and many also highlighted the importance of life skills such as cooking or understanding British values. This is an area where the Labour party has been particularly strong in recent years – most recently with the 'ten by ten' ambition announced by Wes Streeting MP[1]. But parents were also emphatic about the importance of maths, English and science as the core of the curriculum and, while not expressed in these terms by parents, it is clear that the standards agenda pioneered by Michael Gove has resonance in this space. Parents have no sense of needing to choose between these two positions – with 'traditionalists' on the one hand and 'progressives' on the other – and we do not believe they should have to either. Good schools should provide a well-rounded, balanced curriculum with high quality support to improve numeracy and literacy as well as an emphasis on other important skills.

b. Parties should be clear on the role of technology in education, not for the sake of it, but in areas where it can improve education and communication with parents. There is much debate about the role of technology in education, with some arguing it represents the future and others that it is often a distraction with little evidence that it positively impacts teaching and learning. We again do not believe politicians need to take a binary view of this. There have clearly been elements of technology that have been vital to not only educating children but also giving parents unprecedented insight and visibility into that education. Life in general and education specifically will not return to exactly how it

was pre-pandemic, and neither should it. Parties should pioneer how we can use the lessons of the pandemic to utilise technology in a way which improves the experience of students and parents.

c. Parties should champion open, transparent Community Schools. Parents want to be able to engage with staff, to see their children in a school environment, and to feel part of a wider community. One of the things Covid-19 seems to have taken away from parents, now that their children have returned to school, is the physical sense of closeness to both the premises and to staff. A number of parents mentioned to us that having a short slot at a virtual parents evening just is not the same as what they had before. And others mentioned that since returning to school, they are now not allowed inside as a result of Covid-19 precautions. These precautions are clearly sensible, as are many broader safeguarding rules that schools had before the pandemic, such as the need to sign in when coming on site. But they do expose a clear desire from many parents to feel part of their school and for the school in turn to be a part of the community. The Labour party has a proud tradition of believing in the value of communities, and nowhere should this be more important than how schools engage with local parents, charities, businesses and others.

d. Parties should carefully consider a series of different options for how Ofsted could improve engagement with parents whilst reducing its burden on schools. We saw almost no support for the abolition of Ofsted, and our polling demonstrates very respectable levels of engagement from parents when it comes to choosing schools for their children. 56% of the parents we polled felt Ofsted gave an accurate description of a school's performance, but 21% said "don't know." So while there is a clear need to consider the impact of Ofsted on schools, and particularly the workload of teachers and leaders, we believe this thinking should be combined with an analysis of how Ofsted could improve engagement with parents. In line with many of our other recommendations, we sensed from parents a strong desire for greater simplicity and clarity when having Ofsted's findings communicated to them, as well as a low level of understanding about what they do in practice, how often they inspect, and what judgements really meant. So as well as greater clarity and simplicity, parties might also consider the frequency and type of inspections. Based on our findings, one could argue for more frequent, lighter touch health checks and safeguarding inspections for all, to increase reassurance to parents whilst reducing the burdens on schools associated with it.

e. Parties should be pragmatic when it comes to school structures – promoting or opposing full academisation for the sake of it does not appear to land well with parents.

Parents across our focus groups could not have been less interested in debates around academies, free schools or grammar schools. In line with our previous findings, these perennial debates in education policy circles mean almost nothing to parents in thinking about their children's education. There is substantial room here for pragmatism – arguing against ideological system change for the sake of it, and in favour of evidence-based improvements to the current system. Parents simply want what is best for their children, and do not seem to have strong ideological views on how that should be achieved.

f. When they communicate education policy, parties should take into consideration that parents feel a strong sense of pride in the school workforce. Parents demonstrated strong support for teachers and teaching assistants across our polling and focus groups – recognising the vital role they have played in keeping schools going throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Many parents in our focus groups began to talk about supporting support staff more, but found it hard to express what this would mean tangibly and why it was needed. Conversely, when faced with a proposal to extend the school day, it was much easier for parents to react and ask what that would mean for staff workload. We believe this shows parties need to understand and be better at communicating about the core problems facing teachers and support staff, as well as how resolving these could improve the educational experience of children. Parents already have opinions about staff welfare and pay – and are typically very supportive of staff on these issues. Politicians should help parents understand the impact of their policies on the staff they interact with every day and greatly value.

h. Parties should avoid a one size fits all approach to catch up from Covid, targeting support at where it is most needed. The parents we spoke to certainly understood the challenges posed by Covid-19 and the effect on children's academic progress and mental health. However, they were strongly opposed to blanket approaches, and particularly opposed to making every child have more tuition each day i.e. the longer school day. They were more in favour of targeted support and the use of a wider spectrum of activities such as sport or mindfulness, to help children who had suffered most during the pandemic.

To conclude, parties should focus on a good education, excellent teachers and support staff, and schools as a hub for wider support and community activities. Parents are not interested in philosophies around free schools, academies, LA maintained schools or anything else – they want a system that works for them locally. Political parties need to offer a vision, an education policy developed with parents, staff and communities, for the benefit of all of

them: one based on high standards and providing a broad and varied curriculum for all. A new generation of Community Schools.

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[1] https://labourlist.org/2021/08/why-im-launching-labours-new-ambition-ten-by-ten/

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