

**Schools
North East**



Manifesto for North East Education

The key recommendations for all
political parties and policymakers, from
North East Schools

Introduction



The general election called for 12 December will inevitably be dominated by debates on national issues, such as Britain's future relationship with the European Union. However, the critical issues facing our region and its schools cannot be allowed to be forgotten.

Schools North East is determined to ensure that education policy and its impact on the region's children does not drop off the radar at this important time. Schools North East has created a 'Manifesto for North East Education' with direct feedback from its 1,150 member schools and key stakeholders from across the education sector.

Our region's schools are too often cast in a negative light, beset with accusations of low outcomes, low prospects, and a so-called 'North-South' divide in standards. This is a false narrative.

Whilst the Manifesto has been put together in response to the general election, it is also the platform for our strengthening focus on influencing the development of education policy regionally and nationally, and the details of our recommendations will be developed throughout 2020 and beyond.

Our region's schools are too often falsely cast in a negative light, beset with accusations of low outcomes, low prospects, and a so-called 'North-South' divide in standards. This affects all North East schools in disadvantaged areas or otherwise. Through the manifesto, Schools North East will change the narrative, and ensure that education policy relating to our region is fit for purpose.

In particular, we want to see proper consideration of our regional context. The education policy that this negative narrative feeds into is currently driven from Westminster, where the North East's specific challenges are not always adequately understood. The Manifesto for North East Education will work to tackle these myths, and foster a deeper understanding of this context.

The Context

The North East faces some of the highest levels of high impact long term disadvantage in the country.

Current education measures often put the North East ninth in the list of the nine regions in England. We have the lowest proportion of young people in good and outstanding secondary schools. We lag behind others in terms of securing a sustained destination after GCSE, whether it be in education or employment. Fewer 18-year-olds from the North East attend the country's top universities when compared with other regions.¹ As part of this, a false narrative has emerged that says, while 'our primary schools are good, our secondary schools are bad'.

These educational measures give the impression that North East schools are providing a poor quality of education, and failing to serve pupils in the region. However, when the regional context is taken into account, a different picture emerges.

The North East has some of the highest levels of high-impact and long-term disadvantaged groups. The percentage of those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at both secondary and primary schools is higher than any other region in the country.²

Our region has some of the worst levels of deprivation. In the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), Middlesbrough had 32.7% of children living in income deprived households, the highest of any Local Authority in the country. Hartlepool, South Tyneside, and Redcar & Cleveland were also in the top 20 for the highest levels of income deprivation affecting children.³

The number of secondary school students in the North East eligible for Free School Meals is 18.7%. This is higher than any other region in the country.

Why does this matter?

These issues of deprivation have a clear impact on educational attainment. There is an attainment gap that exists across the country between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. Disadvantaged pupils can be over 18.1 months behind non-disadvantaged pupils by KS4. The gap has widened more significantly for the persistently disadvantaged.⁴ The attainment gap in fact increases substantially for every year that pupils are known to be eligible for FSM.⁵

The false narrative of 'primary good, secondary bad' has a number of unintended consequences for our region. A failure to appreciate this can mean that funds are not always targeted appropriately to where they are needed. Current school funding streams

1. [Lord Agnew, speech at Schools North East 2019 Summit.](#)
2. [Department for Education, National Statistics: Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019.](#)
3. [Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, National Statistics: English indices of deprivation 2019.](#)
4. [Education Policy Institute, Education in England: Annual Report 2019.](#)
5. [Stephen Gorard, Nadia Siddiqui & Beng Huat See \(2019\): The difficulties of judging what difference the Pupil Premium has made to school intakes and outcomes in England, Research Papers in Education.](#)

Disadvantaged students in the North East can be up to **22.6 months** behind their peers.

do not adequately recognise or address the impact of long-term deprivation on our students.

The Fairer Schools Index published this year uses an adjusted Progress 8 measure, which takes into consideration pupil background. The most dramatic changes in school rankings were seen in the North East, with schools here ranked on average 361 places higher than in official league tables.⁶

It is important to note that this failure to account for context has impacted non-disadvantaged pupils as well. The inaccurate narrative that has developed around North East schools can discourage teachers from starting a career here and demoralise teachers already working in our schools.

The context is complex, and goes beyond issues of long-term deprivation. The North East has a mix of urban and large rural areas. Underfunding across different sectors has reduced the access our region's pupils have to different educational opportunities, whether it be through poor transport links, a lack of joined up health and educational services, or a lack of cooperation between business and schools.

This context is a reminder that our schools are not an island, and require a collaborative approach across several sectors, with adequate investment and planning to support this.

Conclusion

It is clear from the data and research that the North East faces unique challenges, and when these challenges are ignored an inaccurate picture of North East Education is created. Too often in current measurements of school performance, economic and geographical factors are mistakenly presented as educational ones.

When the context is understood, we see a different picture of how our schools are performing and the dedicated, hardworking teachers who are having to deal with the realities of decades-old economic issues.

Long term deprivation does not exist only in the North East, but the problems here are especially acute, and our schools are leading the way in tackling the growing disadvantage gap, and need the right support to continue this.

Our recommendations are those which any political party wanting to take seriously the challenges of our region would adopt as the platform for successful education policymaking.

Too often in current measurements of school performance, economic and geographical factors are mistakenly presented as educational ones.

6. [University of Bristol, Centre for Multilevel Modelling, Report for the Northern Powerhouse Partnership on Adjusted Progress 8.](#)

Our Recommendations



-  **# 1** Recognise the regional context
-  **# 2** Promote a positive narrative around North East education
-  **# 3** Depoliticise education
-  **# 4** Evidence-based policymaking
-  **# 5** A long term view
-  **# 6** Greater support for Early Years
-  **# 7** A joined up approach from cabinet to the chalkface
-  **# 8** Support the North East's teaching profession at every level
-  **# 9** Ensure all pupils can access an appropriate curriculum
-  **# 10** Targeted support for those with the greatest needs



1

Recognise the regional context

Education policy that supports positive outcomes for the North East's pupils must take into account the context in which it is implemented. The effectiveness of one policy may be different in areas with different challenges.

In the North East, our biggest challenge is the impact of long-term deprivation on education. An education policy that considers this impact will improve outcomes and aspirations, helping to break the cycle of disadvantage.

These contextual challenges are complex, and in the North East they also include access to public transport or links with business. Education policy must take into account this local context. All parties must embed the principle that areas of long-term deprivation need detailed consideration to avoid the formulation of 'one-size fits all' policy. Policy must prioritise research-informed, high quality Teaching & Learning practice, with assessment measures developed from that.

Promote a positive narrative around North East education



2

Schools and teachers face increasing pressures. We must not forget the many successes of our schools and avoid fixating on failure. While we cannot be naive about the challenges they face, we must rightly celebrate the hard work, professionalism and expertise of our teachers.

North East schools face many difficult challenges, and yet have maintained a high quality of education. A poor understanding of their context has led to an unduly negative narrative around North East education with a number of unintended consequences, not least its impact on the retention of hardworking, dedicated teachers.

All parties must sign up to promoting a positive narrative that encourages teachers to remain in and join the profession. A more positive image of the North East's teaching profession must be transmitted to parents, the business sector, prospective teachers, and the current teaching workforce.

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3

Depoliticise education

As long as education is treated as a political football, the different contexts our schools work in cannot be taken into account.

In the development of education policy, standards and practices must be adopted that create effective legislation and practice that will support the North East region.

Politicians and policymakers must sign up to a set of non-partisan principles to underpin education policy. This includes honesty, where failures are acknowledged so that we don't continue with what isn't working; objectivity, with an open mind to different solutions based on the evidence available; an 'organisational memory', to inform the next batch of ministers and policymakers, to avoid repeating mistakes when a new government is formed; and long term planning, avoiding unnecessary structural upheaval, while providing stability in funding so that schools can plan ahead.

Evidence-based policy making

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4

To depoliticise education, and ensure the above principles are incorporated, education policy must be evidence-based. The voice of the teaching profession must be 'front and centre' in this. Practitioner experience must not be sidelined, with wider consultation at the 'chalk-face', a considered pace of change, and long-term planning.

All policy should be able to show a clear evidence base supporting it, a robust implementation plan, including assessment criteria, clear goals and objectives. There should be a commitment that all data, evidence, and results should be published.

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5

A long term view

Constant changes to policy and practice serve only to frustrate school leaders, drive good people from the profession, waste public money, and prevent proper assessment of whether policies are succeeding.

A 10 year view of education, including education funding, must be adopted by all parties to allow for realistic plans and the assessment of what is or isn't effective in education. This stability and the ability to take the 'long view' is essential to ensure North East schools can deal with our regional challenges.

Greater support for Early Years

# 6

An education policy that takes into account the context and is evidence-based requires targeted policy and funding. Greater support for Early Years is crucial for tackling the disadvantage gap in attainment.

Children from socially disadvantaged groups are about 11 months behind their peers by the time they start school, and narrowing the gap as early as possible is essential to breaking the cycle of disadvantage.⁷

This focus on early years must be on quality teaching and learning, coupled with parenting skills, and not just providing free childcare to encourage parents to work.

# 7

A joined up approach from cabinet to the chalkface

Policy changes must be considered in light of all other education policies and initiatives, but also policies across all departments. The 'law of unintended consequences' because of a lack of joined-up government must be minimised wherever possible.

Schools are increasingly expected to take on additional responsibilities, such as mental health, emotional wellbeing, and in some cases taking on a parental role. This is increasing teacher workload, and taking them away from actual teaching.

Schools are not an island, and policymakers must recognise schools alone cannot be the answer to all social issues. Support for a more joined up approach locally between schools, universities, health services, the voluntary sector, and business, is needed.

Greater collaboration between schools needs to be fostered so teachers can share best practice and support each other. High stakes accountability that takes no account of context often creates unhelpful competition between schools, hindering vital collaboration.

7. [All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility Inquiry, Closing the Regional Attainment Gap.](#)

Support the North East's teaching profession at every level

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8

Quality teaching and school leadership is vital. Schools with the highest percentage of pupils eligible for Free School Meals are less likely to have specialised science teachers, and other subject areas have similar problems.⁸

Attracting teachers to disadvantaged areas isn't simply a problem of financial incentives. Our teaching staff should have clear continuous professional development relevant to their context and benefit from a culture where progression is typical. Teacher workload and stress must be addressed, with better access to wellbeing services.

More also needs to be done to attract the best leaders to those areas that need them most. Head Teachers are often put off from working in challenging areas as they lack the support or the time to turn a school around. Policies such as a grace period from formal inspections for Head Teachers moving into a challenging school would encourage more high quality school leaders to come to the North East and more to aspire to lead our most disadvantaged schools. Formal mentoring schemes to support our senior leaders should be considered, with context specific leadership qualifications and training developed.

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9

Ensure all pupils can access an appropriate curriculum

The current national curriculum allows a great deal of flexibility, and this needs to be maintained, encouraging local learning opportunities. However, despite this degree of flexibility, not all schools and pupils can access the same opportunities.

Rural areas in the North East do not always have the best transport links to sites of cultural significance, and the cost of school trips and extra-curricular activities can also be prohibitive to those from poorer families and less well-resourced schools.

Adequate funding is needed to ensure that all of our region's schools can provide a minimum 'curriculum guarantee' to all pupils, allowing them to access the same educational experiences as more advantaged students, raise aspirations, and build cultural capital.

This support is also needed for a curriculum that develops more than just academic skills, with room for creative and vocational subjects, serving the needs of pupils and not performance tables. Equality of opportunity must be prioritised for all students in the North East.

8. [All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility Inquiry, Closing the Regional Attainment Gap.](#)

Targeted support for those with the greatest needs

10

The North East has the highest percentage of pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in the country.⁹ The system for supporting those with SENDs is under serious financial pressure.

Shortfalls in funding and failures in implementation have led to serious delays across the region in the delivery of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans.

Furthermore, considering the higher levels of mental health issues in the North East, it is essential that the next government properly funds the region's mental health provisions, and promotes better integrated health and education services.

Funding and resources must target the region's areas of greatest need with the ambition of making the support they receive the envy of the world.

Contact Us

If you would like to get in touch with us regarding our Manifesto or for any press requests please contact us on

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9. [Department for Education, National Statistics: Special educational needs in England: January 2019.](#)