

Schools North East Submission to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

Executive Summary

Schools North East, representing over 1,150 schools across the region, urges the Curriculum and Assessment Review to embrace a curriculum framework that recognizes regional diversity and context. The North East faces unique challenges, with white working-class boys—our largest demographic—persistently achieving the lowest educational outcomes nationally. High rates of SEND and school absence further exacerbate these challenges. A "one size fits all" approach to curriculum development will only deepen these inequalities.

Our key recommendations are:

1. **Context Matters:** The curriculum must reflect and actively support the needs of regions like the North East, addressing socioeconomic disadvantages, SEND needs, and ensuring equitable access to cultural and educational opportunities.
2. **Context Premium:** Introduce targeted funding to support schools in addressing specific local deficiencies, from enrichment opportunities to SEND provision and staff development.
3. **Support for Long-Term Deprivation:** Prioritize sustained funding to support students affected by persistent disadvantage throughout their educational journey.
4. **Alleviate Workload:** Reduce excessive pressures on teachers and students by streamlining curriculum content and reducing unnecessary repetition, especially at Key Stage 3.
5. **Support Transitions:** Strengthen continuity between primary and secondary phases to address the "wasted years" of Key Stage 3.
6. **Address SEND and Attendance Gaps:** Develop a curriculum that is inclusive of SEND needs and tackles persistent absence rates, which are disproportionately high in the North East.
7. **Integrate Regional Curriculum Components, promoting equity and inclusion:** Include locally tailored content to engage students, foster pride in their community, and enhance civic engagement.
8. **Assessment Reform: Reducing Pressure, Broadening Success:** Assessment should be a tool for learning, not a source of stress. The Curriculum and Assessment Review must prioritize reform that reduces exam pressures, embraces diverse evaluation methods, and ensures inclusivity—paving the way for a more balanced and equitable education system.

We call on the government to ensure that this review delivers a curriculum that empowers educators and serves as a vehicle for addressing entrenched inequalities.

Detailed Recommendations

1. *Recognize Regional Contexts*

Key driver: The North East leads the country in persistent absence and exclusion rates, compounded by higher proportions of SEND students and socio-economic challenges, demanding a curriculum that directly addresses these barriers.

The current curriculum often fails to consider regional variations, resulting in a "one size fits all" approach that disadvantages areas like the North East. For example, white working-class boys—a significant demographic in our region—remain the lowest-performing group nationally. Additionally, the North East has the highest rates of SEND in England and the highest rates of persistent absence, reflecting deeper structural inequalities.

We recommend a curriculum that provides schools with the flexibility to adapt content to their local context. This could include introducing regional history, geography, and culture to instill pride, build aspirations, and make education more relevant to students' lives.

2. **Ensure Equity Through a 'Context Premium'**

Key driver: The North East's schools face significant funding disparities, with fewer resources for enrichment activities, SEND support, and cultural opportunities compared to wealthier regions.

Funding must be allocated to address identifiable gaps in local resources and infrastructure. A "Context Premium" would provide additional funding to schools in regions where opportunities for enrichment, cultural experiences, and SEND provision are limited. This funding should be used to:

- Improve access to arts, sports, and extracurricular activities.
- Support teacher recruitment and retention in hard-to-fill subjects such as maths and languages.
- Expand high-quality interventions for SEND students, ensuring equitable access to education and outcomes.

3. **Support for Long-Term Deprivation**

Key driver: The North East has the highest rates of Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility nationally, yet funding mechanisms often fail to account for the compounding effects of long-term deprivation.

Disadvantage is not a short-term issue. The curriculum must include sustained, targeted funding to support students who experience persistent deprivation. This should be embedded throughout a student's educational journey, ensuring consistent resources are available from early years through to post-16 education.

4. Alleviate Workload Pressures

Key driver: Teacher surveys consistently highlight workload and curriculum overload as barriers to effective teaching, leading to recruitment and retention challenges in disadvantaged areas like the North East.

Overloaded curricula and high-stakes exams create excessive burdens for both teachers and students. The volume and intensity of assessments need to be re-evaluated to:

- Reduce curriculum content to allow for deeper learning and skill development.
- Streamline Key Stage 3 to eliminate unnecessary repetition of Key Stage 2 material.
- Shift the focus from rote memorization to fostering critical thinking and creativity.

Reducing workload must start in the early years and Key Stage 1, where securing foundational knowledge is critical for all pupils. Without a strong foundation in literacy, numeracy, and core skills, further learning becomes inaccessible, particularly for disadvantaged children. Streamlining curriculum content at this stage ensures teachers can focus on depth rather than breadth, embedding essential skills effectively.

It is vital to maintain and extend the growing trust placed in Early Years staff, enabling them to use their professional judgment without the burden of excessive evidence gathering. Simplifying assessment practices will free educators to focus on high-quality teaching and meaningful interactions that truly support children's development.

5. Strengthen Transition from Primary to Secondary

Key driver: The North East sees a significant drop-off in achievement and engagement during the transition from primary to secondary school, with persistent absence rates rising sharply in this phase.

The transition between primary and secondary education is a critical point where many students, especially in the North East, disengage. Key Stage 3 must be reimagined to:

- Build on Key Stage 2 achievements without unnecessary duplication.
- Foster belonging and engagement through subject-specific language and skills.
- Provide students with a strong foundation for Key Stage 4 and beyond.

6. Address SEND Needs and Attendance Challenges

Key driver: The North East has the highest rates of SEND in England and faces persistent attendance issues, highlighting the need for a curriculum that supports engagement and inclusion.

Students with SEND often face a narrower curriculum and greater barriers to assessment, compounded by a system overly reliant on terminal exams. Similarly, rigid curricula tied to high-stakes exams contribute to disengagement and persistent absence in the North East.

Recommendations:

- Develop a curriculum inclusive of SEND needs, with a focus on flexibility and reduced dependence on high-stakes exams.
- Explore ways to recognize and report progress and achievements at each stage of education, fostering greater engagement among all students.

7. Integrate Regional Curriculum Content with an broad and rich National Curriculum

Key driver: Engaging students with regional content fosters pride, aspiration, and a sense of belonging, particularly for disadvantaged groups.

A localized curriculum element would allow schools to address specific regional needs and engage students with the unique opportunities and challenges of their area. This could include:

- Highlighting local heritage, industries, and environmental challenges.
- Partnering with local organizations and professionals to enrich learning.
- Encouraging civic engagement and community involvement.

8. Assessment Reform: Reducing Pressure, Broadening Success

The current high-stakes, exam-heavy assessment system in England places excessive pressure on students and teachers while narrowing the scope of learning. Reform is essential to ensure assessments support deeper learning, inclusivity, and engagement.

Overhaul the Exam Burden

Students face over 31.5 hours of exams on average during GCSEs, consuming teaching time and causing undue stress. Reducing the volume and length of exams, particularly in overloaded subjects like maths, would alleviate pressures and free up time for richer educational experiences.

Diversify Assessment Methods

Over-reliance on written exams limits creativity and engagement, especially in subjects like art, music, and vocational studies. Introducing project-based assessments, portfolios, and presentations would better reflect students' skills and foster a love of learning.

Prioritize Inclusivity for SEND Students

Terminal exams disproportionately impact SEND students, creating barriers to demonstrating their abilities. Inclusive assessment methods are critical to ensuring all students can succeed.

Broaden Measures of Success

Exams should not be the sole determinant of progress. A dashboard-style system capturing academic, personal, and social achievements would provide a more

comprehensive view of student success and reduce the overemphasis on narrow outcomes.

Support Well-Being

The current system contributes to teacher burnout and student anxiety. By balancing summative exams with ongoing, formative assessments, we can create a healthier and more engaging learning environment.

Conclusion

The North East faces profound educational challenges that demand bold and tailored solutions. A reimagined curriculum must go beyond academic targets and league tables to address the realities of socioeconomic disadvantage, regional disparities, and systemic underfunding.

We urge the Curriculum and Assessment Review to:

- Recognize the distinct needs of regions like the North East.
- Empower schools with the flexibility and funding to address these challenges.
- Deliver a curriculum that fosters equity, engagement, and opportunity for all students.

By addressing these priorities, the review can ensure the curriculum becomes a powerful tool for reducing inequality, boosting engagement, and providing all children with the opportunities they need to succeed. Schools North East stands ready to support this transformation and provide further evidence to inform your work.