

Early Years, Education and Skills

- 1. What lessons should be learned from, and changes made to, our education system after the crisis?*
- 2. How can we ensure that our education institutions are rooted in and accountable to their local communities?*
- 3. What other services, beyond education itself, are needed to ensure that vulnerable learners get the support they need?*
- 4. How can our education system support those who are particularly affected by economic disruption, including that caused by coronavirus, and the insecurity and inequality it has revealed?*
- 5. What can we do to provide greater support to those who work in our education system?*

The education system after coronavirus

This year coronavirus has fundamentally changed the way we are able to carry out our daily lives. Over the past few months, many of us have been unable to see our family and friends, and where possible we've been asked to stay at home.

At the same time, hundreds and thousands of key workers have continued to go to work, risking their lives to provide us with the services needed to ensure that the majority are safe and well, and our society is still able to function.

Alongside our NHS and social care workers, and many other key workers, our education staff have played a vital role.

Over the past few months they have continued, as they always have done, to provide support to children, young people, their families and their communities.

They have kept education institutions open to provide care for the most vulnerable, and created virtual lessons to help learners continue their education at home. They have continued to demonstrate what we have always known; that our education system is a vital public service, one that is integral to a fair and functioning society.

Although all of our education staff have been doing an incredible job of providing this support, the past few months have also exposed and exacerbated the deep inequalities that exist in our society.

Throughout the crisis, many children have been left without access to free school

meals, demonstrating the stark reality that without the meal provided in schools, the most vulnerable children in our society go hungry.

While there have been a host of innovative approaches to keep people learning when education institutions are closed, not everyone has access to a laptop or a good internet connection. This means many have simply been unable to access this vital provision.

Although we're unsure what the impact of the coronavirus crisis will be on educational attainment, it is likely it will be felt most sharply by those who are already disadvantaged by the education system. Those who rely on services beyond their education institution, or have a difficult home life, will face severe challenges that will likely widen further the attainment gap they already face. This is a stark reminder of the need to provide public services to support the most vulnerable in our society.

No matter what happens over the coming months, it's clear that we cannot simply return to the status quo.

The reframing of our education staff as key workers, the challenges faced by our education institutions, the importance of support for vulnerable learners, and the deep inequality of opportunity revealed by the crisis are clear indication that the system needs radical change.

We need to rebuild our education system in a way that works for – and really values – everyone.

The challenges

Transforming our education system requires us to think imaginatively about the purpose of our education system, and how we can ensure it delivers on that purpose.

But we must also address the problems that we will inherit from a Conservative government. A decade of austerity has devastated nurseries, schools, colleges, universities, and the services the most vulnerable rely on.

Since taking office in 2010, the Conservatives have chronically underfunded our education system, making it harder for people across the country to reach their full potential.

Between 2010 and 2018 school funding fell by 8% in real terms, rising to 16% in colleges. The extra money promised by the Conservatives in the last General Election would not even reverse their own cuts to schools or colleges.

These cuts have had a devastating impact on education institutions across the country, creating a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. In schools, teacher recruitment targets have been missed in six successive years, while teachers continue to leave the profession in record numbers.

Teacher numbers in secondary schools are falling as the number of pupils is set to rise in the years ahead. This will impact every school in the country, but the impact will be greatest in the most disadvantaged areas, where schools are less likely to be able to recruit the teachers they need.

But it is arguably the services relied on by the most vulnerable which have been hit the hardest. Sure Start spending has fallen by around two-thirds, with over 1,000 centres lost.

A decade of austerity has made it harder to support the most vulnerable in our society. Pupil Premium funding has fallen in real terms, funding for children's services has been slashed, support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) has been cut and maintenance support in further and higher education has been lost. Many of these issues will be exacerbated by the current crisis.

The public health measures implemented in the government's response to coronavirus left 99% of children – and 95% of those classed as vulnerable – no longer attending schools or early year's education.

Everyone is affected by missing education, but that impact is not felt equally. Learners from the poorest backgrounds, without access to laptops or good internet, will find it far harder to access education.

Labour would never support policies that put the health of children, their families and education staff at risk.

But with children and young people already falling behind every year over the summer break, months of schools and college closures, combined with changes to the assessment system, could have serious consequences. It's more important than ever that we find innovative ways to support children and young people access education.

The way forward

Labour have always believed that our education system is a vital public service,

central to building and maintaining a healthy, informed and just society. Those who work within it make an invaluable contribution and the impact of coronavirus has only made this clearer, with the government recognising teachers and education staff as key workers.

The government must always remember the contribution they have made, and move forward with a new understanding of education as a public service that provides vital support to families and communities far beyond the classroom.

The deep inequalities within our society and within our education system must be addressed. The specific challenges faced by vulnerable learners within and beyond education, and the pervasive impact of poverty on educational outcomes, must be acknowledged and eradicated.

If coronavirus has highlighted these issues, then it is our responsibility to ensure there is no return to business as usual. As we look to the months and years ahead, there is an opportunity to work towards a new system that supports all those who need it, particularly the most disadvantaged.

With politicians and the public understanding more than ever the essential role of education, we should return to the first principles of the system. Recognising that education is a vital public service that should be available to all is the first step, but we must then ask what that system is for.

The answer to this question should be the backbone of our programme moving forward. From a new future for assessment and curriculum, to a genuine vision for further education.

The coronavirus crisis has shown the challenges facing our economy, and it is a reminder that many people are in deeply insecure jobs with unacceptable working conditions. We must look seriously at the ways education can transform the lives of working people, particularly through lifelong learning and part-time higher education. After a decade of decline, we must rebuild this vital part of the system if we are to give everyone the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Teachers and other staff have been recognised as key workers, but we must now ask the question of what we can do to recognise their contribution.