

POLITICS IN EDUCATION SUMMIT

RESPONSIBILITY, IMPACT & CONTROLS

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To ask what education is for is to ask what society is for. This became the powerful, perceptive message of the Politics in Education Summit. Among repeated calls to lift education out of political cycles were carefully constructed proposals for the best role the UK government could play and what we could do, as citizens and influencers, to contribute in partnership towards current and future developments of our state education system; the cornerstone of any hopeful, purposeful society.

The importance of stability was a recurring theme in the presentations and panel debates. The creation of a Chief Education Officer, in line with other Government positions such as the Chief Medical Officer, was discussed as a fair way to bring back a professional voice to the Department of Education, lost in 1992 with the creation of Ofsted. The role of Ofsted was discussed little, except to acknowledge how contested its existence currently is and to suggest it becomes an organisation to confirm a school's base standard as acceptable or not, rather than continuing as connoisseurs of education.

We explored the moral responsibility of any democratic government, as the only body answerable to every person in the state, to uphold the right of all citizens to access the concepts and subjects they are entitled to. Our Government, across several parties, stepped up to this role by developing the provision of Special Education (SEN) beginning with the 1978 Warnock Report to the recently founded 'Achievement for All' charity. This work was presented as a case study of the thinking and strategy required to bring about cross party, embedded reform.

Technological advances have exposed our lack of structures for mobilising existing research knowledge. This was called out as, arguably, our most significant limiter to informed system improvement right now. The Education Endowment Foundation and grass-roots movements such as ResearchED were held up as good models on which to develop an Education Evidence Centre, independent of both Government and the teaching profession. In contrast, the College of Teaching will be dependent on the teaching profession and aims to introduce a new standard, normal across hundreds of other professions; the Chartered status.

Alongside thoughtful debates, this Summit revealed an uncomfortable truth about the wider state of state education. Deep questions of worthiness, frustrations around representation, fear to speak and apathy for all the good it might do are running through our system. What are the consequences to this debate, so central to society, when people feel their background or way of expression excludes them, rather than simply signalling hope for an invitation, some patience and empathy in conversation, to partake and learn what's necessary to become part of this important national discourse?

State education is personal, affecting our lives and the lives of those we love. How imaginative can we be in helping each other develop the courage for true expression, to inspire moral dialogue, leading to intellectual reasoning and thoughtful action? Speakers stressed the importance of understanding perspectives of key stakeholders, including the Government and media in order for us to move forward with any coherent vision on education. Interestingly, this recasts our Government as a lever we can learn to understand and use effectively, rather than the provider of a service we critique.

Teacher retention and recruitment remains an urgent problem already affecting students. Given the big picture context and space provided by the Politics in Education Summit, this urgent problem was diagnosed as a symptom of underlying problems we've neglected, while short-term policies swept the system. Longer term thinking, longer term goals and longer term policies are the recommended treatment now.