



*Council for Subject Associations*  
***A Voice for Subjects***

## **Response to the Education Committee consultation on the purpose of education**

This document sets out the response of the Council for Subject Associations to the current consultation.

### **1. About CfSA**

1.1. The Council for Subject Associations (CfSA) is a membership organisation, recognised as charitable company limited by guarantee. It is independent of government and acts as a single voice for its subject association members. The CfSA was officially launched in 2007 and has a membership of over thirty associations. These members specialise in over twenty different subject areas and cover all stages of the curriculum.

### **2. About subject associations**

2.1. The subject associations are the guardians of subject teaching expertise. Some of the organisations are well over 100 years old and date from the beginnings of universal education in the UK. The associations have a long history of partnership with university researchers: both in subject knowledge and subject pedagogy and continue to take forward the teaching and learning of their disciplines. Subject specialism lies at the heart of many teachers' professional identity and the ability to engage with like-minded colleagues in their subject community develops both their subject knowledge and pedagogy.

### **3. What should the purpose of education for children of all ages in England be?**

3.1. The online forum for this consultation shows a broad consensus around the question of what the purposes of education should be. The forthcoming edition of "Learning to Teach in the Secondary School"<sup>1</sup> also contains a useful discussion on the aims of education including this summary:

"Ultimately, our aims for education rest on our values – our conceptions of what makes for a good life both for individuals and for our society as a whole."

The Council for Subject Associations concurs with these values-based views. We believe that aims, which have been expressed in other jurisdictions and at other

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<sup>1</sup> Learning to Teach in the Secondary School; Edited by Susan Capel, Marilyn Leask and Sarah Younie Routledge, in press.

times, put the case clearly and succinctly and that one of the following statements of aims (or a rephrasing of them) should be adopted for England:

**a) “To enable each child or young person to be a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor”**

**b) “To develop successful students who demonstrate courage, behave with integrity and live happy lives”**

**c) “To develop:**

- **Successful learners, who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve**
- **Confident individuals who are able to lead safe, healthy and fulfilling lives**
- **Responsible citizens who make a positive contribution”**

**d) “To help our students to discover their own talents, to make the best of these talents and realise their full potential, and to develop a passion for learning that lasts through life.”**

3.2. CfSA believes that the purposes of education in England should be framed as an entitlement for all young people. We consider that a balanced education should be available to all young people that works clearly and directly towards these aims. We also believe that equivalent regard should be paid to vocational, physical, cultural, creative and academic subjects and activities, as neglect of any of these aspects within education works against the aim of fostering a life long engagement with learning.

3.3. Looking at the “aims” statements above through the lens of the subject disciplines we can see how the wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise available through the subject associations can contribute to achieving these aims. CfSA believes that the subject disciplines, developed over many years, have the capacity to excite and enthuse young people and to support them to develop the ideas and knowledge that will continue to fascinate them throughout their lives. Below are some examples from the subject associations (as shown on their respective websites) expressing ways in which the disciplines can contribute to the broad aims of a well-designed education system:

**Historical Association:** The Association believes that an historical awareness is essential for the twenty-first century citizen. The Association brings together people who share an interest in, and love for the past and it furthers the study and teaching and enjoyment of history in all forms.

**Design and Technology Association:** Design and Technology (D&T) is the inspiring, rigorous and practical subject, which prepares all young people to live and work in the designed and made world.

**Association for Physical Education:** afPE is clear in its role of supporting the transformation of the lives of all young people through physical education and school sport. Happy, healthy and physically active pupils build self-esteem and confidence to give them the best start in life. Children will recognise that anything is possible through engaging in a high quality PE experience.

**National Drama** Learning through drama is a natural human process – our brains are ‘wired’ for it. We recognise it as a powerful pedagogy and a creative process that provides a compelling means of exploration, expression and making meaning. Through it we learn what it is to be a human being.

3.4. From a broad range of subjects, young people should be able to select their preferences for further study and develop their lifelong interests. Some subjects will provide support for young people’s decision-making as active citizens. In setting school curricula, teachers and their leaders should be provided with appropriate resources to create, through the opportunities afforded by subjects, an educational experience that fulfills the aims of the system as suggested above.

#### **4. What measures should be used to evaluate the quality of education against this purpose?**

4.1. Evaluation of the quality of education against purposes expressed in this way is a non-trivial task. However, all evaluation experts would agree that a number of different measures should be used in concert in order to create an overall narrative to answer the question of whether the education system is being successful in meeting its aims.

4.2. In addition the evaluation process should be carefully focused on the stated aims of the system. While it is important to look at examination results and performance in other indicative measures, which serve the next phase of education or employment, these do not provide indicators of the success of the system as a whole against the aims that are described above. Likewise, the assessment of performance as indicated by international comparisons should be used cautiously and appropriately taking into account the information that is gathered and the processes employed to gather and analyse it.

4.3. The voices of young people at different stages in their education should be heard and used in order to shape and evaluate the system so that it achieves its purposes. Likewise the voices of all teachers should be heard, as they are the trusted professionals charged with the responsibility of enacting the purposes of education.

4.4. An external monitoring regime that takes a consistent and formative approach is part of this process. It is not helpful to name this an inspection regime. CfSA’s view is that it must be operated with sufficient subject expertise to understand and support the teaching of the different curriculum areas.

#### **5. How well does the current education system perform against these measures?**

5.1. The Department for Education states that it works “to achieve a highly educated society in which opportunity is equal for children and young people, no matter what their background or family circumstances.”  
And the current National Curriculum in England states its aims thus:

*The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.*

*The national curriculum is just one element in the education of every child. There is time and space in the school day and in each week, term and year to range beyond the national curriculum specifications. The national curriculum provides an outline of core knowledge around which teachers can develop exciting and stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills as part of the wider school curriculum.*

5.2. Neither of these statements of aims gives a clear statement of purpose for the education system in England, so perhaps it is not fair to measure the current performance against the measures proposed in the previous section. However, various studies and the data for achievement at GCSE indicate that equality of opportunity is a long way from being achieved as outcomes at GCSE remain markedly worse for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with no clear positive effect seen as yet from the Pupil Premium.<sup>2</sup> Thus the DfE aim is not yet achieved.

5.3. The aim of the National Curriculum is limited to an idea about what should be taught, rather than the outcomes of the system and as such is also much less than a statement of purpose as described in the previous section. However, some of the components of the current set of reporting criteria, such as the EBacc are, in practice, working against one of the indicators in the proposed model for a 'purposes of education' statement in that they result in a narrowing of the range of subjects taught.

5.4. If we take a further indicator from the proposed statements of the 'purposes of education' above, we can get an additional perspective on whether the aims as a whole are being achieved by the education system in England currently. We have data on the happiness of young people in England today<sup>3</sup>, which indicates that young people in England are less happy than their counterparts in other countries. There is clearly work to do in this regard.

We hope that these thoughts are helpful to the Education Committee's work. CfSA welcomes and fully supports this inquiry and will be happy to contribute further in future.

Annette Smith  
Chair  
Council for Subject Associations  
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<sup>2</sup> The evidence is that while the impact has been significant in individual schools, progress remains slow at a national level. (The Pupil Premium Next Steps, Sutton Trust and EEF, July 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Children's Society 2015 Good Childhood report, although UNICEF reports are more positive