

The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP
Secretary of State for Education
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Cc: Bridget Phillipson MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Education

11 September 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

We are headteachers and senior education leaders, representing British international schools from across the world, who came together to discuss redesigning education at the COBIS Annual Conference in London in May 2023. COBIS schools educate 200,000 students and employ more than 20,000 teachers in more than 80 countries worldwide. Our schools follow a curriculum (wholly or in part) that would be recognised in the UK (predominantly the National Curriculum for England), and our senior pupils take GCSE, A-Level, IB or BTEC assessments. This provides us with a unique perspective of British education.

We believe that significant elements of the current education system are not fit for purpose, but that there is also the opportunity to reaffirm its place as world-leading by asking the right questions of the right people, and bravely engaging with timely education redesign and reform.

Our existing curriculum needs to be redesigned to ensure that our students are adequately prepared for success in the modern world. Now is the time create a world-leading curriculum which will:

- Enable all young people to thrive in the rapidly changing world;
- Build self-esteem and enable self-actualisation for all;
- Ensure that every student feels valued, respected and inspired to learn;
- Build on your personal commitment to more applied learning by offering a better balance in the curriculum between theoretical and applied knowledge and skills.

Following a productive session at the COBIS Annual Conference, and informed by our personal experiences as educators, we recommend convening a group of experienced, open-minded and pragmatic educators, employers, students and parents to redesign a 3-18 curriculum based on the following questions:

1. What needs to be known and understood?

Drawing on the diversity of the world, we need to identify a smaller number of modernised relevant subjects, abandon the vocational/academic dichotomy, consider the importance of health, wellbeing, literacy, oracy, numeracy, financial literacy, computational, digital and media literacy, global citizenship and other domains that will be crucial to enable everyone to thrive throughout their lives.

2. What skills and character traits need to be developed?

Drawing on an extensive evidence base, consider how empathy, creativity, kindness, compassion, problem solving, critical thinking, research, collaboration, leadership, growth mindset, resilience, and metacognition can all be grown and nurtured in all our students.

3. How might the curriculum be learned?

Design a curriculum sufficiently flexible to be engaging, stimulating and rewarding whether face to face, online, blended, outdoor, multi, inter and trans disciplinary, project based,

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enquiry based, and AI assisted, encouraging multiple personalised pathways, student agency, independence and interdependence.

4. **How might the curriculum be enriched?**

An integrated extra-curricular programme of performing, creative and visual arts, sport, outdoor education, leadership development and life skills will deepen the learning and enrich the educational experience for all students.

Similarly, the current assessment system is in need of reform. It is heavily reliant on high stakes examinations and an overloaded school curriculum to evaluate student performance. This can lead to a focus on examination preparation, linked to outdated requirements for entrance to Higher Education, which neglects the broader development of well-rounded students with the skills needed for success in the modern workplace.

Discussion on the following questions could help shape assessment reform:

1. **How can assessment ensure everyone can achieve success?**

We need to address the potential drawbacks of norm referenced assessment and consider alternative assessment approaches that may better align with educational goals and principles ensuring that all students' achievements are acknowledged and celebrated including: pass/fail, criterion referenced, specifications based and competency based assessment systems.

2. **How can assessment be more continuous, flexible, and relevant?**

Could portfolios of work, allowing learners to showcase their work from a range of assessments and experiences throughout their education, be a more valuable record of their capabilities and achievements? Each student's portfolio could reflect their true capabilities including creative problem-solving skills, critical thinking, oracy, collaboration, leadership and teamwork.

3. **How can the system be more holistic and inclusive?**

How could knowledge, understanding, thinking skills and character traits be assessed across a wide range of assessment modes including oral, visual, 3D, projects, problem solving and written? Assessments could map not just knowledge and skills but also capability and metacognitive awareness, to build a more holistic picture of a learner and get a genuine appraisal of their capabilities, strengths and particular talents.

4. **How might assessment support the development and fulfilment of young people in a positive way?**

Can we create an assessment system designed to build self-esteem and enable self-actualisation of all students? Such a system would be tailored to the needs of individual learners, to ensure they achieve their personal best. Ongoing feedback from the gathered data would be used formatively to inform teaching and support student progression as they move through their educational journey.

We strongly believe that the traditional notion of education in the 21st century needs to be revised and redesigned. Our education system must no longer focus on the highest achieving learners, but instead find where each learner can achieve as highly as possible. By engaging with discussion and subsequent reform, we can design an education system that is genuinely world-leading and unlocks the gifts, talents, and future potential of all learners, allowing them to thrive in the modern world.

We are calling on you, Secretary of State, to ask the right questions of the right people, listen to the answers, and lead the way in resetting the direction of the British education system to ensure it is world-leading and meets the needs of our modern learners, their families and the wider community.

This letter will also be published externally to encourage further discussion.

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Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

COBIS Board Members and Chair, on behalf of headteachers of British international schools worldwide.

The Rt Hon Lord Knight of Weymouth, COBIS Chair
Dr Steffen Sommer, Director General, MiSK Schools, Saudi Arabia, COBIS Vice-Chair
Colin Bell, CEO, COBIS
Jennifer Bray, Former COBIS Head and Governor
Fiona Cottam, Principal, Hartland International School Dubai, UAE
Craig Heaton, Headteacher, St Saviour's School Ikoyi, Nigeria
Natasha Hilton, Head of Primary, Park House English School, Qatar
Carl Lander, Principal, Azerbaijan British College, Azerbaijan
Simon O'Connor, Director, Deira International School Dubai, UAE
David Tongue, Principal, Doha College, Qatar
Kai Vacher, Principal, British School Muscat and British School Salalah, Oman
Raymond Williams, Principal, Colegio Anglo Colombiano, Colombia

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