

POLITICAL BRIEFING

Education, Education, Education: What Has Happened to Standards Since 2010?

Introduction

Since 2010, the Coalition Government pledged to improve standards in education and narrow the attainment gap. This analysis scrutinises the Government's performance in meeting these objectives and evaluates the concept of 'standards' in education.

Understanding 'Standards'

What is meant by 'standards' is often subject to a great deal of debate and dispute. 'Standards' in education encompass various factors beyond narrow attainment outcomes.

For the 5-16 school system in England, these outcomes tend to be measured by pupils' performance in summative assessments at the end of primary school (so-called 'SATS tests') or by exam results at the end of Key Stage 4. The main measure for secondary schools, 'Progress 8', places greater emphasis on performance in English and mathematics but also gives a privileged position to a small range of additional subjects that comprise the Government's English Baccalaureate (EBacc) measure.

While not disputing the specific educational importance of English and mathematics, other definitions of 'standards' incorporate a wider range of outcomes and experiences for pupils. The Government itself sets a range of expectations and requirements on schools about the learning provided for pupils that go beyond its core accountability measures.

Narrow View of Standards

Despite claims of success, evaluating the Government's performance on narrow performance metrics is challenging due to changes in assessments and the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

- The Government's reliance on international studies like PISA to gauge standards lacks substantive evidence, as ranking fluctuations do not necessarily reflect genuine improvements.
- England's performance in PISA assessments has remained stagnant, with concerns about the validity of recent outcomes due to sampling issues.
- The claim that where a country sits in the PISA rankings says anything meaningful about changes in standards has been discounted by, among others, the OECD itself. The OECD has made clear that in respect of its league tables 'large variations in single country ranking positions is likely.'

The Government's accountability measures often overlook crucial aspects of education, such as wellbeing and inclusivity.

Broader View of Standards

Broader indicators reveal concerning trends, such as declining life satisfaction among children in England and persistent attainment gaps, especially for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and disadvantaged pupils.

Despite teachers' dedication, systemic challenges like recruitment crises, inadequate funding and neglected children's services hinder progress and exacerbate disparities.

A future government committed to enhancing standards must address these systemic barriers effectively.

Conclusion

While teachers strive to deliver quality education, the Government's policies have failed to genuinely improve standards. To achieve comprehensive educational excellence, policymakers must prioritise addressing systemic issues and fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

About Us

NASUWT is The Teachers' Union and is the voice of the teaching profession.

Our aim is to improve and protect the status, morale and working conditions of the teaching profession so that teachers and headteachers can provide the best education and support to children and young people.

We are committed to ensuring that teachers and headteachers are recognised and rewarded as highly skilled professionals with working conditions that enable them to focus on their core role of leading teaching and learning.

Further Information

For further information please email campaigns@mail.nasuwt.org.uk