

Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Education for 11-16 year olds

Thursday 8 June 2023

11.10 am

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Members present: Lord Johnson of Marylebone (The Chair); Lord Aberdare; Lord Baker of Dorking; Baroness Blower; Baroness Evans of Bowes Park; Lord Knight of Weymouth; Lord Mair; Lord Storey; Lord Watson of Invergowrie.

Evidence Session No. 8

Heard in Public

Questions 68 - 82

Witnesses

[I](#): Sir Jon Coles, Group Chief Executive, United Learning; Professor George Leckie, Professor of Social Statistics, University of Bristol; Dave Thomson, Chief Statistician, FFT Education Datalab.

Examination of witnesses

Sir Jon Coles, Professor George Leckie and Dave Thomson.

Q68 **The Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this evidence session of the Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee. I welcome you all today and thank you for joining us. I would like to start, please, by asking you each briefly to introduce yourself, and then I will kick off with an opening question.

Sir Jon Coles: Good morning. Thank you very much for inviting me. I run United Learning, which is a big group of academies and independent schools.

Dave Thomson: Good morning. I am a statistician and I work for FFT Education. We specialise in the analysis of data related to schools in England.

Professor George Leckie: Good morning. I am a professor at the School of Education, University of Bristol, and my research and teaching are very much in the analysis of data in education with students in schools.

Q69 The Chair: Great. Thank you very much. On to accountability for schools. Progress 8 was introduced in order to capture the progress of secondary school pupils of all abilities. Sir Jon, what are the strengths and weaknesses of Progress 8 as a measure of school performance, in your view?

Sir Jon Coles: It is a pretty reasonable measure of school performance, on the whole. One of the questions we were asked in advance was to what extent it reflects the curriculum that most children study. The answer to that is "Pretty well". The balance of English and maths, three EBacc subjects and three other subjects works pretty well for the curriculum that the vast majority of children study. It is reasonable that beyond the English, maths and double science that pretty much everyone does there is an assumption that most children will do a third EBacc subject. Most do.

Having three other subjects in the open bucket is reasonable; it gives people quite a lot of choice. Most schools do at least eight GCSEs, and the majority more than eight GCSEs. Coverage is reasonable. For most schools, you get a reasonable view of what children have studied. Obviously, in schools with high mobility where children do not have a key stage 2 baseline, you get some distortions that probably are unavoidable. It is reasonable to take a view that children with the same key stage 2 baseline are at the same starting point and ought to make broadly the same progress, and therefore the comparison across the cohort is reasonable. There are different views about whether you can or should contextualise further. Personally, I was never a fan of contextualised value added, so I prefer this to that.

Overall, my view is that it is a pretty reasonable measure of the progress children make in a school. It is not perfect, because there is no such thing as a perfect measure. It would be a mistake to read off from Progress 8 a definitive conclusion about the detailed performance of every school, but a range is published with each measure, and that is a reasonable statistical view of the range of performance that it reflects.

Overall, of all the measures we have had of school performance and progress, this ranks towards the top, in my view.

Dave Thomson: I largely agree with what Jon said. Its strength is relative to other possible indicators of school performance. It rewards every grade. It encourages schools to teach well and help students achieve the best grade possible. That is compared with the previous headline indicator of achieving five or more A* to C grades, which encouraged a focus on pupils at the C/D borderline. It also recognises that school attainment measures are largely correlated with intake. Those with higher achieving intakes will tend to achieve higher performance.

It has a number of weaknesses that are shared with other measures. Intakes vary beyond the prior attainment of students. Jon talked about context. I am a fan of contextual value added, because other factors influence pupil performance beyond prior attainment. We see that

particularly for schools serving very disadvantaged communities. It can also lead to some less desirable behaviour. Progress 8 is calculated based on pupils who are on roll in the January of year 11. Therefore, there is an incentive to move pupils who might not achieve very well off the roll before then.

There are also incentives to pursue particular qualifications that may score more highly and dissuade schools from entering pupils for qualifications that score less well; I am thinking mainly about modern languages. Then there is the question of whether people understand it—whether a score of 0.21 means anything to anybody beyond people working in schools or people like us who work with data.

Professor George Leckie: I have similar reflections. Certainly, one of the biggest strengths is the focus on progress, which only came in in 2016. Prior to that, the focus had always been on average exam results. The contextualisation in terms of starting achievements, the key stage 2 scores that are taken into account in the progress measure, is all-important. We are now trying to move closer to measuring the actual learning that happens on average in each school. That, for me, is the biggest strength.

On weaknesses, there is a debate to be had about how restrictive or not Progress 8 is in subject mix. I know we will come on to that later.

On the contextualisation argument, and whether we should further contextualise beyond just key stage 2 scores for things like socioeconomic background of the student and ethnicity, there are debates to be had, with arguments for both sides. I took the Progress 8 scores and reintroduced some of the types of adjustments that had been made previously in contextual value added from 2006 to 2010. We saw that a third of schools would change their Progress 8 traffic light bandings and a fifth of schools would move up or down by 500 or more places out of about 3,000 secondary schools. My point is that it makes a meaningful difference, so it is worth having that debate again. The Labour Government were pro it, and then we had a change of government, and it shifted to being against. There are interesting debates there.

Another weakness of Progress 8 is that it relies on key stage 2. We did not have key stage 2 tests in 2020 and 2021, so in the two years coming up they cannot publish Progress 8. I am not sure exactly what the DfE will do there, but it is a natural opportunity for any modifications to come after that. It is a good time to be asking these questions.

Q70 The Chair: Great, thank you. I want to go back a little bit on contextualisation, which each of you introduced in your opening answers. There is a divergence of views among you on that question. Sir Jon, can you just unpack a bit why you are generally opposed to reintroduction of contextualisation in accountability measures?

Sir Jon Coles: As a measure it is fine. If all you are doing is measuring what has happened and telling people what has happened and asking a

question such as, "How well did this school do compared to other schools with a similar intake?", it is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It became the be-all and end-all performance measure, and that has happened more than once over time. It became very closely aligned with the judgments Ofsted made. If you told me the contextualised value added of a school, I could tell you what Ofsted grade it would get. That is a bad place to have ended up.

Progress 8 says that if a child has achieved a certain level at age 11, their progress to age 16 will be measured against the progress of all other children who had that same starting point. If you then contextualise according to free school meals, ethnicity, et cetera, you create a measure in which that child is measured not just against children who have the same prior attainment but against children who have the same free school meal status and the same ethnicity, so you create a different expectation of progress for poor black boys or poor white boys from the one that you have for wealthy white girls or wealthy Chinese girls, for example.

The point of progress measures and the point of accountability systems should be the children, not the schools. In trying to be fair to schools and having a fair measure for schools, you create different expectations for children. In what is good progress for any child of any ethnicity of either sex or whatever wealth, our expectations for those children should be the same, in my view. We should expect a black boy or a white boy on free school meals who has achieved a certain amount by age 11 to make the same progress to 16 as any other child.

Contextualised value added as it was did not do that. It created different expectations for different children, and it said that a school that made poorer progress but had a less well-achieving cohort was still as good a school as a school that made better progress with a more affluent group of children. I think that is wrong. That is why I do not like it.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I have a quick supplementary on that, Jon. Accepting what you are saying about children, the Progress 8 scores are then aggregated for school-level accountability, and effectively you then have a norm reference system. I would worry that, as a result of that norm referencing, schools with disproportionately large numbers of disadvantaged children would be likely to do worse in the accountability system, because they had a harder job to do to get their Progress 8 measure on an aggregated basis up above the average. Is that a reasonable concern?

Sir Jon Coles: It is a reasonable concern, but it is not inevitable. Hurlingham Academy, Paddington Academy, Goresbrook School, Glenmoor Academy, Winton Academy and Northampton Academy—all schools in my group with progress scores in the top 80 in the country out of 3,000 secondary schools, all of which are disproportionately taking in either because they are non-selective schools in selective areas or because they are taking in disproportionately many poor children—are achieving among the best progress in the country. It is doable. It is about

the quality of education and the quality of leadership. We all know that it is harder to get great leaders and great teachers in schools in areas of deprivation, but those of us who are involved in the education system should consider it our job to make it happen.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: But for school accountability, should we essentially be setting one off against the other? Should we not just be saying, "How well are you doing?" You can be doing well but essentially be below average. That is possible, is it not?

Sir Jon Coles: That is the system we have, because about 80% of schools are considered good or better by Ofsted.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Yes, if we think Ofsted is doing its—

The Chair: Let us hear from our other two panellists.

Sir Jon Coles: But that is the system we have. Inevitably, only roughly 50% of the high 80 per cent of schools considered good by Ofsted will be at zero or above Progress 8.

The Chair: Dave Thomson and Professor George Leckie, do you want to come in and add any further reflections on this?

Dave Thomson: Yes, sure. With regard to contextualised value added, I would be in favour of publishing for schools a suite of measures, some of which would be contextualised and some would not, so you would see a wider view of school performance.

Professor George Leckie: Yes, I think you learn more by looking at them side by side rather than picking one or other extreme. You could even develop something that was a compromise between the two, which was a partial adjustment. Encourage society and schools to address some of these issues by partial recognition.

Q71 **Lord Baker of Dorking:** It is interesting to hear your evidence, because the evidence from Sir Jon and from Mr Thomson is broadly that, "Progress 8 and EBacc are broadly on the right lines. Don't disturb it. Leave it broadly as it is". I do not think I am misinterpreting either of you.

You are the first people to say that to this committee, quite frankly. As you probably know, there have been eight reports in the last year, all by educationalists, that have said that neither the present curriculum nor GCSEs are fit for purpose. There are two polls in the *Times* today, which you would not have read yet, giving the industry's view, and they say, basically, that two-thirds fewer schools are not teaching the right skills. I have not heard the word "skills" from any of you so far. There is a fundamental feeling in the country that they need a change. Could I ask you one question, Sir Jon? Do you know what the level of youth unemployment is at the moment?

Sir Jon Coles: Among 16 to 18 year-olds?

Lord Baker of Dorking: Yes.

Sir Jon Coles: It is extremely low.

Lord Baker of Dorking: You do not know the figure.

Sir Jon Coles: Not off the top of my head, but it is extremely low.

Lord Baker of Dorking: I would have thought you did, because I would have thought one of the judgments of a school is what the leaving rate is. When you go and ask a head today at a school, the head will say, "Oh, I'll tell you how many go to university".

Sir Jon Coles: Sorry, Lord Baker, but what is the answer?

Lord Baker of Dorking: NEETs are 9%.

Sir Jon Coles: For which age group?

Lord Baker of Dorking: I dare say that in many of your schools they do better than that, but that is the average level. In disadvantaged areas such as Stoke, Sandwell and the north-east, the level of NEETs is 20%. They are not being served by Progress 8 and EBacc at all.

Sir Jon Coles: That is a big leap.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Indeed, when it comes to the EBacc, they only have 39% of the schools doing the EBacc at the moment, and it stalled for five years at 39%.

Sir Jon Coles: Nobody has asked me about EBacc yet, but I will happily answer on EBacc.

The Chair: We will come on to that shortly.

Sir Jon Coles: Progress 8 assumes only that you do English, maths and three EBacc subjects. It is a national curriculum requirement that everybody does science and a national expectation that everybody does at least double science. Actually, the EBacc component of Progress 8, the extent to which Progress 8 incentivises EBacc, is very limited, because you only need to have done one of a third science, computer science, a modern foreign language, an ancient language, history or geography in order to meet the requirements of EBacc. That is only five GCSEs.

Lord Baker of Dorking: But the whole thrust of the Gove curriculum is to try to get those eight particular subjects. Do you happen to know that those eight subjects are word for word the curriculum of 1904?

Sir Jon Coles: I was not alive in 1904, but I was alive in 1988 when you introduced the national curriculum, and you made it a requirement to do all those subjects.

Lord Baker of Dorking: I did.

Sir Jon Coles: They are not all a requirement now.

Lord Baker of Dorking: I agree.

Sir Jon Coles: In fact, there is much more flexibility than there was in the 1988 curriculum.

Lord Baker of Dorking: With the greatest respect, if you want to do my full history you must say that I strongly supported the simplification in 2003, and I sponsored it and reduced it. There was a broad and balanced curriculum. What has happened to a broad and balanced curriculum in a situation where—

Q72 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** I would like to move the questioning on in that direction, Lord Baker, if that is all right.

Progress 8, as we have been discussing, promotes a focus on the EBacc academic subjects. In a way, I would like to turn this around. Sir Jon and others essentially say that Progress 8 is a pretty reasonable reflection of the curriculum that most pupils are learning. We have heard from the reports that Lord Baker has alluded to and from a whole number of witnesses that there might be a problem with the way the curriculum is structured, and that it is not meeting the needs of employers or the future needs of young people in a rapidly changing world.

If we were to want to change the curriculum to have more breadth and more vocational and technical content, what sort of adjustment should we make to the accountability system in order to make that work?

Professor George Leckie: Maybe ease off some of the subject constraints on Progress 8. I note that Sir Jon said that in Progress 8 five subjects are EBacc subjects, but in order for the English component to be double-counted, which obviously you want as a school to boost your score, students have to take both English language and English literature, I believe. That takes you up to six subjects. The lower of those two then appears often as one of the three open slots, so that really means that you only have two slots to play with, not three. It is probably more Ebacc-focused than first comes across. Of course, if you are doing the EBacc as a school, that leads to more subjects again, because then you have to do English, maths, double award science, humanities and a language, so you are up to seven. If you are doing three sciences, you are up to eight, and there is very little space left over.

In terms of changes, you could reduce the number of EBacc slots from three to two, and open from three to four. You could take off the double English aspect I talked about, and suddenly what is working is four open slots rather than, in effect, two for some kids. That would be a small modification that could be encouraging to a wider range of subjects.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: So the basic structure of the four buckets of Progress 8 is fine, but we could play around with what is in each bucket.

Professor George Leckie: Yes, you could tweak it. It has demonstrated that as an accountability measure it can alter what schools do. It is about more than just measuring schools and encouraging them to do more of the same better; it can actually change the direction of schools. They will

perhaps go on to a one-size-fits-all, very academic-type approach. It is great for Russell group universities and traditional degrees, but perhaps less great for full diversity.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Do you think it excludes pupils in the school system from being able to prosper, because it is so skewed towards what the Russell group wants?

Professor George Leckie: If you are following the intended structure of Progress 8, it might limit the range of things that you are actually interested in and want to do. Just because a measure is there does not mean that all students follow it. No doubt, there are lots of students doing broader things than are implied or encouraged by Progress 8.

Dave Thomson: Following on from what George said, if change is needed to the accountability system, you would have to start with which qualifications are included in performance tables. You can roll back to the Government's response to the Wolf review in 2014, when a whole raft of qualifications that were approved for use among 16 year-olds were deemed ineligible for performance tables, but some of those qualifications are very good for young people working at lower levels. I am particularly thinking of young people in special schools, AP schools and so forth. There would have to be change to the machinery around which qualifications are included and how they are valued to produce broader measures of school performance.

Sir Jon Coles: The way you have posed the question, Lord Knight, is the right way of posing the question. In other words, what is the curriculum that we want children to study? That is the important question. The next question is: what are the qualifications that best certify that children know, understand and can do the curriculum they have been taught? The third question that follows from that is how we hold institutions to account for the success of the children in studying the curriculum that we want them to have taught.

It is obviously true at the moment that we have a backwards effect of accountability on curriculum. I strongly urge this committee not to propose tinkering with the accountability system, but instead to talk about what is the curriculum that we want children to know, understand and be able to do. Policy has gone badly wrong at times over the last, say, 35 years when the accountability system has been used to create a backwards effect on qualifications and on curriculum.

Lord Baker basically got it right in saying that we should propose a national curriculum, whatever the detail of that might be. It should go through Parliament and be publicly consulted on and publicly discussed, and it should be available for scrutiny by the wider public, and government should be held to account for what that curriculum is. Then when it is enshrined in statute, it should be left alone for quite a long period of time, because fiddling around with the curriculum all the time is quite damaging to schools, and to the quality of education that happens in schools, because teachers are spending all their time revising all their

materials in order to meet the requirements of the new curriculum, rather than focusing on the quality of what they are doing.

Starting with the curriculum is the right thing to do. That would be my first point.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: It would be wonderful to get your view on how well the current curriculum equips all the children you are responsible for educating.

Sir Jon Coles: Could I make one more slightly general point first? It would be a mistake for this committee to think that the 11-16 curriculum ought to be second-guessing an unpredictable future in the labour market. That is a bad idea. Trying to chase today's skill requirements in the 11-16 curriculum is a mistake. It is a mistake that people have made, and it should not be repeated.

The 16-18 curriculum also needs to be considered alongside this. Personally, I think the weaknesses in the 16-18 curriculum in this country are quite pronounced. It is a requirement, as you and I know well, Lord Knight, that people should stay in some form of education and training between the ages of 16 and 18, which was a change that was introduced by you and your Government when I was still at DfE.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: That is the only thing I did that has not been undone since.

Sir Jon Coles: We have to think about that. In that context, I would argue that the most important thing that the 11-16 curriculum must do is provide general education for children and young people, and the concept of broad and balanced remains right. That should include a core of what is commonly known as general academic education.

Would you argue that children ought not to learn English or maths? I do not think anybody would. Would anybody argue that children ought not to learn about the science of the world, how the physical world works, how substances react with one another, and how living things are and behave? Those are fundamental to understanding our world. So is the history of our country and the wider world and how we got to where we are today. So is the nature of the physical and human geography of the world. It is important that we should learn to engage with other cultures and learn to speak other languages in order to understand the way other countries are.

These are not some kind of bizarre abstract academic creations. This is the nature of what it is to be human. We should not be saying, "Well, let's not bother about English literature", quite frankly. The idea that people should not be reading demanding, interesting, rich literature up to the age of 16 is madness.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I do not think there is an argument about that. The question is whether we need to create room for applying some of that knowledge, and learning some of the technical and vocational

skills that apply.

Sir Jon Coles: I would argue that, first, you need a national vocational route.

Lord Baker of Dorking: What do you mean by that?

Sir Jon Coles: What I mean fundamentally is that, if I have O-level history or A-level maths or a degree in maths from Oxford University, everybody knows what that means and everybody understands what it is. Its value as a qualification comes in large part from the fact that, although many people do not know what is in the detail of the A-level maths specification, people have a general sense about what it means about your capabilities and understanding. That is true across an enormous range of the economy and across further education.

Lord Baker of Dorking: We understand that.

Sir Jon Coles: But that is not true of any technical qualification at the present time in the present system. There have been multiple attempts at reforms. The Business Education Council and the Technician Education Council producing what are now called BTECs was one attempt at national reform. The diploma system and the current T-level system are all attempts at creating a national vocational system. There needs to be political consensus that we will stick with one version of technical education over multiple Parliaments and multiple Governments so that over a generation—it will take that long—there is an established national technical route that takes people to success in the way that the German system takes people to success.

Lord Baker of Dorking: I fully understand, but to get to that is rather a dream, quite frankly, because you will never change the education system by taking that approach. You have to change what exists on the table at the moment. I am surprised to hear you say that skills should not be taught to children between 11 and 16. They all teach skills in Europe at 13 and 14.

Sir Jon Coles: That is simply not true.

Lord Baker of Dorking: They do it right across the board.

Sir Jon Coles: First, I did not say nobody should be taught skills between the ages of 11 and 16. That would be an absurd position, because maths is a skill, reading is a skill and writing is a skill. All those things need to be taught.

Lord Baker of Dorking: No, those are not the skills I am talking about.

Sir Jon Coles: Which are the skills you are talking about?

Lord Baker of Dorking: Do you think it is more important for someone to master irregular French verbs or learn to code?

Sir Jon Coles: Computer science is taught in schools. It is part of the national curriculum. It is part of the national curriculum at key stage 3.

Lord Baker of Dorking: But only 13% of children take computer science, so 87% do not.

Sir Jon Coles: As you have pointed out, a large proportion of children do not do GCSEs in modern foreign languages as well.

Lord Baker of Dorking: So what? Modern foreign languages are declining, because English is—

Sir Jon Coles: The answer to your question is that of course there should be space in the 11-16 curriculum for the beginnings of vocational and technical study, but we know from past history and from the data on this that, when children were doing four and five GCSEs' worth of technical qualifications that were vocationally specific technical qualifications, it hugely diminished their progression into post-16 education. If you do a five GCSE-sized motor vehicle qualification in the 14-16 age group, you are in fact much less likely to progress into post-16 education. That is an established fact in all the data.

Lord Baker of Dorking: It is not.

Sir Jon Coles: I am afraid it is.

Q73 **Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** The questioning has moved on a bit from the point that Sir Jon made a little earlier, which I want to pick up on. It was when you stressed curriculum over assessment as what the committee should concentrate on. In previous sessions, we have heard a lot about EBacc and how it has narrowed the curriculum in a number of schools, effectively—maybe not in their ability to do what they want. In actual fact, practically, some schools are not able to have as broad a curriculum as they would like, particularly in arts and creative subjects.

United Learning has private schools as well as academies, and private schools typically do the EBacc less and tend to have a much richer offer in the arts curriculum, so is there any way in which what your private schools do in United Learning is able to be transplanted to some extent, even if a limited extent, into your academies so that you could show others that it is possible to have a broader curriculum even while the EBacc is still there?

Sir Jon Coles: I am not obsessed by the EBacc. Lord Baker's questioning has made it sound as though I am. A broad general education is fundamentally important. That leaves room for the arts and for technical education in key stage 4. I do not think the two things are in contradiction at all.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: We have evidence that in some schools the EBacc is creeping into key stage 3, and a year of key stage 3 is lost as some schools gear up for moving into the EBacc.

Sir Jon Coles: Yes. I think that is straightforwardly wrong. Just to be clear about that, I do not think schools should do that.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: I do not think they should, but there is evidence that they are to some extent.

Sir Jon Coles: All our schools, which is the only thing I have any influence or control over in my current job, teach a full key stage 3 curriculum right up to the end of year 9. That is important. That includes the technologies and the arts in full. Almost all our independent schools would say that they teach the EBacc in key stage 4 almost without exception, although they do not use the word "EBacc". They are much less likely to do BTECs than our academies are. Of course, it may not show in the league tables, because they may be doing IGCSEs, which do not count in the league tables, and so on.

We believe, and I believe, and I think our schools demonstrate very clearly, that you can teach a rich academic curriculum that includes all the things that I continue to believe can be taught alongside opportunities for children to study technical subjects and vocational subjects in key stage 4, and that that is not in contradiction with teaching the arts, music, drama, and art itself. Lord Baker seems to have abandoned the position, although he was its greatest advocate, that the best of what has been thought and known by humans across time is what we exist as educators to provide young people with. All those things have a place in the curriculum.

It is true that we take on quite a lot of schools that have got into difficulty, and lots of those schools have done things like drop music from their key stage 3 curriculum. I do not think there is any point in anybody saying that is the fault of the national curriculum, because the national curriculum requires people to do that. It is not the fault of the accountability system. It is decisions that are made by leaders—sometimes by leaders struggling to recruit teachers, of course. We put those things back into the curriculum in every school that we take on if they have been taken out. The accountability system does not constrain that one iota, in my view.

Q74 **Baroness Evans of Bowes Park:** Moving beyond the curriculum, would you be in favour of including a wider variety of achievements in the accountability system to deal with some of the broader skills and competency issues we have talked about? That might be the higher project qualification or even completely different, independent schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Is that possible or desirable? What would the implications be?

Professor George Leckie: In general, yes, I would like to see a more holistic summary of what is happening in schools, beyond just achievement and progress. The only things monitored beyond that now are student destinations—whether they stay in education or employment—and absences and exclusions. We care about so much more in student outcomes, including things like attitudes, behaviours, values

and well-being, and general skills like financial and digital literacy, and so on.

On the specific examples you mentioned, the higher project qualification is obviously an existing qualification and is on a 1-9 scale, so in principle it could be incorporated into something like Progress 8. It is 100% coursework, so we obviously have concerns about parental input and now ChatGPT. It is marked within the school, so if it becomes high stakes you have to be wary about gaming behaviours by schools. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award might be less feasible. I suspect that, as an external organisation, it would be delighted to be promoted but might not be so delighted to be part of an accountability system.

Baroness Evans of Bowes Park: They were just examples, going back to your point on values and competencies and how you could perhaps draw them into the accountability system. We talked about it being so focused on specific knowledge, et cetera.

Professor George Leckie: It is useful to have specific examples as test cases—straw men—so that we can think about what the issues are. You previously mentioned the Gatsby benchmarks. That is another obvious one. You might also survey students, as you see in the PISA surveys or the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England. You might collect new data, as well as capitalising on existing things, to get a richer sense of what is going on in schools. It is not necessarily about accountability but about having an awareness of what is going on and responding when there are concerns.

Dave Thomson: I agree with George. A wider set of measures that reflect the work of schools would be welcome. It just requires the political will to do it and for somebody to say, "Yes, this is what we expect the school system to do". The technical side of things would just fall into place. Data would need to be collected. With some of those things, I might be a little worried that disadvantaged schools would again lose out and that we were just measuring the same thing. The higher project qualification exists, but it was deemed ineligible for performance tables because it did not meet specific criteria, one of which was that it had to be assessed by exam.

Sir Jon Coles: I am in favour of all these things. Schools should do them. You have to be really careful about what you put into the accountability system, because you create enormous perverse incentives very quickly. We have seen schools overreact to all sorts of minor changes to the incentive structure in ways that were at times quite damaging. When the previous Government got rid of GNVQs, I know for a fact, because I was there, that Ministers did not intend, in recognising other qualifications, for there to be an explosion in uptake, but the fact that they were recognised meant that there was an enormous explosion that changed the curriculum vastly, and unintentionally.

So you have to be very careful what you put into the accountability system, but if you want to encourage it meaningfully, you have to think

very hard about how you get away from a system where schools feel that they have to respond to whatever the Government currently say they must do. The Government are over-mighty in education. There is insufficient confidence in the system to stand up and say, "Well, it's interesting that the Government think we should do that, but I think something different". We are institutionally weak compared with other sectors. The medical profession has royal colleges. If the Government said, "You should do keyhole surgery like this", the Royal College of Surgeons would stand up and say, "Well, that's all very interesting, but actually the evidence shows that—". In education, we do not have anything like that which is truly independent of government.

We need to build the confidence of schools to do things that are not incentivised by government, and not to do what government says some of the time, on a high-quality and well thought through professional basis. You have to be careful to say that of course we want these things, because they are about developing the whole young person and what it is to be human. We want young people serving, adventuring and thinking more deeply. We want scholarship and deeper thought and reflection. We want wider skills and technical learning. We need to find a way of encouraging that which is not to measure, monitor and publish it, incentivise it and drive perverse unintended consequences.

Q75 Lord Baker of Dorking: I have great sympathy for you, because you have to deal with the statistics in the educational world, and it is a complete swamp to the uninitiated. Can I ask you a specific question, rather pertinent to this? There are stories now that absentee rates in schools are very high following Covid, some as high as 10% or 15%, and in disadvantaged areas 20% or 25%. Statistically, are you measuring that at the moment? I want to try to work out why children are not going to school. In disadvantaged areas where the rate is as high as 25%, they are not going, because when they go back to school they do not learn anything useful to them in getting a job. Do you have any figures on this?

Professor George Leckie: I believe there was weekly absence rate monitoring during Covid. I do not know if that carried on.

Dave Thomson: It has carried on. The department is producing more up-to-date statistics on absence than ever. In fact, there is a Select Committee at the moment on absence in school.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Yes, there is. Do we get weekly figures on absence rates and that sort of thing in schools?

Dave Thomson: Yes.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Thank you. I just wondered.

Q76 Baroness Blower: Sir Jon, in your previous answer, probably the most interesting thing you said was that all schools should do all these things. Do you agree that there is a difficulty with the accountability measure which, in your first answer, you described—I lost count of how many times—as reasonable? Are there problems that mean that schools could

take off on a slightly different trajectory if teachers felt that they had the agency and schools felt that they had permission to do so? Would that mean that they would actually become more successful than they otherwise feel able to, precisely because of the accountability system? In other words, were you actually saying in your previous answer that there are problems with the accountability system, because it depresses the level at which schools might make decisions, other than those that they feel are being wished on them by the DfE and Ofsted?

Sir Jon Coles: The profound point is what you said about the sense of agency and confidence in the education system. I do not believe that anything about Progress 8 really means that you cannot have a rich curriculum in the arts and music, or a technical curriculum.

I do think there is a great sense of what we might call governmentality—your mentality has been captured by the Government. As you know well, we used to have the sense that our intrinsic motivation as educators was the most important thing. If something the Government measured cut across that, we would find it annoying and get angry about it, and possibly go on strike, but we would carry on doing the thing that we believed in. I honestly think that has been lost, to a degree. People have been captured by the idea that doing well in the performance measures is the thing that we are trying to do because that is what prepares children for life.

There is a much deeper question than “What are the specific performance measures?” It is how we get back to our intrinsic motivation to do the things that matter most to us, and not feel we are put in a box by the Government, Ofsted and what have you. In truth, in my experience, having done this for goodness knows how long, there is space to do interesting and different things, and have a creative curriculum with space for the arts and technical education. There is space for all those things, alongside a properly rigorous academic curriculum. There is space for the development of character, the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, and extended project-type work. These things can live in the system. Sometimes resources constrain our ability to do everything we might want, but we need the appreciation that we are free to do that, and that we have agency. It is not enough to say that tinkering with the accountability measures will make things better. The fact that we feel captured by the accountability measures is the problem. I do not think we are nearly so captured by them as people sometimes think.

Baroness Blower: Chair, these are questions we might put to Amanda Spielman. It does not matter how nicely Sir Jon puts it. The fact is that how it feels on the ground in schools is a very different matter.

Q77 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** We heard from the subject associations for music, drama and design and technology, and it was then confirmed by other witnesses, that because of Progress 8 it is essentially impossible to offer music, drama and D&T to the same child. Is that true?

Sir Jon Coles: To the same child? It is not impossible.

Lord Baker of Dorking: But the subjects you have just mentioned dropped by 40% to 50% because of Progress 8 and EBacc—the performing arts, dance, drama and music. The show business industry in Britain is crying out for people with those skills. That industry will produce more money for Britain next year than banking. But they are not there, because those subjects have been dropped from the curriculum as a result of Progress 8.

Sir Jon Coles: I think you could make the argument that you cannot very easily do EBacc and all those subjects. I do not think you can make an argument that you cannot meet the requirements of Progress 8 and not do those subjects. Those are two different arguments.

Lord Baker of Dorking: They do not get qualifications in them. Employers want qualified students who have done those subjects at 16-18 and they do not exist.

Sir Jon Coles: I want to push back on the 16-18 bit. You made a point about NEET numbers. Very few 16 to 18 year-olds, far fewer than has ever been the case in this country, are in employment. That is partly because of changes in the labour market and partly because of changes in the education system.

Lord Baker of Dorking: With great respect, there are 700,000 16 to 18 year-olds now considered to be permanently unemployed. That is a government statistic.

Sir Jon Coles: First, permanently unemployed is not a government statistic. There is no such category. Secondly, the legal expectation for all 16 to 18 year-olds is that they are in full-time education or in employment with training. In thinking about preparing people for the labour market, you must consider not just 11-16 but 16-18. My position, which I have tried to articulate, is that there should be a broad, general education from 11-16, which includes space for some technical education, but that the preparation of young people for the labour market and the skills needs of the labour market happens post-16. That is the nature of our education system. It is no good shaking your head. That is the truth.

Lord Baker of Dorking: I know. That is why I oppose it.

Q78 **Lord Aberdare:** My question has changed as we have gone along. Fundamentally, how can we un-capture ourselves from the accountability measures? It seems to me that we are very much focused at the moment on the measures that we have, which work quite well for the academic part of the system and for those wanting to go to university. I think George Leckie mentioned the Gatsby benchmarks. An awful lot of young people are not getting what they need from education. I very much agree that we should start from the beginning with what matters for us. That is partly the curriculum and partly how we serve all the children in our schools.

We have to have an accountability system. How can we have one that properly balances the academic side with the technical side and the other

interests? We have heard very much that you must start thinking about the career options open to you from a very early age, so the 11-16 stage has to be part of that. What would a balanced accountability system look like? At the moment, we seem to be focused very much on the academic side and, as you have all said, it is more difficult to measure the softer, more technical and vocational attainments. What about destination data? Schools are not measured on how many apprenticeships they succeed in getting people into, for example.

Sir Jon Coles: They are.

Lord Aberdare: Well, they are, as a number, but not recognised in the way that GCSE or A-level passes are.

Professor George Leckie: You could certainly have a broader range of measures, but you would need a strong steer to alter the balance between them. We have six headline measures. We have talked about only Progress 8, with some discussion of EBacc. There would have to be a very strong steer, a signal from government that they wanted more balance between Progress 8 and a number of other things. Maybe we could talk at the end of the session about more fundamentally changing the accountability system, reducing the stakes and doing it in a completely different way.

Lord Aberdare: I would be a bit sorry if that had to come from government. I agree that it would be nice for schools to have more say in this and more power in responding to what they thought would actually work.

Professor George Leckie: The stakes are so high at the moment that a lot of schools feel they have to strongly follow the specific performance measures. I know Ofsted said that it relies less strongly on them, or is less influenced by them—I think it made that statement a couple of years ago—but a lot of schools would still say that they feel that if their stats do not look good enough they are really under the cosh. Maybe we need to step back and think more broadly about the accountability system, and do more than tinker around the edges. We could look at examples from other countries and different ways of doing things, such as more localised models. There are other approaches.

The Chair: Lord Mair, I think you want to drill into this theme.

Q79 **Lord Mair:** I was going to ask about the accountability system, but we have obviously discussed that a great deal. Sir Jon, I think you said that it should not be tinkered with and that you are against any major changes to the accountability system. Is that right?

Sir Jon Coles: Not quite. I am against constant tinkering with the curriculum. Curriculum stability is very important in the education system. You should think about the accountability of people like me. Our schools are not accountable to government or to Ofsted but, through me, to my board. That is where the accountability of our schools actually lies. It is very difficult at the school level to come up with performance

measures that do not perversely incentivise behaviours that we do not want, but it is perfectly reasonable to think that you could ask me some difficult questions, such as what I am doing to make sure that across my trust as a whole all children get good careers education or a decent experience of music, drama and design and technology. Do you see what I mean?

Holding me to account for what I am doing to make sure that my schools are doing the things that you might want us to be doing, and making that very clear, is a very useful thing to do. You can influence me to do the right things and there are many fewer of me. I have 75 schools in the trust. You can have difficult, challenging conversations with me as an inspectorate or a Government about those things. It should all be public and transparent. Thinking about trusts and not just schools would be a powerful way into thinking about improving the accountability of schools.

Lord Mair: As you can imagine, a lot of views have been expressed. Would you oppose the view that the EBacc should be removed from the Ofsted inspection framework altogether?

Sir Jon Coles: Occasionally, but not very often, Ofsted refers to the Government's EBacc target in inspections, which is 90% of children doing EBacc. That has nothing to do with inspection and should not be in the framework.

Q80 Lord Watson of Invergowrie: Grade accuracy obviously impacts on school accountability. Previous evidence to the committee reflected on a point I raised, which was that when Glenys Stacey was acting head of Ofqual in 2020 she gave evidence to the Commons Education Committee and said that GCSE grades are reliable to one grade either way. Ofqual has since tried to walk that back and say that was not what she meant. We heard, I think from Dr Michelle Meadows, also ex-Ofqual and now at Oxford University, that we should not get hung up on the value of an individual grade either way.

Of course, between grades 4 and 5 that means quite a lot. Any inaccuracy, on the basis of what Dame Glenys Stacey said, could profoundly impact not just on schools but on individual pupils. I particularly want to hear what Professor Leckie and Mr Thomson think of that—and, Sir Jon, if you want to give us the benefit of your feelings. That would be helpful to the committee, because it is an issue that we will probably revisit when we have Jo Saxton here in a couple of weeks.

Dave Thomson: I totally agree. There is a piece of work to do looking at the implications of grading being reliable to one grade either way. I think Ofqual's argument is that there is a range of legitimate marks for any particular exam script. That is fine, but if that is the case, let us see all the possible grades associated with each script. So, yes, I agree.

Professor George Leckie: Yes. In essay-based subjects, two different markers could give two different grades. That is consequential for the individual, certainly at A-level and in applying to university. A greater awareness of that would be sensible when choosing between borderline

candidates. At school level, hopefully, it would all average out, to the extent that it is somewhat random. Yes, it is important for individual decisions on individual students.

Sir Jon Coles: The research on marker accuracy is available on the Ofqual website, so it is publicly available and you can scrutinise it. I do not think it shows what Ofqual and Glenys said it shows, and I have said that to Glenys and to Jo Saxton and discussed it with the authors of the paper. I think it creates at best an upper band for marker inaccuracy. It exaggerates the extent to which there is marker inaccuracy overall because of some methodological features that I do not suppose you want me to discuss now. Statistically speaking, there are some problems with it.

However, I think it should be rerun and regularly updated, and we should discuss and scrutinise that. It is very significant at the level of the individual. It is highly unlikely to be very significant at the level of the school because you are talking about, say, 180 children in a year group, each of whom has done 10 GCSEs, so the statistical effect will be tiny.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: I certainly accept that point. Professor Leckie made the point that it would even out and that the issue is not so much at school level, but it is important at individual level. Can any of you say, briefly, what might be done to squeeze any inaccuracy out of the system, as far as it is ever possible to do so?

Professor George Leckie: You could do double-marking, which would be very expensive. It is hard to do. I feel that Ofqual is being quite defensive on this topic.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: Does AI have a role to play in this down the line, if it does not end up controlling our entire lives?

Professor George Leckie: I am not convinced so far.

Sir Jon Coles: Perhaps I could say one thing about it. Lots of things have been done to examinations to focus on and increase reliability. The old A-level had the "In the 18th century, land meant power. Discuss" type of question. That was very open. It was unclear what would get you marks. It was extremely judgmental. There was no very clear mark scheme. All that has changed. We now have much more structured questions and a much clearer sense of what gets you the marks. There are lots of six, eight or 10-mark questions, and two, three or four-mark questions in subjects, even at A-level, with fairly structured mark schemes. All those things are done to drive reliability and make sure that two markers marking the same script would be more likely to give the same grade.

The difficulty with that educationally is that it becomes a trade-off between validity and reliability. Are you really testing the skills, qualities, knowledge and understanding—the scholarship—at A-level that you might want to see, if you limit the length and difficulty of the questions? We

need to be a little careful not to overemphasise reliability of qualifications if it is a trade-off with validity, which I think is increasingly the case. That concerns me.

Again, it plays into my earlier point that you are for ever not just tightening accountability systems for schools but increasing the consequences of small differences in grades for young people. That is the case; we have a university entrance system in which the difference between an A and a B is the difference between being able to do what you want and not being able to do what you want. We have to think not just about the system but about the consequences of the system, and not just about exams but about where they take you. How do we de-emphasise, at least at the margins, the extent to which those things are highly consequential for individual young people?

- Q81 Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Having discussed the reliability and validity of exams, it is impossible to resist asking about the reliability and validity of Ofsted inspections of schools, given that they play an important part in the accountability of head teachers and people like Sir Jon. We have Amanda Spielman coming before us in a couple of weeks. Is there anything you feel able to say about the consistency of quality of Ofsted inspections of schools, if that is not too career-limiting?

Sir Jon Coles: I am an outlier on this. Broadly speaking, I like Ofsted. The current framework, which has de-emphasised exam results to a degree, has positive features. There is the sense that you have a hard-edged measure, which is how well children do in exams, balanced by a visit from skilled and experienced professionals currently working in education having a look at how well the processes and qualities work in your school.

In principle, that is a good balance. Ofsted should not get captured entirely—as it has been three or four times—by the performance tables results for a school. That is positive. The quality and experience in an individual inspection depend on the individual inspector, probably more than would be ideal, but it is difficult to entirely eliminate.

I can probably quantify the overall concern. We have had about 100 inspections over the last five full inspection years, eliminating the Covid years. I thought that three of those were seriously wrong. Some were a bit more generous than I would have said at the time, relatively.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: And they are not included in the three, so you could have had half a dozen that were overly generous and three that were wrong.

Sir Jon Coles: When you say overly generous, I would say that they were not wildly inconsistent. If you get a good judgment that you think is basically right, and you get outstanding elements in your provision, you think, “Well, it’s not really outstanding, but I’ll take it”. That is the sort of thing I am talking about. There were three where I thought, “That’s just wrong”. As a trust, we always write to parents after an inspection, and to

staff. There have been three occasions when I wrote to parents saying, "We don't think that's right. What we think is—".

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Have you complained and had that reviewed by Ofsted?

Sir Jon Coles: Twice, and it was a bad experience. It was not a good complaints process. I told Amanda that. I think several people have done that. I think she said she needs to change it, and I think she said that in public. It felt like Ofsted closing ranks.

Lord Baker of Dorking: I want to record one thing on which I agree entirely with Sir Jon. He said some time ago that he did not want politicians getting up and messing around with the curriculum. When I was Education Secretary, I had to put every subject, in GCSEs and everything, to a vote in both Houses. The system of Progress 8 and EBacc, which you are defending, Sir Jon, was announced overnight by one man, Michael Gove. Neither House voted on it. There has been no approval of his particular curriculum, and that is the curriculum that you are defending.

Sir Jon Coles: There is a whole lot to unpack. First, it is not a curriculum; it is two performance measures. To reiterate, we need to think about curriculum and not performance measures. Secondly, I have answered lots of questions about Progress 8 and almost none about EBacc. I have not defended EBacc, because nobody has asked me about EBacc, and Progress 8 is not a very limiting thing.

Finally, to make it absolutely clear, I oppose government making changes to the curriculum and what is taught in schools without proper public consultation and without bringing it to Parliament. I am on the record as having done that, most recently in relation to Oak. You may be aware that we withdrew all our resources from Oak precisely because we thought there was an unacceptable attempt by government to control the curriculum at a level of detail at which government should not be controlling the curriculum. It had had no public consultation. It was wrong in principle and authoritarian. I just put all that on record.

Q82 **The Chair:** Sir Jon, you clearly want to get something off your chest about EBacc. Give us a paragraph on your views on EBacc and whether it should survive the Nick Gibb era.

Sir Jon Coles: Two things are enmeshed with one another. First, those subjects are very important for all children to learn. Children should learn them all up to the end of key stage 3, without exception. People should not narrow the curriculum in year 9. That is point number 1.

Point number 2 is that, for at least a majority of children, they are an important collection of subjects to study in key stage 4, because they give the best access to the best range of post-16 options. Keeping your options open at 14 is extremely important. The 90% target for EBacc is a mistake and should be dropped. It is not the right option for 90% of

children to do that precise range of subjects. There is more to say about that, but that at least is a summary of my view.

The Chair: Great. I thank our three witnesses for their very stimulating contributions. Thank you again.