

Comparing education policies: preparing for the general election

As most of you will be aware, it is an election year. Voting is a democratic right and responsibility. Just as Daniel guided King Nebuchadnezzar, Christians today can advocate for truth, justice and righteousness through elections. Governments impact religious freedoms which make the Christian voice crucial. And by staying informed about candidates and issues, Christians can vote in ways that prioritise the common good and the flourishing of society.

As such, the upcoming general election (whenever that may be!) empowers Christians to contribute by voting wisely.

Being a charity, ACT cannot endorse specific MPs or parties, and nor would we want to. However, our aim is to spotlight critical education issues particularly for Christians actively involved in education or with a prayerful concern for it. While it can be frustrating when parties don't clarify their positions, it provides an opportunity for voters, including you, to engage and influence policies!

While Westminster MPs influence education policy for England, residents of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland are governed by their own representatives. And although this article focuses mainly on parties in England, we'd

encourage you to go and listen to the briefing we recorded with the Christian Institute's Education Officer, John Denning, for a more comprehensive overview of the UK's devolved authorities and the stances parties take there. But in the meantime, here's an overview of the main parties and their position or history on 'big issues' with regards to education.



Conservative education priorities:

1. **Sustainability:** The Department for Education (DfE) is set to release a sustainability roadmap for schools, highlighting its focus for 2024.
2. **Ofsted:** Sir Martyn Oliver, the new Chief Inspector of Education, is prioritising mental health training for inspectors and plans to engage with parents and professionals through "The Big Listen."
3. **Workload reduction:** The DfE is aiming to reduce teacher workload by 5 hours a week over three years, with plans to remove performance-related pay and streamline administrative tasks.
4. **Attendance:** persistent absences remain a concern, prompting the DfE to allocate £15 million for attendance hubs to address the issue.

5. SEND: The DfE acknowledges the challenges in the SEND system and is working on solutions to improve capacity for special school places.
6. Recruitment and retention: Efforts to recruit and retain educators include a £30,000 starting salary and initiatives to reduce workload and support mental health.

Transgender issues in schools

Despite calls for legal clarity regarding schools' role in children's social transition, the Conservative government has disappointingly not pursued such legislative changes. The consultation on the guidance for support for gender-questioning children in schools was initiated late in the parliament, leaving uncertainty about the timing of the final guidance's release before the election.

The aforementioned draft guidance should broadly be welcomed, however. It emphasises that pupils must use facilities designated for their biological sex. Primary schools are barred from using pronouns for the opposite sex, while secondary schools should only do so exceptionally. Restrictions are placed on male students' participation in girls' sports to prevent safety risks and unfairness. Parental involvement is highlighted, along with recognising the distinction between children's desires and their best interests.

Faith school designation reforms

There is a consultation that the government are currently conducting into faith school designation reforms- to remove the 50% cap on faith admissions, with the aim of enabling all faith groups to apply to open new faith free schools and to allow new special academies and existing special academies with a recognised faith ethos to apply to be designated as having a religious character.



Proposals include:

1. Higher standards in schools by recruiting 6,500 more teachers to ensure every child is taught by a specialist, funded by ending tax breaks for private schools.
2. Improved well-being for young people by hiring mental health support staff in every school, funded by ending tax breaks for private schools.
3. Providing free breakfast clubs in every primary school in England, funded by closing tax loopholes for the wealthy.
4. Enhancing opportunities for children to study music, sport, and the arts by revising accountability rules for schools.
5. Facilitating higher-paid jobs through improved skills, apprenticeships, and training programs.

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Transgender issues in schools

Labour's shadow education spokesperson, Bridget Phillipson, welcomed the draft guidance on gender policies in schools, citing the need for clarity and support for teachers in handling sensitive issues. However, a number of individuals in the parliamentary Labour party are fiercely opposed to the position set out in the draft guidance. Labour's stance remains ambiguous, reflecting internal divisions within the party and awareness of the contentious nature of the issue among the electorate. The lack of a definitive position suggests potential openness to persuasion without the risk of contradicting manifesto promises.

VAT on private schools

The Labour Party have proposed to end the VAT exemption on fees for private schools if they win the next general election. An increasing number of independent schools in England are small Christian establishments; they are often financially vulnerable, and serving families who often opt out of state education for reasons motivated by their faith.

A prospective Labour government intends to implement a 20% VAT on the fees these schools charge their pupils. Labour anticipates that this VAT imposition could generate approximately £1.6 billion annually.

Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, has committed to utilising these funds to bolster staffing levels in critical subjects such as mathematics and physics.

Liberal Democrats

1. Placing mental health professionals in every school.
2. Increasing school funding annually above inflation.
3. Extending free school meals to primary students and more secondary students.
4. Providing £10,000 for lifelong education and training for adults.
5. Rejoining Erasmus Plus for student exchanges with the EU. Aimed at improving education and mental well-being for young people amidst pandemic challenges.

SNP

1. Address inequality by introducing reforms in primary schools to tackle decades of inequality
2. Close the attainment gap with £750 million investment in the 'Attainment Fund'.
3. Increase representation of deprived students in Higher Education by setting ambitious targets.

4. Maintaining tuition-free university education.
5. Supporting young people's transition to work with expanded apprenticeships and a Jobs Grant.



Plaid Cymru Party of Wales

1. Free school meals: extend to all primary school children by the first term of office
2. Early Years education: provide 30 hours of free childcare for children aged 24 months to school age.
3. Teacher recruitment: employ 4,500 additional teachers and support staff.
4. Post-16 education reform: review and reform post-16 provision. Reduce maximum tuition fees for Welsh-domiciled students to £7,500 and offer lifelong learning entitlements worth £5,000 for individuals over 25.

We are aware that this briefing does not cover every political party. We recommend conducting your own research, reaching out to prospective parliamentary candidates with specific questions, and referring to resources from organizations like CARE and the Christian Institute for additional information. And above all, PRAY! Pray *'for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.'* - 1 Timothy 2:2 [🔗](#)