

Polly Toynbee, The Guardian, 29 February 2024

Children became unhappier in the past decade, according to the annual [Good Childhood report](#). The number of eight to 16-year-olds with mental health problems [rose sharply](#). It wasn't their parents' fault: children were happier with their families, but their distress coincided with a school life [relentlessly concentrated on exams](#). Meanwhile, art, music, drama, sport, and design and technology are vanishing – they are unaffordable in schools with cut budgets that knew they would be judged on that harsh English baccalaureate regime: [English](#), maths, two sciences, history or geography and a language. Nothing else.

As [40% fewer took arts subjects](#), PE hours were also cut, while 215 school playing fields were [sold off](#) and fun was squeezed out of the curriculum. Half of secondary pupils failed the Ebacc, without alternative activities to shine in. Ofsted, as stern enforcer, helped cause a [flight of headteachers](#) intimidated by those one-word judgments: lose a “good” rating and you might lose your career.

More than a third of new secondary heads [quit within five years](#), with unions on strike over a 14% real-terms cut in wages, [recruitment down](#) and [teacher vacancies doubled](#) in the past two years. Children voted with their feet, too, as [absence levels soared](#). In future, schools need to be judged as joyful and enticing places for teachers and children alike, and here is how to start.

1. Begin at birth

Bring back those 1,416 Sure Start centres [that have closed](#) in England since 2010. Set children and their families on their feet in those first vital years, ready to enjoy primary school. Everything afterwards is remedial, difficult to catch up and more expensive. The gap between deprived young children and the rest [has widened](#): narrowing the social divide starts with nurseries staffed by professional teachers and with good social support. Invest here, as every child falling behind young will be harder to help, costing far more all their lives than good nurseries. Regard supporting the whole family as part of education: children learn most – and spend the most time – outside of school.

2. Make children happier

Schools need just one target: make children happier and education a pleasure. The focus on learning facts is a strange anachronism when a click of a mouse can tell us anything we want to know. Tick-box systems of teaching and marking to pass tests come at the expense of thinking, expressing ideas, knowing how to trust information and how to use it fruitfully. Make critical thinking the course at the heart of school learning. Enrich children's lives with arts, music, drama, dance and plenty of time for sports.

Bullying and misogyny stalk the corridors, below the radar of overworked teachers, and are the greatest cause of unhappiness. The emotional life of pupils is as important as exams, as headteachers plead for professional mental health therapists to treat distressed children. Bring back [school nurses](#), another place for pupils to turn for help: there is [barely more than one nurse](#) for every 10 schools in England now.

Nurturing children means feeding them, too: beyond the first years in primary, free school meals only go to families on universal credit [earning under £7,400](#). At the very least, raise that threshold to the median wage. Offering breakfasts to all lifts a school's wellbeing and attendance: the London mayor [currently pays for free school dinners](#) for all London primary children. Do all this and if children are measurably happier, count that as worth more for the rest of their lives than counting exam certificates.

3. Kickstart FE

Further education, that garden of second and third chances for the more than half of students not destined for university, languishes neglected.

FE college staff have suffered real-terms pay cuts of 18%, even deeper than teachers, and a quarter of them [leave the profession](#) after one year because of lack of resources and lack of esteem. It's here that Britain falls behind in skills. Where other countries train high-level engineers and technicians, with apprenticeships worth the name, those opportunities have fallen in the past decade.

An apprenticeship levy on big employers has failed, as they have used it to fund business degrees for existing senior staff at the expense of [taking on young beginners](#). Use that money to kickstart FE, with the resources and respect it deserves, even if universities on the verge of going bust have to fend for themselves. Colleges have often become places of torture for the rising numbers of 16 to 18-year-olds [who fail GCSE English and maths](#), resitting and resitting again. Only 20% of those failing maths the first time will ever pass, so why put them through yet more exam hell?

Create new basic literacy and arithmetic tests, enough to function: few will ever need fronted adverbials or algebra again. Too little national conversation is directed towards FE, which the powerful regard as for "other people's children". These potential engines of social mobility deserve the teaching resources of universities.

Too much education is designed to weed students out, not to find out their skills and encourage them in what they can do. Too many become alienated from learning altogether. Start with the idea that education matters for every child, at every level. They will never learn much if schools are places for exams, inspections, tests and torture, for teachers and pupils alike.

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