

## **A New Settlement for Education**

### ***Why we need a new theory of place-based improvement***

*The challenge for the next forty years is not simply to build better schools. It is to improve places, so where a child grows up no longer determines the opportunities available to them.*

#### **Briefing Paper**

England is at a generational turning point. The education system created by the 1988 Education Reform Act transformed schools through competition, parental choice and institutional accountability. It raised standards and strengthened many individual schools. But forty years later, that model is no longer enough.

The challenge now is not simply to build better schools. It is to build better places.

Persistent absence, the SEND crisis, youth mental health, child poverty, exclusion, regional inequality and the growth in young people not in education, employment or training are not problems that any single school can solve alone. They are place-based problems. Yet England still relies on a system designed to improve institutions rather than communities.

The paper argues that the market era of education reform has reached its limit. Competition may have driven improvement in the past, but it now too often works against inclusion, collaboration and shared responsibility. Schools are judged individually, while children experience services collectively. Leaders are held accountable for institutional outcomes, while many of the barriers facing young people sit beyond the school gate.

COVID showed that another model is possible. When traditional accountability mechanisms were suspended, schools and trusts did not become less accountable. They became more accountable to their communities: supporting families, protecting vulnerable children and acting as civic institutions. That lesson matters.

The next settlement should combine the strengths of trusts with the legitimacy of place-based leadership. Trusts should remain engines of school improvement. Places should provide civic leadership, democratic accountability and shared responsibility for outcomes. Communities should become the focus of improvement.

This requires fundamental accountability reform. Current measures, particularly Progress 8, are too narrow. They privilege academic routes, constrain technical innovation and fail to recognise wider contribution to community outcomes. A modern framework should also consider attendance, exclusion, elective home education, NEET rates, wellbeing, employer engagement, economic participation and community resilience. This is not a call for less accountability. It is a call for more intelligent accountability.

The paper also makes the case for curriculum reform. Every young person should study a strong academic core, but schools and trusts need greater flexibility from age fourteen to create high-quality technical, vocational and employment-linked pathways. Models such as the Manchester Baccalaureate and West Midlands Baccalaureate show what is possible when curriculum is connected to local economies and real opportunities.

The economic case is clear. Too many young people leave education without a secure route into work, while employers face acute skills shortages. A place-based education system could reduce NEET rates, strengthen regional economies and connect education reform directly to national growth.

For forty years, England has organised education around how institutions compete. The next forty years must be organised around how communities thrive. The goal is not just better schools. It is great schools at the heart of inclusive, healthy and prosperous communities — so that where a child grows up no longer determines the opportunities available to them.