

General Election 2019

An analysis of manifesto plans for education

Executive summary and introduction

Jon Andrews, Emily Hunt,
Bobbie Mills and Felix Bunting

December 2019



Research Area:
Election Analysis



Executive summary

High quality education is consistently a public priority in opinion polls. The quality of education is also a key driver of productivity and economic success, as well as social mobility and inclusion.

It is to be welcomed that all of the main parties make aspirational statements to improve education in their manifestos.

The Conservative manifesto notes that: “Talent and genius are uniformly distributed throughout the country. Opportunity is not. Now is the time to close that gap... Every child should have the same opportunity to express their talents and make the most of their lives...”

The Labour manifesto promises a National Education Service to “nurture every child and adult to find a path that’s right for them”. The Liberal Democrats pledge to “give every child the best start in life, no matter their ability or background”.

This analysis of the manifesto promises of the five main parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green and Brexit parties) seeks to assess the likely impact of each of their education policies, considers how far these seem to be based on the best research available and judges whether the stated aspirations are likely to be met in practice.

While there are some notable differences in the policies of each main party, all are promising a more generous funding settlement for education than has been the case since 2010. But the parties are proposing to spend different amounts of money on different phases of education and targeted in different ways. There are some important differences in both the likely cost pressures arising from each party’s plans as well as the impact they will have on pupil outcomes and equity.

None of the parties make reference to how they plan to secure value for money from the additional investment in schools or to support schools to make efficiency savings where needed.

In the case of each party, spending commitments are contingent on higher taxes, savings or other revenue sources. The Conservative plans assume that the growth impact of Brexit will be moderate; the Labour plans assume the same, and also rely upon large tax revenues from a limited number of sources; meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats are banking on a ‘remain bonus’, and revenues from uncertain sources such as tax avoidance. With all parties, it is unclear how education spending plans would be altered if revenues prove less robust than planned.

The Conservative Party

The Conservative Party’s manifesto section on education is notably shorter than in 2017. We assume that this indicates that much of current government policy will continue. The manifesto contains some key policies which could support improved education standards – including a commitment to retain the current framework of accountability (although there are no commitments to address the flaws in the current system) and the introduction of higher pay for newly qualified teachers, to boost recruitment and retention. A new National Skills Fund aims to improve skills and training in the workplace.

There are, however, a number of areas where the proposed policy agenda is unlikely to support the very boldly stated aspirations which the Conservative government has set out for raising attainment and ensuring greater equality of opportunity.

Despite around 40 per cent of the disadvantage gap at age 16 already being present at age 5, the Conservative manifesto has little to say about improved early years education. Policy in this area seems largely focused on childcare, to help parents who want to return to or remain in employment. England has a relatively low funded, poorly paid and under-qualified early years workforce, and some of the existing entitlement policy (such as the 30 hour policy) excludes many poorer children. The Conservative manifesto does nothing to address these issues, and it is therefore difficult to see any significant reduction in the early years gap under the Conservative approach.

On school funding, the planned rise in real terms funding could help make teacher pay more competitive (particularly for newly qualified teachers) and so improve retention. But the extent of these gains will be limited, as the planned real terms rise (of 7.4 per cent) is modest and will leave per pupil funding in 2022-23 at the same level in real terms as in 2009-10 – and with schools needing to bear the cost of increases in pay and pensions.

A major concern is that under the Conservative plans the additional funding for schools will be skewed towards those schools serving less disadvantaged communities. Our analysis finds that, under current government plans, over a third of the most disadvantaged primary schools and half of the most disadvantaged secondary schools outside London would receive inflation-only increases in their budgets.

There is also no Conservative commitment to uprate the Pupil Premium for inflation – this would mean that, over the period from 2014-15 to 2022-23, the Pupil Premium would decline by 15 per cent in real terms. The risk is that the Conservative commitment to ‘level-up’ funding could, combined with real terms cuts to the Pupil Premium, actually widen the attainment gap.

There is also no commitment to further increases in funding for pupils with SEND after 2020-21, suggesting that this will continue to be an area that will suffer from funding pressures and where funding will fall significantly short of the £1bn recommended by the Education Select Committee.

Funding for 16-19 education will increase under Conservative plans but there is only a commitment for one year and it is unclear whether funding for this phase will be increased or held steady over the rest of the Parliament. The 16-19 per-pupil funding rate proposed by the Conservative party is lower than that proposed by Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

The Conservative manifesto makes a commitment to “ensure that parents can choose the schools that best suit their children”. It is not clear what this means in practice but it does leave open the option to expand places in selective schools (or create new selective schools) – a measure which, as EPI research shows, could have a detrimental effect on disadvantaged pupils. Current Conservative policy to increase grammar schools capacity in areas where these schools already exist has been shown by EPI research to potentially have negative attainment impacts on those not admitted into selective schools.

There are some major policy challenges which the Conservative manifesto appears to have no proposals to address, including the large number of unexplained exits from school (disproportionately affecting more vulnerable pupils), the uneven access to top performing state

schools across the country and the relative shortage of subject qualified teachers in more disadvantaged schools.

Finally, the manifesto section on higher education is surprisingly short of new policies, given that the government commissioned an independent review into the issue in February 2018 and received a detailed set of proposals from the review team earlier this year. On funding, the only pledge appears to be to reduce the interest rate on student loans. While popular with students, the gains from this policy would go disproportionately to higher earning graduates and would have little or no impact on educational attainment or the disadvantage gap.

In spite of the strong statement Conservative commitment to closing the gap and giving “each child the same opportunity”, our assessment is that the Conservative manifesto proposals are unlikely to deliver on these aspirations.

In the last few years the reduction in the disadvantage gap appears to be stalling and while the Conservatives now plan an end to real terms school cuts, the measures set out in the Conservative manifesto are unlikely to have a significant impact on closing the disadvantage gap over the coming years.

The Labour Party

The Labour Party has also made a large commitment to additional education funding. Its manifesto costing document sets out that by 2023-24, it is promising £5.2bn extra for improved early years education, £5.1bn extra for schools, £4.4bn for improved skills training and lifelong learning, £6.7bn more (net) for higher education, and £1.0bn for its National Youth Service.¹

Labour proposals on early years education would lead to a large increase in the funding for 2-4 year-olds. Additional hours of education, improved staff pay and qualifications, and other support to parents could help to reduce the large disadvantage gap by age 5. However, it may take time to recruit and train additional staff and it will be important to ensure that very large rises in funding are used effectively. Since research suggests that early years education needs to be high quality to have an impact on longer-term outcomes, there is a risk that this very rapid increase in spending may not deliver value for money in the short term.

Labour also plans a significant rise in school spending – an additional 14.6 per cent per pupil by 2022-23. This would mean that per pupil funding is materially higher than in 2009-10. Labour has also indicated that it will protect the Pupil Premium in real terms, and provide additional special needs funding, both of which could be expected to help with efforts to narrow the attainment gap.²

Labour also promises larger increases in teacher pay than any other party (5 per cent in the first year) but does not address the challenge of attracting more of the best qualified teachers to the most challenging schools, nor does it set out a convincing strategy for improved school quality in parts of the country where there are few high performing schools.

In addition, Labour’s policies on private education could lead to additional costs from pupils being diverted into the state-funded sector by higher private fees. It is not clear whether policies such as a

¹ In 2019-20 prices. The Labour Party’s costing document presents cash amounts in 2023-24.

² The commitment to protect the Pupil Premium was confirmed in correspondence from the Labour Party on 27 November 2019.

maximum class sizes of 30 in primary schools offer value for money. Labour also propose to extend free school meals to all primary aged pupils. We estimate that Labour costings on this are around £140m lower than is needed due to increases in staffing costs. If the National Living Wage is increased to £10 per hour (as per Labour's plans), this shortfall could double.

Labour also plans significant changes in policy on assessment, testing, inspection and accountability. These plans to dismantle the key aspects of the current accountability system are counter to evidence that strong systems of accountability can help deliver improvements in attainment and a narrowing of the gap.

On how schools will be governed, and held to account, it is clear that the Labour manifesto envisages a return to a system with far more local authority oversight and involvement – but it is not clear how this would work in practice and what impact it would have on school standards. There is little evidence to suggest that, at a system level, structural reform makes much difference to educational standards.

Labour does, however, acknowledge the issue of increasing unexplained pupil exits from schools, although its proposed solution could come with unintended consequences.

The Labour manifesto also proposes a number of measures to improve out-of-school services which are important to more vulnerable young people, and where action could improve learning outcomes. For example, Labour propose to double the annual spending on children and adolescent mental health services. If well targeted and delivered, this could help improve outcomes for many vulnerable children.

Labour has made a strong commitment to improved 16-19 funding, which seems to be rational when looking at international experience, and some of the recent trends in funding and curriculum in this sector.

Labour proposes additional spending on lifelong learning and improved access to Level 4-6 training, which could help address the current skills gap.

Labour's largest education spending pledge is on higher education, where it proposes to spend £6.7bn abolishing tuition fees and restoring maintenance grants. Transferring more of the HE funding burden from students to taxpayers can be expected to be popular with students, but there is little evidence that it will improve education outcomes, including participation. The policy also comes with some long-term risks to universities – that in competition with other public spending, a Labour government might seek to reduce overall funding, which could impact on unit funding or participation, or both.

Labour's manifesto includes no proposals to address the challenge of attracting the most qualified teachers to the most challenging schools and does not set out a convincing strategy for tackling poor performing schools.

In conclusion, Labour's manifesto proposals on early years education, children's mental health, school and college funding, and teacher pay, could all help boost attainment and narrow the disadvantaged gap. But Labour proposals on accountability and structural reform could impact negatively on value for money and could offset gains from these other policies.

Labour's largest education pledge – to spend £6.7bn on abolishing university tuition fees and restoring maintenance grants – has little to commend it in terms of education outcomes. This money could be better targeted at those phases of education and particular challenges, where a large impact on attainment and disadvantage gaps might be expected.

Finally, it should be noted that while Labour's commitment to spend a large additional amount on education should be welcomed, this is in the context of a manifesto with large pledges on resource spending which require big increases in tax revenues, which come with some risks and uncertainties. It is unclear how Labour would respond to its planned revenue coming in under budget and whether the financial commitments to education would then be at risk.

The Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats have also made a large financial commitment to additional education spending. Its manifesto costing document sets out that by 2024-25, £9.6bn extra is proposed for schools, £12.7bn for early years education and childcare, £1.1bn for extending free school meals, £1.5bn for further education and youth services, £0.9bn for restoring maintenance grants, and £1.5bn for introducing a new 'Skills Wallet' for all adults.³

The Liberal Democrats have proposed the largest spending package on early years education and childcare and propose significant increases in the annual hours of free childcare for all 2-4 year olds – including more than trebling average funding for children in non-working families. Much of the money would be focused on childcare support to enable employment, but the emphasis on a higher Early Years Pupil Premium, improved entitlements for disadvantaged pupils, and improved staff qualifications could all help to reduce the gap and improve child development. The scale of the Liberal Democrat commitment would mean that "early investment" would move from rhetoric to reality and would be higher per student than in the primary and secondary education phases. However, the speed and scale of change raises risks that the plans will prove too ambitious, or that there would need to be an over-reliance on less skilled staff. This could, in turn, considerably moderate any favourable impacts on child development. A more carefully phased plan would be of benefit, and one with a clearer focus on quality early years education rather than childcare.

On schools, the Liberal Democrat funding proposals are less than Labour and would leave per pupil funding little changed from the 2009-2010 level by 2022-23. Their pledge on school funding is not materially different from the Conservative proposals – by 2022-23, they would have increased the schools budget by only around 1 per cent more than the Conservatives.

Surprisingly, for a party that proposed the Pupil Premium, the Liberal Democrats assume that it will not be uprated for inflation – which means it will decline by 15 per cent in real terms by 2022-23 (versus 2014-15). The Liberal Democrats also say they "will increase teacher numbers by 20,000", but this is misleading – teacher numbers aren't controlled by government but by the schools which are given the budgets.

The Liberal Democrats have also pledged to extend free school meals to all children in primary education and to all secondary school children whose families receive Universal Credit which they

³ In 2019-20 prices. The Liberal Democrat's costing document presents cash amounts in 2024-25.

estimate would cost £1,160m in 2024-25. Again, once we account for increases in staffing costs, we estimate that the likely cost would be £180m more than the Liberal Democrats have budgeted.

Like Labour, the Liberal Democrats propose to end national tests in primary schools and to replace Ofsted – though the purpose of the latter reform is far from clear. Evidence suggests that robust accountability can help improve attainment, and there are risks that these steps could lead to worse value for money and a reduced focus on improved attainment and tackling poorly performing schools. Vulnerable children’s interests might not be served by such changes.

More positively, the Liberal Democrats propose a series of policies to improve mental health and wellbeing, as well as out of school support. There is growing evidence that such policies, if effectively delivered, can have an important impact on well being.

On higher education, the Liberal Democrats have few proposals. A new ‘Skills Wallet’ for lifelong learning is proposed, but with limited policy detail. This could have a useful impact on skills, but there could also be high deadweight costs. In contrast to the Labour package, the Liberal Democrats appear to be proposing to spend relatively little on higher education and have committed instead to a review of funding in this area, despite an independent review having only just taken place.

The Liberal Democrats make a large commitment on extra education spending. But some of this comes from an assumed ‘remain bonus’ from staying in the EU and from uncertain revenue sources such as measures to counter tax avoidance. There are therefore some risks in relation to these revenue sources.

In conclusion, there are some Liberal Democrat pledges that could positively impact on attainment and the disadvantaged gap – particularly on early years education and wider child support e.g. mental health services. But on schools and colleges, there are few policies which would impact materially on attainment and the gap, and the proposals to reduce accountability and allow real cuts in the pupil premium are likely to have a negative impact. While the Liberal Democrat pledge to spend more on the early years is significant and potentially very beneficial, a more carefully phased plan is needed, along with more action to build on this in the later phases of education.

The Green Party

The Green Party’s manifesto sets out a series of aspirational policies, some of which lack sufficient detail to properly analyse.

The party has committed to providing 35 hours of free early education from nine months onwards. It is not, however, clear how this will be funded and whether universal childcare from as early as nine months will help to improve child outcomes or narrow the disadvantage gap.

As with Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party proposes significant reforms to school accountability and inspection. Again, these reforms risk lowering rather than raising standards.

Like Labour, the Green Party would abolish tuition fees, a policy which would be unlikely to improve participation amongst disadvantaged students and would have little or no impact on educational outcomes.

The Green Party’s manifesto, overall, is not rooted in the best available evidence of what works to improve overall attainment and narrow the disadvantage gap.

The Brexit Party

The Brexit Party manifesto has very few proposals relating to education. These include an expansion of the academies and free schools programme, abolishing student loan interest and scrapping the apprenticeship levy. Assuming that the party maintains current government policy in all other areas, there is no evidence that their policies will either improve attainment or narrow the disadvantage gap.

Introduction

The 2019 General Election has been driven by the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union. Polling carried out immediately prior to the campaign showed it as the top-issue of the electorate by some margin – over two-thirds of people placed it amongst their top three issues.⁴

Domestic policy areas such as education, housing, welfare, and the economy each polled under 30 per cent. But education is still a high public priority, and it is crucially important that policy-makers and the public do not lose sight of these important domestic issues.

We have a school system that has been facing challenges in teacher recruitment and retention, as well as funding pressures that have seen schools facing real terms falls in per pupil funding of around 8 per cent over the last decade. The government has promised significant extra investment – equivalent to an additional £7bn a year in today's prices by 2022-23 – this would return funding to 2010 levels. But this still means the school system in England has faced a 13-year funding squeeze.

Our annual report, published in July 2019, highlighted just how far we are from an equitable education system. By the time they complete secondary school, pupils from low income backgrounds are 18 months behind their more affluent peers. Progress in closing that gap has stalled, and there are some indications that it might be about to go into reverse. Forty per cent of this gap is evident before children even start school.

International comparisons show that England's high attaining pupils are on a par with some of the highest performing countries in the world. Our biggest challenge is therefore a long tail of low attainment that is correlated with economic disadvantage, special educational needs, and particular ethnic groups.

This project aims to increase public understanding of the key challenges in education – framed in particular around the inequitable nature of education in England – and provide an independent, evidence-based assessment of the extent to which each of the main parties have committed to meeting those challenges.

Report structure

The report is structured around eight priority areas for education in England:

1. **Early years:** improving access, quality and funding, particularly for the most disadvantaged.
2. **School accountability:** including the role of Ofsted and performance measures and addressing the impact of accountability measures on inclusion, exclusion and curriculum breadth and choices.
3. **Distribution of school funding:** ensuring that the distribution of school funding reflects the challenging contexts of schools.
4. **Teachers:** addressing the challenges of recruitment, retention, workload and distribution of teachers.
5. **Access to good schools:** delivering good school places and fair admissions processes.

⁴ YouGov, 'Which issues will decide the general election', (November 2019).

6. **Post-16 education (including technical and vocational education):** ensuring sufficient funding, quality and access, and reducing segregation.
7. **Post-18 education:** recognising the diversity of options and funding between bachelor and sub-bachelor degrees, changes to tuition fees and maintenance loans.
8. **Children and young people's mental health:** Ensuring that young people have the necessary access to children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and support in schools.

Each priority area includes a summary of the challenge, a discussion of the latest relevant analysis, research, and policy developments and then highlights what government needs to consider and objectives for any incoming government. We then go on to assess party proposals against these objectives and the extent to which they are likely to meet them.

Coverage

As education is a devolved issue, and the UK Parliament only has control over education in England, this project considers policy implications for England only. As such we have restricted our analysis to parties seeking election for constituencies in England.

The uncertainty around the make-up of the next parliament, coupled with a large number of independent candidates and smaller parties, has meant that we have had to set conditions for which parties are included. We have worked to the principle of including any party that might reasonably have a direct influence, either as a governing party or as part of an alliance, over government policy in the next parliament. We include any party which:

- was polling at least 10 per cent in the Britain Elects poll tracker at the point of dissolution;⁵ or
- had at least one seat (in England) in parliament at the point of dissolution and has at least 10 candidates (in England) standing in this election.

The parties included are therefore: Conservative; Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green, and Brexit. We assess policies where the party has made a clear public statement either through a manifesto or through its official website or social media accounts. In the absence of a clear policy statement, we have assumed a continuation of existing policy.

⁵ Britain Elects polling, Wednesday 6th November 2019.