

Teach the Future's response to the Department for Education's final Climate and Sustainability Strategy

Whilst we welcome the publication of the Department for Education's (DfE's) new Sustainability and Climate Change strategy, and many of the individual actions, overall we are left feeling underwhelmed by the final document. Sadly, it represents a missed opportunity to mainstream and integrate climate education. We have some substantial concerns about the DfE's ability to implement the plan.

According to the Secretary of State, Nadhim Zahawi, this strategy was going to "...put climate change at the heart of the education" and position the UK as "...the world-leading education sector in sustainability and climate change by 2030"¹. In our view this strategy will not achieve either of these aims.

No curriculum change

In his joint statement from the Education Ministers summit at COP26, the Secretary of State said: *"We commit to the integration of sustainability and climate change in formal education systems, including as core curriculum components, in guidelines, teacher training, examination standards and at multiple levels through institutions."*

At the time we welcomed this commitment to integrated sustainability and climate education. In our view, this would entail weaving relevant sustainability and climate change content into subjects across the national curriculum. We believe that integrating learning for sustainability is essential if we are to put the climate emergency and ecological crisis at the heart of the education system, which is where it needs to be given the magnitude of the problems we face, and that every career and life is going to be massively implicated by the climate emergency and ecological crisis.

Young people, all of the main education unions² and most of the main environmental charities have repeatedly feed back to the DfE on the critical need to integrate climate education into the national curriculum.

However, the new strategy makes no mention of integrating climate education. Instead, it offers up the optional GCSE in Natural History as a quick fix easy alternative. It is one of only two new pieces of curriculum, the other being the new primary science model curriculum.

We maintain that the UK cannot, and will not, be a "world leader" in climate education unless it integrates climate and sustainability into the national curriculum. We are vehemently opposed to the DfE positioning itself as world leader on climate with a national curriculum that has most of the climate content in optional geography, and only basic content in science, as it sends a misleading message to other countries as to what world-leading looks like.

On the Natural History GCSE, whilst we remain supportive of that in its own right, we are not supportive in the context of it being the main route for the DfE to offer up a decent climate and ecological education. As an optional subject, it will very likely remain niche

¹ <https://ukcop26.org/co-chairs-conclusions-of-education-and-environment-ministers-summit-at-cop26/>

² www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/teachers-nadhim-zahawi-government-unions-university-and-college-union-b1999481.html

and typically only taken up by schools in more prosperous areas, potentially widening the socio-economic inequalities around access to nature.

In our view, this strategy commits us, for the next eight years, to an outdated and inadequate national curriculum which does not require the in-depth study of issues relating to the climate emergency or ecological crisis and does not enable young people to explore their roles in working with others to create solutions to our problems.

Whilst we support the idea of there being a sustainability lead to work on climate education in each educational establishment, we note that this is voluntary and that there is no new resourcing to fund these roles. This means that many schools, colleges and universities will not create the roles, or will have trouble filling them.

It is disappointing that, with the exception of sharing good practice, and “*empowering universities*”, there is no commitment to addressing what is taught in higher education, and no reference to the crucial role of the Office for Students (OfS) in influencing higher education providers. It was disappointing to see no mention of climate or sustainability in the DfE’s recent grant letter to the OfS³, despite that being issued five months after COP26. The OfS does much less on sustainability than its predecessor HEFCE did, despite the climate emergency and ecological crisis having come to prevalence since the OfS was created.

There is no reference in the new strategy to Ofqual, and it would have been so easy, and impactful, for the DfE to have asked Ofqual to add climate and sustainability education requirements their handbooks.

No new teacher education

Whilst we welcome the commitments in the new strategy to continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers and lecturers, and the many commitments relating to vocational education, we are disappointed that the DfE has removed this commitment from their first draft: “*All teachers and school leaders will have free access to a new National Professional Qualification to prepare them for the next stage of their career.*”

The only commitment left on teacher education is to “*Continue to work with higher education to identify opportunities to work together to further enhance best practice in teacher training*”. This is of limited use as the majority of initial teacher training now happens outside of higher education. The lack of commitments to teacher education is a substantial failing in this strategy, as we urgently need all incoming educators to be confident to teach these issues, regardless of their academic disciplines.

It is also sad to see this commitment, from the draft strategy, having been dropped: “*England will have the best trained, best supported teachers in the world, teaching a broad and balanced, knowledge-rich curriculum to give all pupils the knowledge and skills needed to build a better and fairer world for future generations.*” In our view, the fact that this line has gone is a reflection of the actual ambition of Government on these issues.

No targets for retrofitting schools

Whilst we are pleased to see the commitment that all new schools will be built to a net zero standard has been retained in the final strategy, we are disappointed that there aren’t any commitments or targets relating to the retrofitting of the c27,000 existing schools to net zero much earlier than 2050, which is the legal minimum. There is just a vague commitment to “*work with BEIS to help education settings access the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme to support them in decarbonising their estates*”. As

³ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/64e0a177-e78d-4d74-b6a0-81dd60dbb5c7/ofs-strategic-guidance-20220331.pdf

stated in our official response to the first draft of the strategy, the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme only funds c64% of the measures needed, leading to a c£250m shortfall each year⁴. This needs to be urgently addressed.

Our immediate concerns

For a strategy, there are almost no measurable targets, and many of the commitments do not have deadlines. As such, we are worried that much of the strategy will be delivered in a tokenistic or unimpactful way. These fears are compounded by the lack of any committed budget for any of this work. We have very real concerns about the DfE's plans to find commercial sponsorship to fund aspects of the strategy, especially if that applies to curriculum resources. We believe that ensuring young people receive a good quality, integrated climate and ecological education should be central to the role of Government, and that this work must be core funded and properly resourced. Having corporates involved will dilute this work and undermine its importance.

Our plans

Teach the Future was created to campaign for a broad climate and ecological education. The new strategy does not give us what we want, so we will continue with our campaign. Immediately we will seek a meeting with DfE officials to discuss our concerns and reflections and see if and how we can help improve the strategy at its first review. We will continue with our plan to commission a team of curriculum experts to do a 'tracked changes' version of the national curriculum to show the DfE how it could integrate sustainability into subjects such as English literature, history and art. We will organise another parliamentary reception to build political support for our Climate Education bill⁵ and seek to get it debated in the new parliament as an opposition day motion. We will continue to run our Teach the Teacher sessions for new and existing teachers, so we can ensure that teachers understand about these issues. We will also launch our new 1.5 degrees campaign to create league tables for how universities are ensuring that the subjects they teach, like economics, law and education are aligned with the Paris agreement.

We would like to thank the Secretary of State for meeting with us at COP26, and for his team for engaging with us since then. We do see the strategy as progress, although we maintain that it constitutes a massive missed opportunity to give us the integrated climate and ecological education we, and our fellow pupils, desperately want, and that society needs.

21 April 2022

www.teachthefuture.uk

⁴ www.teachthefuture.uk/blog/response-to-the-dfes-draft-climate-and-sustainability-strategy

⁵ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3070>