

GUEST COLUMN – December 2022

If I were Education Secretary Tim Coulson

If I were education secretary, I would expect to reverse the current position, and to be seen as more influential than Ofsted.

I would point out that since the turn of the century, I was the 11th education secretary and that the majority of these could not be named by even many educationalists. Indeed, in the last 35 years, only three education secretaries – Baker, Blunkett and Gove – have had longer than three years in the post.

I would focus on the hard bits of the system – the areas where former education secretaries have uttered positive commitments but have not found the effective policy levers to effect the changes needed.

As a starting list, I would aim to set out programmes of work to see crucial developments in the areas of special educational needs, alternative provision and school funding. None of these are easy and I would look to draw in the enthusiasts in the system and give them time-limited opportunities to innovate on how the system could be developed and improved.

I would set out my top ten headline-grabbing announcements and see how many I could get to stick:

- a nationalised approach to high needs funding, with common ‘tariffs’ for levels of need, common expectations for education, health and care plans with national quality assurance.
- the opportunity to local authorities with plans to support fully academising in their area the power to summon academy trust chief executives on an up to once-a-year appearance at a publicly held scrutiny event.
- one off pay annual increase of £1000 for three years in return for five additional days annually on teacher professional development.
- invite schools across a whole local authority or within a defined part of the local authority to volunteer to take over from the local authority, and the associated funding, the responsibility to find a new school for those who are permanently

excluded; to commission evaluations of the volunteer areas and develop policy on the most effective with an ambition of making significant reductions in exclusions.

- commit to a national funding formula introduced fully within three years with a commitment of 'losers' having their existing funding levels until the formula catches up.
- three-year grants of £100,000 annually to schools in the highest quartile of exclusions that commit to sustainable plans for reducing exclusions – these plans would need to include collaboration with other schools and alternative provision providers.
- look again at the function of Ofsted and whether it has outlived its usefulness to the vast majority of schools graded 'good' or better – its focus on reading, SEND and safeguarding are good examples of turning the screw in particular areas, but for this approach to be more explicit would be helpful.
- announce a ten-year schedule for reviewing the national curriculum, which includes a rolling programme of evaluation, innovation, evaluation, national discussion, consultation and publication.
- put in place the development of an alternative approach to qualifications, where rigorous standards are set for success but where success when ready becomes the norm instead of success or failure at a particular age.
- make clear my commitment to evidence-based approaches and talk at every opportunity about the link between happiness at school at 6 with success in qualifications.

I would expect to be drummed out of office with, completely unfairly, my integrity and commitment questioned.

Dr Tim Coulson is CEO of [Unity Schools Partnership](#), an academy trust of 32 primary, special and secondary schools.

This is an extract from Tim Coulson's essay which features in [If I were Education Secretary](#), a collection edited by Geoff Barton and published by John Catt.