Education Policies: Ranked by Teachers!

Two weeks to go until the general election and all parties have now released their manifestos…including their education plans!

But how popular are the policies among teachers? And how does that change when looking at the phase you're working in?

The Results: What did 11,000 teachers say?

Using Teacher Tapp, we asked our panel of over 11,000 teachers to prioritise 10 specific policies from Conservative, Liberal Democrats and Labour manifestos, using a method called 'discrete choice' (more on this later). Note: we didn't tell teachers which party each policy was from.

Here is the overall priority order of the policies as decided by teachers…

Teachers' manifesto wishlist
Ranked by teachers

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1 Provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school

2 Reform Ofsted and replace single word-judgements

3 Build 15 new free schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

4 Recruit 6,500 new expert teachers in key shortage subjects

5 End VAT exemption for private schools and use funds for state-school spending

6 Reform the School Teachers Review Body, making it independent of the government

7 Create a register for children who are not in school

8 Add arts subjects to the EBacc

9 Change the RSE guidance to put age limits on what is taught and stipulate parents have a right to see what is taught in schools

10 Introduce the Advanced British Standard (including English and maths to 18) replacing A levels and T levels

The results had two immediately striking conclusions:

1. Of the top five policies, four could be found in the Labour Party's manifesto. At the other end of the ranking, the bottom two policies were both Conservative - and were last by some distance.

2. The top two policies were incredibly close - indicating a clear strength of feeling about both the issue of mental health and the impact of Ofsted.

Where are the disagreements?

We can re-rank the results to compare how primary and secondary teachers responded, and for senior leaders and non-senior leaders:

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Teachers' manifesto wishlist

Primary teachers

1. Reform Ofsted and replace single word-judgements ↑
2. Build 15 new free schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) ↑
3. Provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school ↓
4. End VAT exemption for private schools and use funds for state-school spending ↑
5. Reform the School Teachers Review Body, making it independent of the government ↑
6. Recruit 6,500 new expert teachers in key shortage subjects ↓
7. Create a register for children who are not in school
8. Add arts subjects to the EBacc
9. Change the RSE guidance to put age limits on what is taught and stipulate parents have a right to see what is taught in schools
10. Introduce the Advanced British Standard (including English and maths to 18) replacing A levels and T levels

Secondary teachers

1. Recruit 6,500 new expert teachers in key shortage subjects ↑
2. Provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school ↓
3. Reform Ofsted and replace single word-judgements ↓
4. Build 15 new free schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) ↓
5. End VAT exemption for private schools and use funds for state-school spending
6. Reform the School Teachers Review Body, making it independent of the government
7. Add arts subjects to the EBacc ↑
8. Create a register for children who are not in school ↓
9. Change the RSE guidance to put age limits on what is taught and stipulate parents have a right to see what is taught in schools
10. Introduce the Advanced British Standard (including English and maths to 18) replacing A levels and T levels

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* Arrows represent a change in ranking compared to teachers *overall*

A. Recruitment is top priority for secondary teachers...but just 6th for primaries

The ranking of the recruitment policy saw the biggest disagreement out of all the policies.

Labour have pledged to recruit 6,500 new teachers. Their manifesto says: "Labour will recruit an additional 6,500 new expert teachers. We will get more teachers into shortage subjects, support areas that face recruitment challenges, and tackle retention issues. The way bursaries are allocated, and the structure of retention payments, will be reviewed."

The difference in support could be due to the difference in recruiting new teachers that primary and secondary teachers experience (you can read more about that in our Gatsby report here) and also because of the emphasis on shortage subjects.

B. Primary teachers ranked new SEND schools more highly than secondary

Primary school teachers ranked the Conservative policy of building new SEND schools as a second priority, and secondary school teachers put it fourth.

The Conservative party pledged to expand the provision for SEND children. Their manifesto says: "We will transform education for children with special educational needs, ending the postcode lottery of support by delivering 60,000 more school places and a further 15 new free schools for children with special educational needs."

Although this pledge is promising a relatively small number of SEND schools, enthusiasm for this policy might speak to a concern teachers have for special educational needs generally. SEND provision is an issue that frequently appears in your Teacher Tapp replies.

C. The two lowest ranking policies did not change for any group

Whether we filtered for primary, secondary, leaders or non-leaders: everyone ranked the

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changes to RSE and and the introduction of the Advanced British Standard (ABS) as their lowest priority.

One reason could be that both of these pledges involve issues that aren't of a high concern among teachers – the RSE guidance is an adjustment to a relatively new policy that has only been in schools for a few years, and the ABS rollout might either feel too far in the future, or too soon to change as T-level qualifications are still being rolled out.

D. The seniority of a teacher changed very little in the rankings

There was broadly a complete agreement between senior leaders and non-senior leaders regarding which policies were deserving of a higher priority. Ofsted pushed ahead for senior leaders – which makes sense given the pressure of inspection falls more heavily on the shoulders of those who lead in schools.

What do the results mean for whoever wins the election?

Much ask is expected but the popularity of the mental health policy suggests there will be more scrutiny on what Labour do here. The original proposals from Labour were for a counsellor in every school and to put mental health hubs into every community. The actual pledge is only for 'access' to mental health professionals, and the money put aside is only equivalent to £7,000 per school – which isn't nearly enough to cover a full-time professional.

Labour therefore need to look carefully at what they can offer and potentially push for more, otherwise they risk disappointing the profession.

Likewise, the popularity of the special needs schools suggests that Labour need policies in this area. At present there are few specific pledges (and lots of vagueness).

Workload, behaviour and absence were also rarely mentioned in specific pledges. These are issues which we know matter to teachers, according to many other Teacher Tapp surveys. If Labour get in as expected they are unlikely to be able to ignore these issues for an entire parliament!

If you have any ideas for policies we should be testing please get in touch with us via hello@teachertapp.co.uk

The Science: How We Built The Model

Teacher Tapp ran a discrete choice experiment to analyse these policies. Teachers who have assessed work using 'comparative judgement' will find the process familiar. Here's how we did it:

We read all three manifestos and created a list of all of the policies mentioned. We then themed the policies and ensured there was a balanced representation from each party. We also included policies that appeared in the manifestos of two different parties. However – when we posed the questions we deliberately didn't reveal which policies belonged to different parties.

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To create the ranking we ran an experiment which asked you to choose policies when presented with just two of them.

For example: If the next government could only implement one of these policies, which would you choose:

- Reform Ofsted and replace single word-judgements
- OR
- Create a register for children who are not in school

We wanted to rank 10 policies in total, which meant there were 45 questions to ask! Fortunately, because there are a lot of you - we didn't have to ask everyone all 45 (although by the sounds of it some of you might have liked that!).

Because there are a lot of Teacher Tappers, we could randomise which pairs you got, so that each of you got 5 pairs each, with each pair receiving around 1,300 responses.

We then applied the usual mathematical wizardry (or, as our data team calls it: 'just maths') to rank the policies.

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