



18 December 2023

Statement from the #SaveOurSubjects campaign in response to letter from Nick Gibb

We are extremely disappointed by the reply from the former Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb, to our open letter to the Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan. We delivered the letter, signed by over 1,200 organisations and individuals, to the Department for Education in person on 19 July 2023. We note that it has taken the DfE nearly four months to respond.

The response ignores the wealth of evidence provided in our letter about the scale of damage done to arts and technology subjects by the combination of the English Baccalaureate and Progress 8 accountability measures in English secondary state schools. It also contains several highly questionable statements:

1. *'The Government is committed to the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) suite of GCSE subjects for the majority of pupils because this is the best preparation for a pupil's post 16 education.'*

Where is the evidence for this? The EBacc reflects an out-dated approach that prizes academic subjects over creative ones, and it does not prepare students for the 21st-century economy:

- The EBacc subjects (English, maths, science, a humanity and a modern foreign language) are almost identical to those set by the Board of Education's Secondary Regulations in 1904.
- The EBacc subjects are aligned with the Russell Group of universities' set of facilitating subjects, which were scrapped in 2019 because of concerns about the damage they were doing to uptake of arts subjects.

2. *'Over the past five years between 2019 and 2023, around half of pupils have taken at least one approved arts qualification... This has remained broadly stable, as have D&T GCSE entries.'*

This is highly misleading as it ignores the fall in arts subject entries since 2009/10, from which they have not recovered. Data from the DfE shows the size of the GCSE cohort in England increased by 5% between 2009/10 and 2022/3. If arts GCSE entries have remained broadly stable, we would expect to see them increase during this period. Instead, they have almost all fallen significantly, both in number of entries and as a percentage of the overall cohort:

Subject	Number of entries 2009/10	Number of entries 2022/23	% of cohort 2009/10	% of cohort 2022/23
Art and design	172,504	183,270	26.9%	27.2%
Dance	15,884	8,236	2.4%	1.2%
Design & technology	270,401	78,339	42.2%	11.6%
Drama	81,592	49,570	12.7%	7.3%
Music	46,045	29,870	7.2%	4.4%



While the percentage of art and design entries appears to have risen slightly, this is in the context of a sudden and sharp rise in entries for art and design endorsements in graphic design, 3D studies and textiles in 2019. This rise coincided with a dramatic fall in entries for design and technology and therefore should be viewed with caution.

There is also a widening gap between the number of GCSE entries in arts subjects for pupils in the state versus the independent sector. How does government intend to address this?

3. *'The Department is committed to continue to invest £115 million per annum until 2023 in music, arts and heritage programmes.'*

- In fact £115 million represents a fall in real terms funding for arts education since 2010. It includes the £79 million awarded to Music Education Hubs, which is less than before the creation of hubs in 2012, when music services received [approximately £82 million pa](#).
- The £90 million Arts Pupil Premium pledged in the Conservatives' 2019 election manifesto has never been delivered.

4. *'...all schools are expected to teach music to 5- to 14-year-olds for at least an hour a week.'*

- Although this is indeed the advice of the refreshed National Plan for Music Education, there is no statutory requirement for schools to comply, nor any sanction if they fail to do so.
- There has been a decline in curriculum hours allocated for all arts subjects, with [3 in 5 teaching hours](#) in secondary schools now spent on EBacc subjects. How will this be addressed?
- There is an acute shortage of arts teachers. The latest government figures for initial teacher training shows that they have once again missed their targets by substantial margins (music and design and technology have met just 27% of their recruitment targets, art and design has met 44%, and drama has met 79% of the target). Schools are increasingly unable to deliver a full arts curriculum as a result. How will the government resolve this?

5. *'The best schools in the country combine a high-quality cultural education with excellence in core academic subjects.'*

What metric is Nick Gibb using to define the 'best schools in the country'? We looked at the schools with the highest Progress 8 score, the measure that he defends so strongly in the letter. The data reveals that many do not offer a high-quality cultural education:

- Of the 20 schools with the highest Progress 8 scores, less than half (nine) offered music GCSE, seven offered drama, five offered D&T, and just two offered dance GCSE.
- As [recently reported](#), the Michaela school in London, one of the top 20 Progress 8 schools, does not teach music at all beyond Year 8, and Ofsted inspectors noted that its curriculum in music 'does not match the ambition or breadth of the national curriculum'. At A level, Michaela had no entries for creative subjects last year. Despite this, it is rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted.



6. *'The Department has also announced that a second Brit School will open in Bradford, establishing a new hub for creative talent in the north of England.'*

The Brit School North will provide specialist education for 16-19-year-olds only, and not until 2026 at the earliest. This will do nothing to address the huge decline in arts education experienced by pupils under 16 right across the country.

The DfE is out of step with the education sector in its steadfast support for accountability measures. In May former education secretary Lord Baker [told](#) the Lords' 11-16 Education Committee: 'It is undoubtedly the collective view of all that Progress 8 and EBacc should go because, in all the evidence we have received so far, no one has defended Progress 8 or EBacc.' The 11-16 Education Committee has recently published its [report](#), which calls for the EBacc to be scrapped and for Progress 8 to be reformed, to allow schools to 'promote a broader range of subjects to pupils at key stage 4.'

We hope that Nick Gibb's replacement, Damian Hinds, takes a more enlightened approach to the curriculum and accepts that it is time to reform these damaging accountability measures.

Independent Society of Musicians (ISM)
National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD)
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