

Centre for Education Systems (CES) - August 2024

The Centre for Education Systems is building an international evidence base to help improve policy making. We model ourselves on the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) and the Education Policy Institute (EPI) i.e. close to decision making, evidence based, non-partisan and authoritative. Our point of difference is a commitment to systematically cover all areas of education policy making, providing system descriptions and meta-reviews across the four UK Home Nations, plus ten other jurisdictions around the world. As our insight and comparative analysis builds, we will provide a deep understanding of each policy area; offer alternative approaches to individual policy initiatives; explain how policy instruments interact and develop a system architecture to help build system coherence and identify investment priorities.

The CES employs leading policy advisors (Sam Freedman, Loic Menzies and Lucy Crehan); it partners with the best academic institutions (e.g. Cambridge, UCL/EPPI and Bristol Universities); is guided by a highly respected Advisory Board (Dylan Williams, Steve Munby and Anna Vignoles); benefits from an operating partnership with EPI, supported by Patrick Wall (epol.net) and has recently won a prestigious grant from the Nuffield Foundation, to undertake international comparative reviews for both curriculum and accountability policies.

CES exists because policy-making is always hard and because education policy is particularly complex. Governments change and Ministers, each with their own ideas and agendas, come and go. When they are in post, Secretaries of State have to deal with multiple competing demands and have numerous constraints on action, including money and time. Inevitably the most challenging issues get put off. Hence, there is uncertainty about the effectiveness of important changes across the Home Nations. In England for example, early intervention has been scaled back; less than half of Primary schools are academised, while resources have been drained from the Local Authorities; few are happy with support for Special Education Needs; attainment gaps are wide; in Further Education, curriculum and assessment for BTEC and T-levels continually change; apprenticeship numbers are declining; the role of GCSEs and A levels are routinely questioned (Rishi Sunak calling for an Advanced British Standard; The Times, for an International Baccalaureate). Few are happy with OFSTED; teacher retention is worryingly low and recruitment is in crisis.

CES responds to these challenges by providing a credible, independent, and balanced source of information to the policy-making community. Rather than focusing on its own primary research, CES draws on existing but disparate sources of information, to describe in great detail relevant education landscapes, alongside all of the quality academic literature and commentary, together with synthesis, modelling and insight. Our objective is not to find the “right” answer; but to increase understanding of the options available, the intended and unintended consequences of each and the opportunity to evaluate “what’s possible”.

CES operates as a “Hub and Spoke” model, involving a small core team working in partnership with different groups of academics (similarly to the EEF for teacher practice, but focusing on macro-policy and system design).

Prototype CES reviews are becoming available; the CES website will provide a single point of access for synthesis and insight, as well as detailed, referenced studies. Increasingly, CES will offer timely and trusted support to everyone in the policy making ecosystem, including advisors, the DfE, policy influencers, representatives and advocates.

