

Foreword: Helen O'Donnell, CEO, Children's University Trust



“Learning beyond the classroom offers children and young people a way to develop skills, build knowledge, discover hobbies, and explore new interests on their own terms.”

If I were to sum up the world of education policy this past year, the two words that most readily come to mind are change and neglect. Children's University published its first ever State of the Nation Report in July 2021 at what felt like a turning point for education in Britain. After the upheaval and challenges of the previous 18 months (need I introduce Covid 19?) we were ready to start the new academic year on more certain and calm terms after weathering the pandemic's storms. However, just weeks after sending a copy of our report to the office of Gavin Williamson, then Secretary of State for Education, change was afoot. Fast forward to now and there have been a further five Secretaries of State serving under three Prime Ministers.

Consistent leadership and a steady vision from the Department for Education has been absent, while public debate about education feels neglected and overshadowed by political dramas, infighting and cabinet role swapping. While the eyes and ears of those at the top have been distracted by talk of Brexit, NHS funding, energy bills and the ever-worsening cost-of-living crisis, education debate has been raging yet overlooked. Throughout, the good faith and commitment of Britain's teachers and schools has been relied upon to deliver despite all this. As we now publish our 2022 State of the Nation Report looking at learning beyond the classroom, this is the Britain that we're documenting.

“Learning beyond the classroom” is the term we use to describe participation in any structured learning activity outside of the timetabled curriculum. This is inclusive of school-based enrichment and extra-curricular activities, as well as those that take place outside of schools and are run by organisations and individuals with no links to formal education. Importantly, in the context of the change and neglect described above, while this kind of learning falls outside of the core curriculum, this does not mean that it should fall outside of the purview of the Department for Education.

Learning beyond the classroom offers children and young people a way to develop skills, build knowledge, discover hobbies, and explore new interests on their own terms. Ensuring children have the time and space to learn under their own steam - following their own nose and being led by their burgeoning passions - helps them lay down foundations that can support them into adulthood.

It should be a form of learning that is unaffected by the instability and change in the world around them. However, the data and evidence that this report utilises would show otherwise.

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Our insights from 50,000 children, over 12,000 registered learning opportunities and more than 310,000 hours of participation, paint a picture of learning and opportunities that needs recognition, support and funding if they are to have the impact we know they can.

At a time when 25% of schools are reporting cutting spending on trips and outings, and 20% are cutting spend on sports and extracurricular activities¹, our data finds that children are reliant on schools to access these kinds of activities.

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At a time when 90% of state secondary schools have made cuts in the provision of creative subjects², our data shows a drop in levels of creativity, despite evidence of links between skills development and participation in learning beyond the classroom.

While education feels less of a national priority than it has done for years, and the recognition and demonstrable support for learning beyond the classroom is incredibly low from government policy makers, there is real commitment to this type of learning shown by teachers, parents and organisations. A YouGov poll found that 72% of parents agreed that “all schools receiving extra government funding to provide additional extracurricular activities like sport, drama, music, debating or dance”³ would be a good idea. Schools, despite the cuts described above, see the value to be found beyond the classroom but aren't funded to encourage it as they should. The cost-of-living crisis isn't just affecting families and households, increasing energy bills are having a devastating impact on school budgets⁴. The need for learning beyond the classroom is huge, but demand is overwhelmingly reliant on the ability of schools to supply it.

What I hope these reports show is that despite the challenges we're all facing, the impact of and appetite for learning beyond the classroom is huge. Children's University is in a unique position as the only organisation collating the information we do and we are desperately keen that this is used to improve provision for all children. In the following pages you will read how we're mapping provision and participation of learning beyond the classroom, and measuring its impact on skills development. You'll see how wide our network reaches, and importantly how much more we could be doing with the right support.

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/school-funding-and-pupil-premium-2022/>
2. <https://nuk-tnl-editorial-prod-staticassets.s3.amazonaws.com/2022/education-commission/Times%20Education%20Commission%20final%20report.pdf> p33
3. <https://nuk-tnl-editorial-prod-staticassets.s3.amazonaws.com/2022/education-commission/Times%20Education%20Commission%20final%20report.pdf> p29
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/oct/22/exclusive-90-of-uk-schools-will-go-bust-next-year-heads-warn>