

Thinkpiece: introducing the Education Charter

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Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the RSA, and Ian McGimpsey, the RSA's Head of Education, introduce the new Education Charter, a broader vision of education in the 21st century - and they are asking for your support.

There can be little doubt that we are living through increasingly uncertain times: yet another age of anxiety. If we needed any confirmation, we got it from several economists' recent visits to the RSA – economists are, after all, the people with the unenviable task of making a living from predictions about what is likely to happen in the future.

The global economic crisis unfolding around us is causing deep anxiety for many. As our jobs become less secure and credit dries up, the risk grows that we won't be able to pay our mortgages or meet other commitments. For economists, however, risk is not really the problem. Rather it is *uncertainty* that is causing them anxiety. As leading economist John Kay recently wrote in the RSA Journal, '*Risk describes the things we know we do not know; uncertainty describes the things we do not know we do not know. The imperfect state of human knowledge means that widespread uncertainty is inescapable.*' Those uncertainties have become alarming realities in the last few months. For financial institutions that had thought they were managing risk cleverly (and profitably), the future has become a far more complex and unpredictable place.

Anxiety for different reasons is something that another economist, Professor Lord Richard Layard, has been discussing recently. In his work on the report of the Children Society's *A Good Childhood Inquiry*, he has been marshalling the evidence that shows the growing emotional difficulties and unease among young people resulting from changing family structures, competitive and consumerist lifestyles and growing pressures to perform, not least at school.

So, we arrive at an interesting confluence in a period of profound uncertainty: at the same time as we see widespread outrage at bankers' greed (not just their technical failings), research into children's wellbeing has led to an attack on our competitive, individualistic culture and a call for a revolution in values.

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How can schools and education policy makers respond?

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of recommendations in education. One is to do more of the same only better. The other is to go back and consider our purposes and aims, and then think afresh about how we can successfully deliver the core business of education.

It has been striking that most responses in education to some of the challenges we face have been firmly in the former category. In response to economic challenge, the Government hasn't wavered from generation-old policy debates about schooling that have tended to focus on structures and the pursuit of higher academic attainment. Indeed, these issues haven't gone away and if the Conservatives win the next election we can expect another round of structural reform. *A Good Childhood Enquiry*, meanwhile, may have called for a fundamental revolution in values, but its recommendations for schools were, for example, about expanding and prioritising PSHE (personal, social and health education) provision.

When Sir Ken Robinson, a supporter of the Charter, spoke at the RSA recently, he argued that *'it is our duty to shift the paradigm in education from an industrial view of the world'*. In schools, and increasingly in debates among educationalists, employers and students, more fundamental questions are being posed and practical innovation taking place.

By developing a Charter of core values for education, the RSA is seeking to play its part in shifting the paradigm by starting a campaign to realise a broader vision of education for the 21st century which finds, champions and ultimately spreads that practice. The story of the Charter's development sheds light not only on key debates in education policy but also on the challenges and rewards of collaboration to make this happen.





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How did the Charter develop?

The Charter's life began in a meeting at the RSA in November 2007. The meeting had been called by a group of RSA Fellows and advisors from other education organisations, including the Edge Foundation, the Innovation Unit and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. We were brought together by a shared critique of much existing educational practice and shared enthusiasm for innovation in schools.

Those present believed that the focus on assessment and narrowly defined academic standards had now become counterproductive. They felt that schools should be aiming to address the wider needs and capacities of children, overcoming divides such as that between academic and vocational ability. Crucially, there was a wide knowledge of powerful initiatives in schools ranging from the RSA's Opening Minds to Paul Hamlyn's Musical Futures and the studio schools being developed by the Young Foundation.

The defining moment in the meeting came when its participants suggested that the RSA form an Education Commission. But, others reasoned, the issue isn't really a lack of ideas or opinions. Rather it is, on the one hand, a failure to join up the various commissioners and developers of innovative practice already in operation and, on the other, the difficulty of mobilising the 'silent majority' among professionals and the public in favour of a more progressive approach. The idea of the Charter was born.

The next stage was more difficult. How could we get agreement to the Charter wording? In particular, how could we have something concrete enough to be meaningful but broad enough to mobilise a wide alliance? This was a task taken on by the RSA Education team and which resulted in the final words of the Charter. If we succeeded, it was through the combination of a genuinely inclusive approach – including consultation with RSA Fellows – and a willingness to be very clear that the whole process relied on people and organisations being flexible.

The obvious question is 'what next?'

First we asked Fellows and organisations we know well to sign up – our 'Friends and Family' as one supporter put it. The RSA Fellowship response to the Charter has been greatly encouraging, with around 1,700 individuals signing up since December. As well as prominent educationalists such as Howard Gardner, Sir Mike Tomlinson, and Sir Ken Robinson, individuals from a wide range of disciplines have put their name to the Charter, from philosopher Julian Baggini to designer Paul Smith, social entrepreneur MT Rainey to TV presenter Johnny Ball.

Dozens of organisations have also signed up, including Oxfam, the Edge Foundation, the National Union of Students, and the Family and Parenting Institute.

So, signing up is the first step and we hope you do too. Please join us in making that first step count and creating the impetus for a powerful and compelling launch of a campaign. By signing up to the Charter you are putting your collective weight behind our proposition that change is both necessary and possible. For the launch itself, we want to give young people a voice. They are the most eloquent exponents both of the limitations of much current practice and of the potential for change. They also have the most to gain from taking transformative action now.

Step two is to form networks of Charter signatories in towns, cities and counties. We hope that supporters will range from teachers and school governors to local employers, parents and school students themselves. Who knows, perhaps we will connect teachers and pupils in the same school who would never have dreamt they shared similar ambitions and values for education! These networks, armed not only with a common purpose but also with access to the examples and support offered by the Charter website and administration, can be a powerful force for change. The next step is to turn these loose alliances and varied initiatives into a sustainable organisation that can continue to provide progressive argument and reform. Such an

organisation, combining a strong mandate with a unique alliance of different educational stakeholders, simply does not exist at present.

In the end, it's not about organisations; it's about giving young people a gift of certain value in uncertain and anxious times – that of learning. 'It is the primary purpose of education to awaken a love of learning in young people, and give them the ability and desire to carry on learning throughout life.' So begins the Charter. Until that is a purpose embodied in all our schools and realised in every young learner there is much work to be done.

Education for the 21st Century: A Charter

The world is changing rapidly. The globalised economy creates opportunity, challenge and unpredictability. The great challenges of sustainability and the shifting demographics of our population will require new thinking and collective action. As we increase our understanding of human intelligence and behaviour, we know more about how we can learn effectively, and the value of learning throughout life. Meanwhile, young people bring with them the expectation not just to sit and listen, but to participate, to interact, and to shape.

The last ten years have seen the standard in education improve, the quality of teachers at all levels get better, and investment in buildings, IT and resources. However, in our changing context the old models of education born of the industrial age make little sense. If we want to help our young people to become the adults they will need to be to thrive in the 21st century, we need not just to adapt, but to transform.

This Charter sets out the principles we believe should inform the future development of education for young people, in which we include learning of all kinds, whether formal or informal, and whether offered by schools, colleges, universities, training organisations or others.

You can sign up to the Charter quickly and easily by visiting www.thersa.org/educationcharter



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The Charter

It is the primary purpose of education to awaken a love of learning in young people, and give them the ability and desire to carry on learning throughout life.

We need to recognise that education has many aims

Education must nurture creativity and capacity for independent and critical thought.

Young people should leave formal education equipped with the confidence, aptitude and skills they need for life and for work.

Education should help young people to understand how to be happy and to develop and maintain their own emotional, physical and mental well-being.

Every young person has the right to develop to their full potential

Ability comes in many forms and learners need to be supported to enjoy success no matter where their talents lie.

The educational success of learners should not depend on their background. Schools, communities and families must work together to close gaps in attainment.

The curriculum in schools and colleges should balance abstract and practical knowledge so that every learner can access high quality academic and vocational opportunities.

Education should engage the learner with exciting, relevant content and opportunities for learning through experience and by doing.

Education must be a partnership

Learners have a valuable role to play in contributing to the design of their own learning, and in shaping the way their learning environment operates.

The education of young people should be a partnership of schools, parents and the wider community in a local area.

Schools should be inclusive, creative communities which build tolerance, respect and empathy in young people.

We must trust our schools and education professionals

Every teacher should be a creative professional involved in the design of curricula and learning environments, and should be supported and developed to fulfil that role.

Every school should be different, every school innovative and we must find ways of holding them to account for their performance that reward rather than stifle this creativity.