The Cross-Party Consensus for Andy Burnham's Education Policy

A PUBLIC FIRST INSIGHTS NOTE

Executive Summary

New research from Public First has identified an emerging cross-party consensus on education policy.

Evidence from national polling of more than 4,000 adults and from six focus groups across the West Midlands conducted in July and August 2026, shows most voters share similar views on education, regardless of voting intention and that education is a genuine strength for Burnham's Government.

We found that voters overwhelmingly want more technical education and apprenticeships, less emphasis on going to university, and young people to be better prepared for adult life. More importantly, they feel the education system is currently failing to deliver on all fronts.

Government has also realised this. Through ministerial appointments and policy announcements, Burnham is effectively targeting this issue for voters across the political spectrum. Burnham has already announced his intention to create more technical education pathways in schools to allow young people to access technical skills and work experience. This has been coupled with a promise to devolve these powers and a greater focus on the 'hard hat' as opposed to the 'graduation cap'.

This has proved successful so far, with a majority of voters (55%) trusting Burnham on education – more so than on any other issue.

The evidence suggests that this agenda is here to stay. But while voters support Labour's policy agenda in theory, they are sceptical of whether Burnham – or any politician – can deliver. As Keir Starmer learned, telling a compelling story of political change is equally as important as delivering it. Without both, Burnham risks the same fate. Government's focus will be making the changes voters want, and making sure voters know about it.

And for the education sector more broadly, how strongly Burnham's message resonates with voters across the political spectrum is a lesson to heed when trying to make inroads with the Government over the next Parliament. More vocational and technical education is as popular with voters as with Government, and expectations are high on delivery.

Anyone with a stake in schools, colleges and universities should be prepared to adapt.

Key findings:

01 Education matters to voters, but it is not yet deciding how they vote.

Voters consistently rank education among the most important policy areas, but rarely see it as vote-deciding on its own. Many parties struggle to convince even their own voters with their current policy offering.

02 Voters feel education is failing to prepare young people for adult life.

What voters perceive as a one-size-fits-all education, geared up to steer young people towards university, fails to meet their hopes for an education system that gives young people the skills needed for adult life.

03 Burnham's vision for education is received positively across voters.

Work experience and improving the status of technical and vocational education from the age of 14 prove popular with voters. Burnham is also currently met with greater trust on education than on any other policy area we tested.

04 Despite support, voters are split on whether change can be delivered.

This trust, however, will only carry him so far. Trust in politicians' ability to make change more generally is still low, and risks declining further if Burnham is unable to deliver on his vision. This leaves an opportunity for the sector to help delivery.

Finding 1: Education matters to voters, but it is not yet deciding how they vote.

> *"[Education] is important but it's probably not at the forefront of what everybody wants from a government at the moment."*
>
> ***- Male, 60s, Social Group D, Labour***

Voters we spoke to consistently ranked education among the most important policy areas but rarely saw it as vote-deciding on its own. The cost of living, immigration, and health were the issues most commonly cited at the top of voters' priorities.

"A lot of people can't afford a lot of things, so I think that's the most important thing that needs sorting."

- Male, 30s, Social Group C1, Labour

"I wouldn't say it's the most important thing I'm thinking about… healthcare is the most important thing that I want the government to help sort out"

- Female, 20s, Social Group B, Green

When education was valued, participants believed it was important for shaping the next generation, for producing capable, independent adults, and for changing a country they feel is moving in the wrong direction.

"[Education] is a big part of how we are as society, because that's where we spend the majority of our younger years. So if we put more investment into that, then it can change the economy, change the way things are."

- Male, 20s, Social Group C1, Conservative

"I think it [education] is an important issue for any political party… everybody wants their children to have the best education available to them, so it's about the future."

- Male, 60s, Social Group D, Labour

Voters often tied the importance of education to the rising number of NEETs, skills shortages and AI unpreparedness. The education system was seen as both the source of and the solution to these problems.

"We have got mass unemployment of young people, and it is simply because they haven't had the advice that they need. And I think that the government should be looking at that, guiding children as to this is what you want out of your career."

- Female, 70s, Social Group B, Reform

"Because AI is taking over... We need to update the education system and show these children where the future lies because those roles are going to be obsolete very soon."

- Female, 20s, Social Group B, Conservative

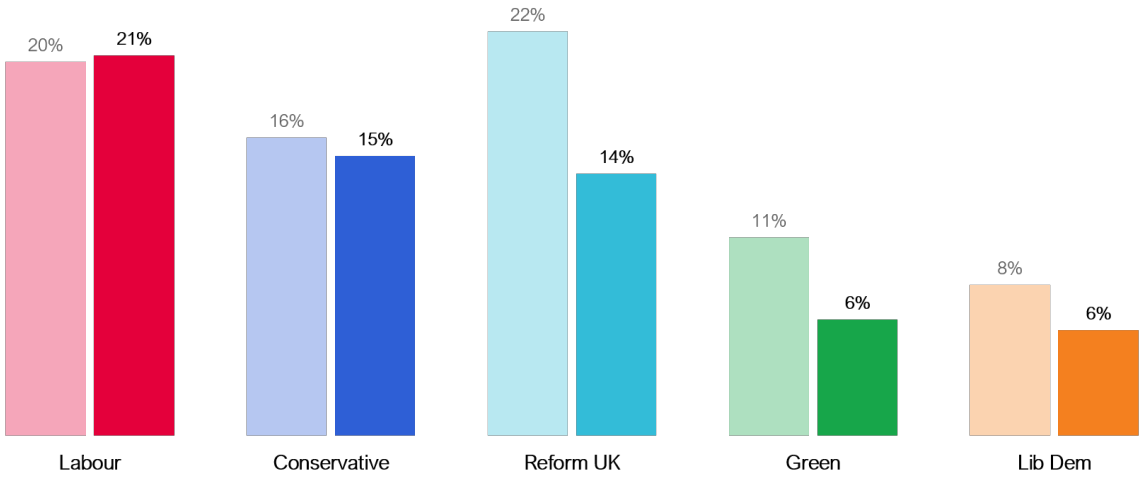
"I did read there's a million young kids not in education or training or anything and that's terrible. 16 to 18-year-olds, they [the government] are doing nothing. So apprenticeships would help them I think."

- Male, 60s, Social Group D, Labour

When asked which party has the best policies on education, over a quarter (26%) of all voters say that they don't know enough about parties' education policies to judge – outranking any one political party.

21% responded that Labour had the best education policies, making it the only party to score more favourably on its education policies than on broader voting intention.

"Regardless of how you usually vote, which party, if any, do you think has the best policies on education in England?"
Faded: % of all adults naming the party as their vote intention
Solid: % who say the party is best on education

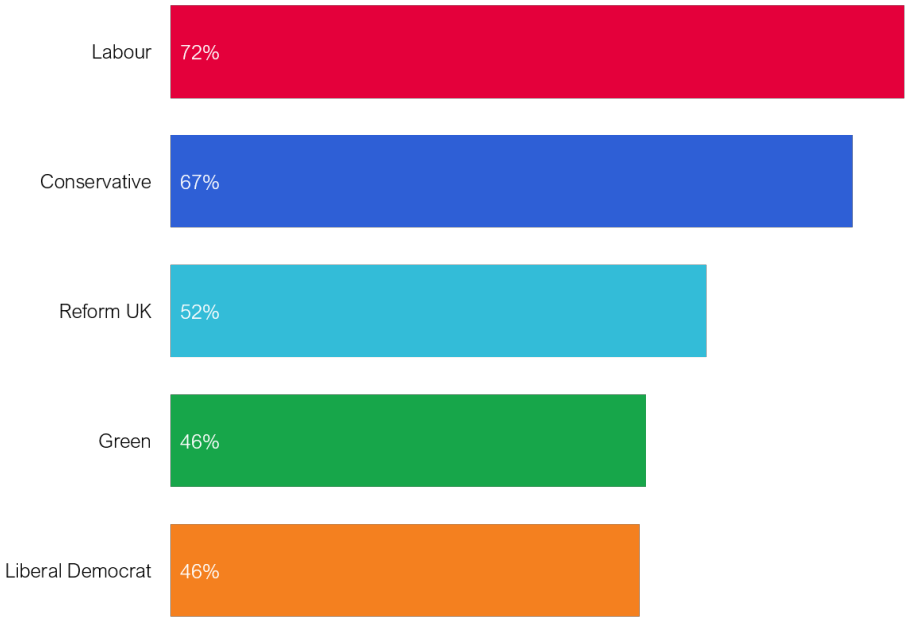


Beyond these five parties, 24% don't know, 10% say no party is best and 2% name another party

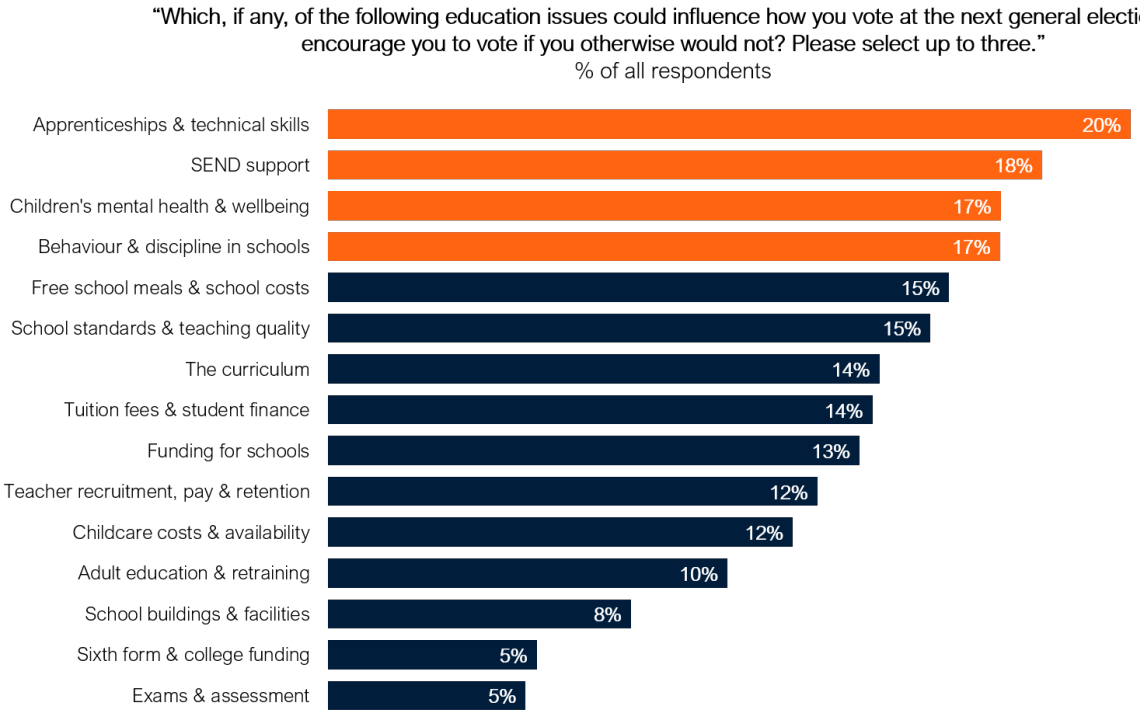
Among those currently intending to vote Labour, 72% say the party has the strongest policy offer on education – the highest of any party, and well ahead of the 46% recorded among both Liberal Democrat and Green voters.

Of the broader group who voted Labour in 2024, only 44% say Labour has the best education policies, lower than the continuing levels of support among both Conservative and Reform 2024 voters.

"Regardless of how you usually vote, which party, if any, do you think has the best policies on education in England?"
% of each party's current supporters who say their own party has the best policies on education



Asked which education issues could influence their vote at the next general election, voters placed apprenticeships and technical skills first (20%), followed by SEND support (18%), children's mental health and wellbeing (17%), and behaviour and discipline (17%).



Finding 2: Voters feel education is failing to prepare young people for adult life.

> *"[Education's goal should be] to allow kids to have independence, to be able to stand on their own two feet once they get into the real world."*
>
> ***- Male, 30s, Social Group C1, Reform***

Voters described the primary purpose of education as readying young people for adulthood and teaching young people about independence, resilience and the capacity to function as an adult. What that meant in practice varied, with work-readiness, socialisation, and preparation for independent living all mentioned in focus groups. Judged against these expectations, participants were clear that the system is falling short.

"Your hope is that the education system is readying the youth for their adulthood and giving them the right skills to thrive in society."

- Female, 40s, Social Group B, Non-voter

"[Education] should prepare you for your working age and point you in the right direction of what you want to do with your life."

- Male, 60s, Social Group D, Labour

Others were concerned that education did not do enough to teach "life skills", including money management, cooking, and relationships. Some voters felt this was a significant omission from the curriculum.

"They [young people] don't have life skills… learning how to manage money, how to cook every day… how to use the washing machine, they could start introducing it at school level."

- Female, 20s, Social Group C1, Reform

"I think it should have a lot more about life skills on the curriculum. Money management, relationships for girls and boys."

- Female, 60s, Social Group C1, Liberal Democrat

Voters felt that quality of education had declined, ascribing this to the undervaluing of the teacher workforce, and schools being pulled towards the wrong priorities by curriculum and accountability pressures. Dissatisfaction was often presented comparatively, against a remembered past in which pathways into work were clearer and standards were assumed to be higher.

"Education is failing the kids at the moment."

- Female, 50s, Social Group C1, Non-voter

"I feel like education has almost become a bit corporate… it isn't actually targeting success of the kids that are going there."

- Male, 30s, Social Group B, Liberal Democrat

"Teachers feel devalued, underpaid and overworked, so the standards aren't there as they used to be."

- Male, 40s, Social Group C1, Conservative

"I think it's not what it used to be, I know everyone gets nostalgic."

- Female, 40s, Social Group C1, Liberal Democrat

Voters were overwhelmingly concerned about post-16 education and the school-to-work pathway. They felt the system had become "one-size-fits-all", built around an academic route that suits some children while failing others.

"The way the curriculum's set up, it's set up like everyone's exactly the same."

- Female, 20s, Social Group B, Green

"I feel like it's built for certain people but there's different ways to teach everybody… I don't think university is for everybody."

- Male, 20s, Social Group B, Conservative

Voters were particularly critical of a perceived over-emphasis on going to university, seeing a lack of political prioritisation of apprenticeships as a consequence. Voters are aware of rising numbers of young people not in education, employment or training and see these figures as proof that the pathway from school into work has broken down.

"I went to university, kills me to see my student loan coming out every single month. If I had my time again, wouldn't go to university, would do something like an apprenticeship."

- Female, 20s, Social Group C1, Labour

"There's a lot of kids who aren't doing anything… she has just finished school and she's got no apprenticeship, she's got no college, she's got nothing."

- Male, 60s, Social Group E, Reform

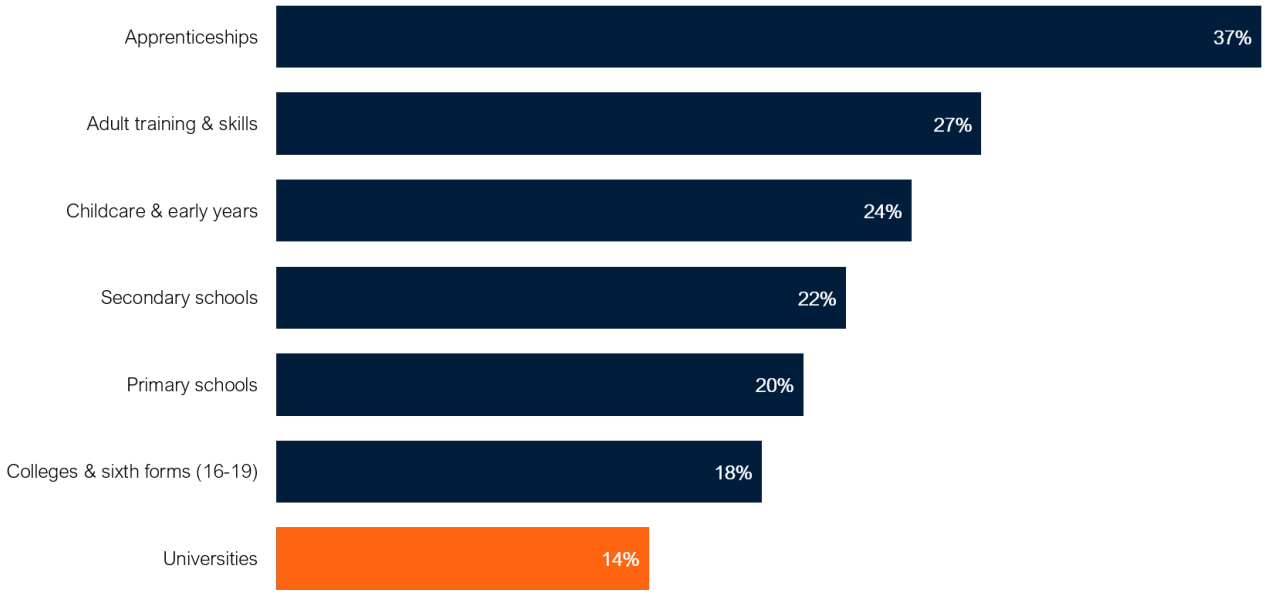
"When I was in school, we were told that the correct formula is get good grades, go to a good uni, and you're basically guaranteed a job at the end of it. But that's just not the case now. You're promised you'll be rewarded for your hard work… then just to receive nothing in return, it does make me think are kids being pushed in a direction that's not maybe the best for them."

- Male, 20s, Social Group C1, Conservative

University was the stage of education voters were least willing to see prioritised for funding in our polling. Just 14% placed it in their top two, compared to 37% for apprenticeships and 27% for adult training and skills. Support for greater prioritisation was concentrated among 18-24s (31%) who were most likely to be current students or recent graduates, as well as Green voters (22%) and Londoners (23%) – groups that Burnham has expressed a desire to reconnect the Labour party to.

"Thinking about education, which, if any, of the following should the Government prioritise investing in? Please select up to two."

% of all respondents, up to two selections

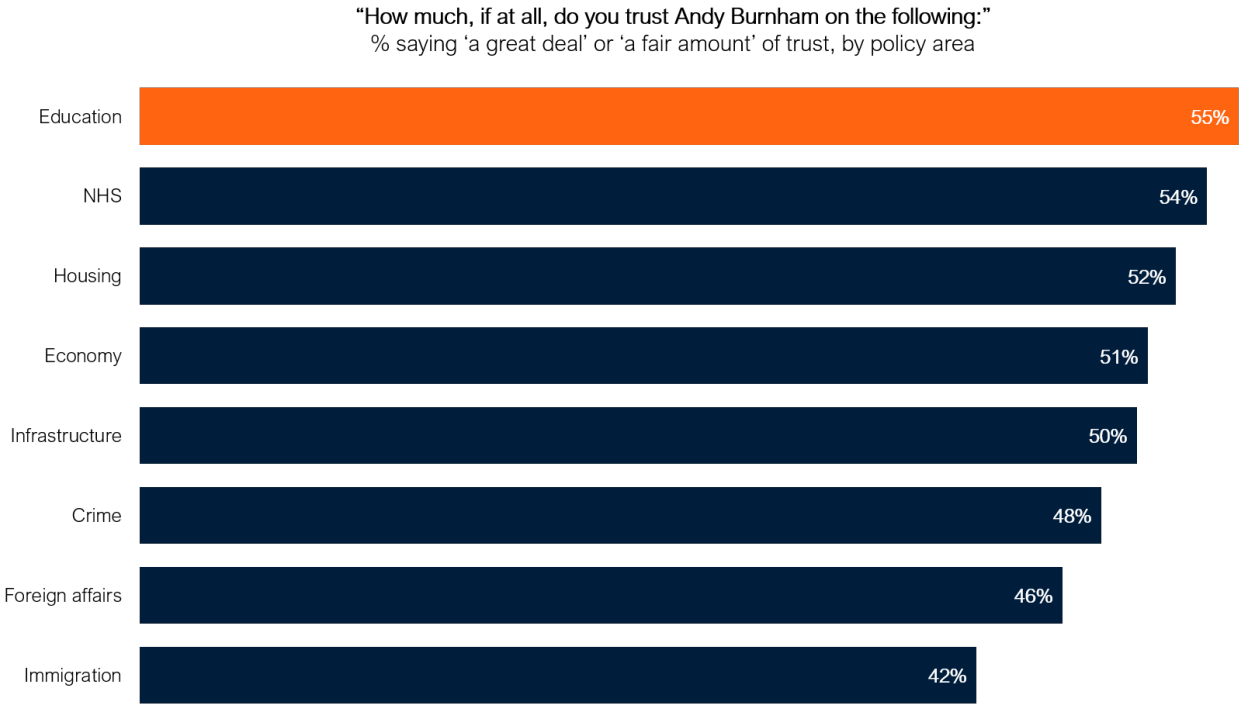


Finding 3: Burnham's vision for education is received positively across voters.

> *"The government need to actually look at apprenticeships. We've got no manufacturing in this country. It's all gone. But they need to look at apprenticeship courses for these school leavers because otherwise they're going to end up just [on] benefits all their lives."*
>
> ***- Female, 70s, Social Group B, Reform***

Andy Burnham's education agenda has strong cross-party appeal. In surveys and in focus groups, voters responded positively to the Burnham government's education policies, regardless of voting intention.

Andy Burnham seems to have secured voters' trust. 55% trust him a fair amount or a great deal on education, the highest of any policy area we tested including the NHS, housing and the economy. This extends beyond voters on the left as it is also the issue on which 2024 Conservative (47%) and Reform (35%) voters trust him most.



To further understand how voters view Burnham's agenda, we identified three key policies which were central to his stated vision for education:

- End university-first school system and give technical routes equal status.
- A scheme in school that recommends subjects and provides work placements for 14-to-16-year-olds to help them get into technical and vocational jobs.
- Devolve more skills and education power locally.

We then tested these in focus groups, as well as the education policies of opposition parties and those of the Starmer government.

Burnham's policies seemed to land strongly with all voters because they address a diagnosis of the education system that voters across all parties described – a system fixated on universities and lacking credible alternative pathways. Voters often expressed support for Burnham's 'parity of esteem' between technical and academic routes spontaneously in discussions, before being shown the policy.

> *"My elder daughter, she's got a law degree... it's going to take her 30 years to pay that debt off and she's got a really good job. And some of her friends that went to university with her... they're still doing the part-time Tesco job that they had when they were students because there's no jobs there for them…So, I'm steering my youngest daughter away from university."*
>
> *- Female, 50s, Social Group C2, Conservative*

"I feel like it [the government] could even go further and you should be actively warned about university. This is how much debt you're going to be in, and this is the interest you're going to accrue."

- Male, 30s, Social Group C1, Labour

"I was always kind of pushed into the university lane... my teachers pushed me down one route and I just went with it."

- Male, 20s, Social Group B, Green

"It's what we've been saying since the start, isn't it? That university was always the main goal at the end of the education system, whereas the apprenticeships and whatnot are just as good, if not sometimes a little bit better."

- Male, 20s, Social Group B, Labour

Voters welcomed the introduction of a scheme in school that recommends subjects and provides work placements for 14-to-16-year-olds to help them get into technical and vocational jobs. This proposal represents a national expansion of Burnham's Greater Manchester 'MBacc' scheme.

"Some children just don't like schooling, it doesn't seem to do much for them. So giving them a work placement at that early age could help."

- Male, 60s, Social Group D, Labour

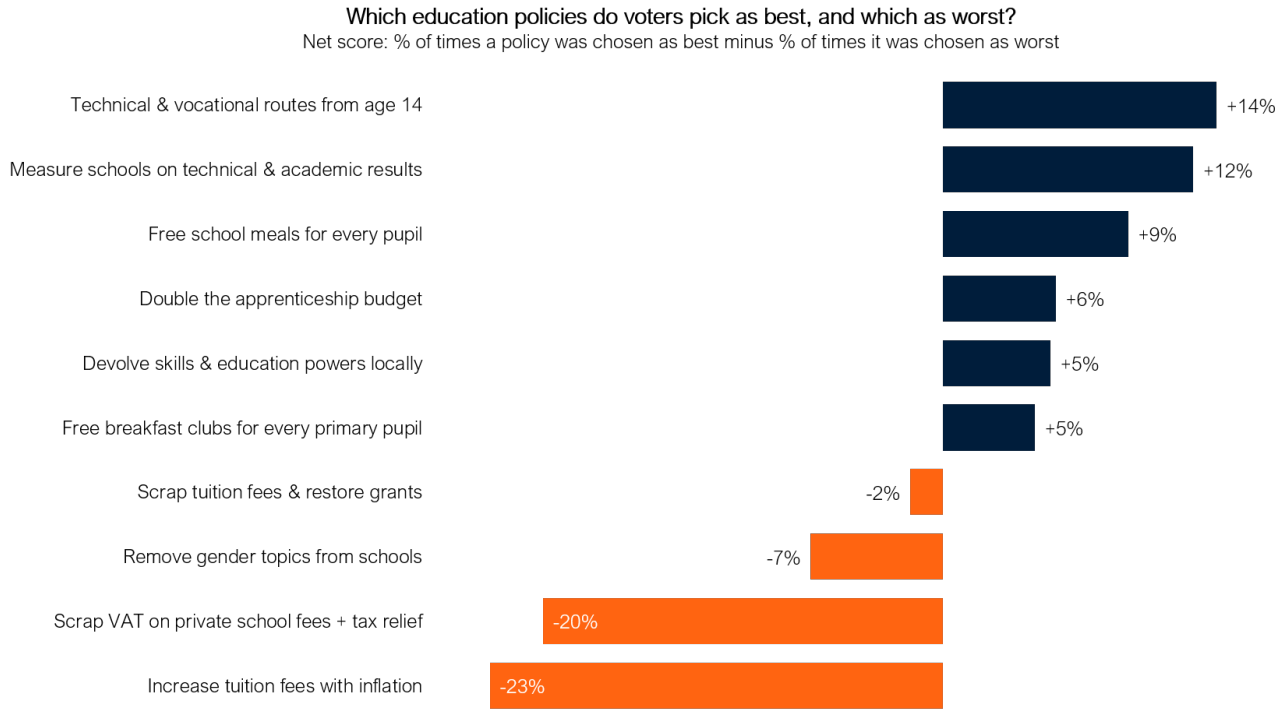
"I think the [expanding the MBacc nationally] sounds pretty good in theory... if there's a scheme that helped them to pick subjects and find work placements, that could only benefit them."

- Male, 30s, Social Group C1, Conservative

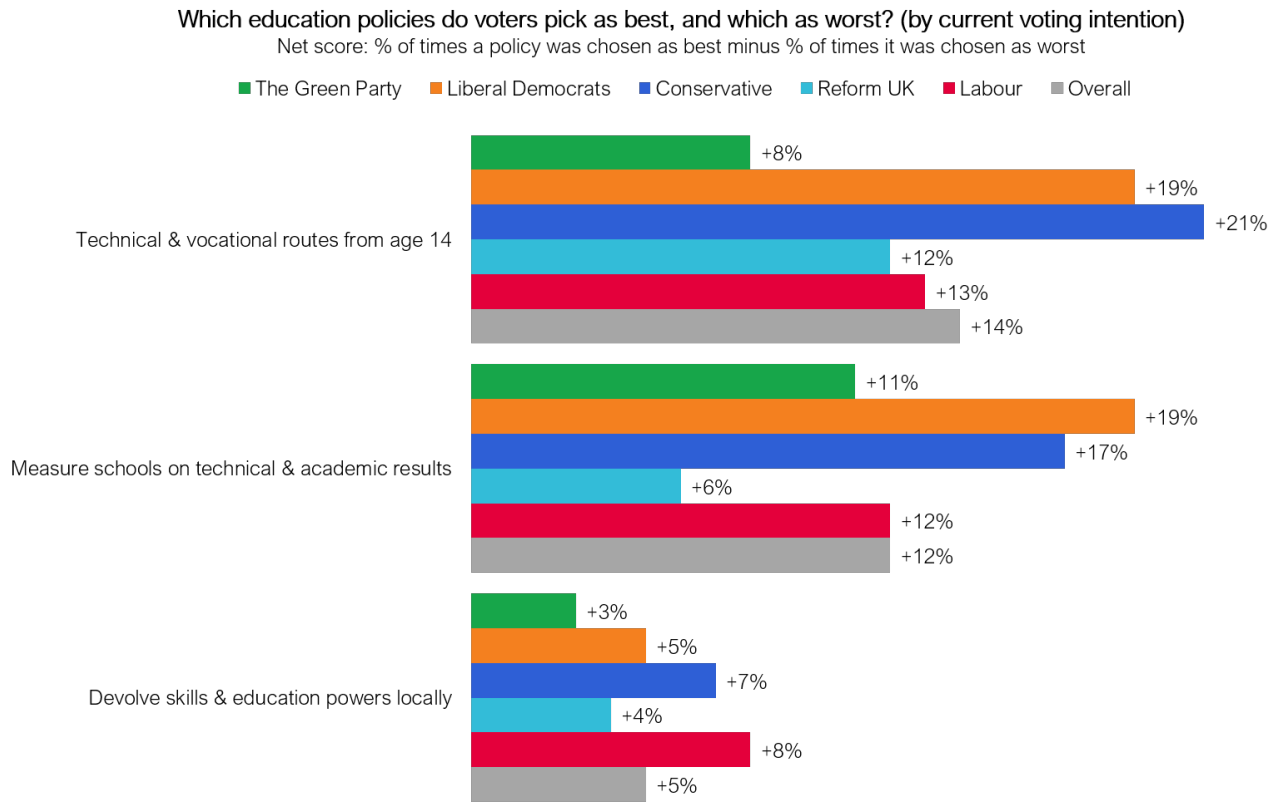
"I think that [expanding the MBacc nationally] is a good idea because it prepares pupils to go into the real world, but you've still got the shield of your parents and your teachers to look after you... you can actually dip your toe into the working environment."

- Male, 60s, Social Group C2, Non-voter

The discussions across our focus groups match our polling evidence. In polling conducted after these policies were announced, technical and vocational routes from age 14 emerged as the most favourable policy overall across all policies tested.



Breaking this down by each party, Burnham's policies were viewed favourably by all voters – regardless of voting intention.



In our focus groups, however, devolution of education was Burnham's only policy to draw some diverse responses. There was some enthusiasm around how it could transform local areas as part of a broader agenda. But voters often distrusted their own local authority, feared a postcode lottery, and struggled to understand how the policy might work in practice.

"That will also give people more pride in the area... You create skilled workers for that area. You'll have that pride back and ownership of your local area."

- Female, 40s, Social Group C1, Liberal Democrat

"My only concern would be who gets the educational power or devolved power… Birmingham City Council was a Labour Council and was pretty poorly run..."

- Male, 20s, Social Group B, Green

"The problem with the [devolution policy] is probably the postcode lottery of if you gave more power locally... some children in more affluent areas might benefit more so or vice versa."

- Female, 20s, Social Group B, Conservative

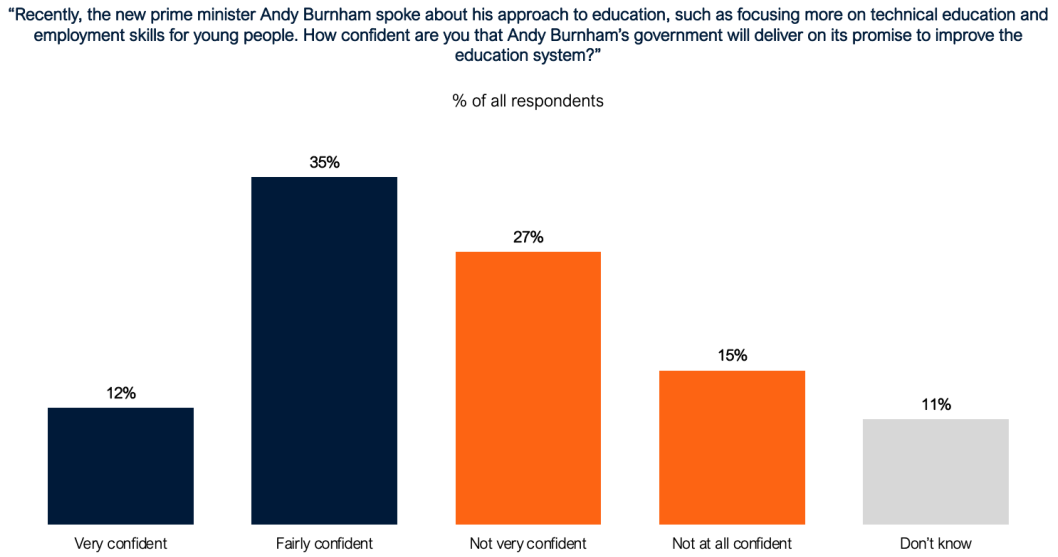
Education is clearly a key policy battleground for Andy Burnham. But not in the sense that Burnham faces an uphill task in convincing voters of his agenda – it is clearly supported. Rather it's a battle of convincing an electorate that increasingly feel that politicians are ineffective, that he can actually deliver change.

Finding 4: Despite support, voters are split on whether change can be delivered.

> *"Labour politicians will do whatever they say to get elected so it really doesn't matter what they say."*
> ***- Male, 60s, Social Group B, Reform***

However positively some voters responded to Burnham's education policies, this enthusiasm was undercut by a deeper scepticism towards politicians.

Voters were largely split down the middle about whether they had any confidence that Burnham's policies could be delivered – 47% felt at least fairly or very confident while 42% felt not very or not at all confident.



When discussing Burnham's policies, voters' perceptions often shifted once it was revealed that he was behind them.

"So [Burnham's policies] sound promising, but as we know, people [politicians] say things and whether they can go through with them [is another matter]."

- Male, 60s, Social Group D, Labour

"So it's all positive, but they [politicians] all say what they want to say until they get into power"

- Male, 40s, Social Group C1, Conservative

"No, they're still good policies. We'll just see if they happen."

- Female, 50s, Social Group C1, Green

This doubt and cynicism were not exclusive to particular parties. Voters were sceptical regardless of voting intention.

"I don't know. I've just lost a lot of faith in politicians that any of this will happen."

- Female, 50s, Social Group C1, Green

"They're all liars. They'd never stick to what they say they're going to do. None of them do, not one of them."

- Male, 60s, Social Group C2, Non-voter

"You vote to get them people into a good paid job because they give you all the blurb. The minute they're in, they go, 'Ah, suck that. We can't do that. But thanks for the money. Thanks for the job. Love you.'"

- Male, 60s, Social Group C1, Non-voter

"Sometimes parties may start the ball rolling on something and then the next party either takes the credit for it or blames the previous party. So it all gets a bit blurred... I don't think they're very honest, these parties."

- Female, 40s, Social Group C1, Liberal Democrat

Voters were not entirely fatalistic and did understand that circumstances can shift. They often stressed that what would increase their confidence in politicians was more about honesty and transparency than perfect delivery.

> *"Transparency I think is the key thing... [I]f they did get voted in on this thing in a five-year manifesto, let's say if they do have to change it for a certain reason, then a clear explanation as to why and the reasons behind it rather than just coming out of there and be like, 'Oh, we're not doing this'... So I think transparency and trust is a key thing."*
>
> ***- Male, 20s, Social Group B, Green***

> *"We [women] fought really hard to be given a vote and I feel bad for not voting... But ultimately, I think at the moment the trust levels are just too low. I think there's a lot of false promises made. And I think it's a case of picking the least worst of a bad bunch and that's not how I want to vote. I want my vote to really mean something and I want to be passionate about something... So at the moment I'm not voting."*
>
> ***- Female, 40s, Social Group B, Non-voter***

This shows the scale of Burnham's challenge. The government is inheriting a political climate rife with distrust, in which voters across the board are sceptical of politicians' ability to stick to their promises and ultimately, deliver.

Burnham's focus on technical and vocational education is also a significant shift away from the Department for Education's previous focus on a knowledge rich curriculum and academies.

The Department for Education and Lucy Powell will then be working at pace to implement these changes and communicate them to a wider sector – and this will largely be led by officials unfamiliar with the policy detail and the level of sector relationships required for this message to land.

This has significant implications for the education sector more broadly – it represents an opportunity for organisations with good ideas to complement the Government's agenda.

This leaves the sector with three big questions to answer:

- What capability can the sector offer that the Government cannot build itself?
- Who is building the evidence base on what works in technical and vocational education to inform officials?
- Who is bringing employers, colleges and providers together to deliver the Government's proposed changes?

Methodology

This research was based on mixed methods research conducted by Public First consisting of a series of online focus groups and two polls of UK adults.

The focus groups were conducted in July 2026. All were facilitated by trained moderators. Each group brought together adults living in the West Midlands – an area all five main parties could win - with a mix of backgrounds and contexts, but shared voting intention if there were a general election held tomorrow. Each group consisted of six to eight participants. Where we refer to 'voters' in the report, we are referring to the participants of each group – even if some said they would not vote in the next election. Groups were structured as follows:

Group	Location	Voting intention
1	West Midlands	Labour
2	West Midlands	Conservative
3	West Midlands	Liberal Democrat
4	West Midlands	Reform
5	West Midlands	Green
6	West Midlands	Would not vote

Sessions lasted for 75 minutes and were recorded and transcribed with participants' consent. Moderators followed a structured but flexible discussion guide, designed to explore participants' views on education and then strength-test education policies from each of the five major parties – initially blind, and then attributed to each party or politician.

The first poll contained three questions. It ran from the 10th to the 13th of July 2026, with responses from 2,021 UK adults. The second poll contained four questions. It ran from the 13th to the 17th of August 2026 with responses from 2,004 UK adults. Both polls were weighted using Iterative Proportional Fitting, or 'raking', meaning the results were weighted by interlocking age & gender, region, and socioeconomic grade to Nationally Representative Proportions.