

# EDUCATION & SKILLS

## MACRO ANALYSIS

The Conservatives' manifesto is a much longer document than Labour's will be later this week. Nonetheless the essential pitch can be summarised in two words: tax cuts. There are an estimated £17 billion worth of tax cuts outlined in the manifesto to be implemented over the next parliament. They range from further reductions to national insurance to abolishing stamp duty for young home buyers. The proposals are vaguely costed but Rishi Sunak's main objective is not to demonstrate their feasibility. He seeks to create dividing lines with Labour over tax, often a vote winner for the Conservatives in the past. This time the electoral context is bleak for him and his party. Privately senior Tories are in despair about their prospects and fear the manifesto will not be a game changer.

**Steve Richards**, Senior Adviser

## POLICY ANALYSIS

**"Thanks to Michael [Gove's] reforms and a generation of inspiring teachers, English school children are not just the best readers in the UK, they are the best in the western world."**

Last night, embattled Prime Minister Rishi Sunak took part in an interview with the BBC's Nick Robinson, ahead of today's manifesto launch. When questioned about the Conservative's record in office, Sunak clung to one thing like a lifeboat: his party's success in driving up school standards and boosting the UK's position in international education league tables, something which they can rightly be proud of.

But what plan does the Conservative Party have for education policy going forward and, frankly, will it even matter?

The Conservatives' education commitments contain few surprises. They continue to emphasise the importance of vocational skills with their commitments on delivering the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, introducing the Advanced British Standard, and pledging 100,000 apprenticeship places for young people every year by the end of the Parliament.

School standards and achievement are the focus of pledges on maintaining current funding levels per pupil and attracting STEM and technical teachers with generous bonuses. In many ways, this is a programme for education which echoes the Prime Minister – stick to the plan which is working.

And yet, peppered in amongst these continuity pledges are a number of 'red meat' retail policies aimed to appeal to the older, more socially conservative demographic on whom the Tories' survival as a political force now seems to depend. The pledge to divert funding from degree courses that provide so-called 'low quality outcomes' for young people into apprenticeships, the banning of mobile phones during school, and a drive for more competitive sport in school are all meant to signal traditional education values to core Tory voters.

Given the Conservatives' poor polling performance at present, some may argue that their education plans do not matter since they are unlikely to be implemented from July 4th. Yet this would be a mistake. In opposition, the Tories would undoubtedly criticise a Labour government if the progress they made on school standards and academic performance began to slip. These pledges – and Sunak's rare confidence on the issue of education – could provide the yardstick against which Bridget Phillipson's performance in office will be measured.

To discuss WA's manifesto analysis and what it means for your organisation, please email **Lee Findell**, Head of Corporate Communications at [leefindell@wacomms.co.uk](mailto:leefindell@wacomms.co.uk).

## HEADLINE POLICY ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Giving every child the chance to go to a great school by protecting day-to-day schools spending in real terms per pupil.
- Banning the use of mobile phones during the school day.
- New teachers in priority areas and key STEM and technical subjects will receive bonuses of up to £30,000 tax-free.
- Legislate to create a register of children not in school.
- Ending the postcode lottery of support by delivering 60,000 more school places and a further 15 new free schools for children with special educational needs
- Mandate two hours of PE every week in primary and secondary schools, supported by extending the PE and Sport Premium to secondary schools.
- Introduce the Advanced British Standard, a new approach to 16-19 education which will build on the best of A Levels and T Levels.
- Delivering the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, giving adults the support they need to train, retrain and upskill flexibly throughout their working lives
- Creating 100,000 apprenticeships in England every year by the end of next Parliament
- Changing the law to close university courses in England with the worst outcomes for their students

## WA ADVISORY BOARD ANALYSIS

The most striking policy is the one announced at the start of the campaign, national service for 18 year olds. There are plans for reform of A levels and for 100 000 new apprentices. A commitment to maintain spending levels per pupil is easily made when school numbers are falling.

**Steve Richards**, Senior Adviser, WA Communications

There are five references to universities, and they are mostly about the risk of poor quality degrees. The messages about R&D are much more positive and should create some exciting opportunities.

**Sir Philip Rutnam**, Chair of the Advisory Board, WA Communications