

ESSA MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE

ESSA, the English Secondary Students' Association, is an organisation run by the students themselves, with the support of the Phoenix Education Trust. One of their projects this year was a competition for three-minute videos about how the education system might be changed for the better. On May 5 this was launched by Natascha Engel MP at Portcullis House. The project was sponsored by NESTA. (the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), with the support of the NUT, the examination board AQA, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the National College for School Leadership and other prestigious institutions, including most importantly Channel 4, which is going to broadcast some of the winning videos this autumn.

The purpose of collecting these short videos of student views was to provide material for a Manifesto for Education, written by young people, to be considered by policy-makers before the next General Election.

All the entries were posted on www.youtube.com/yourstudentvoice where they can still be seen. The awards for the videos judged to be the best in various categories were presented at a ceremony at the Channel 4 studios on 10 July which was led by the up-and-coming comedian, Jack Whitehall

The first impression made by these short videos is their variety. At a college for people excluded from school, for example, the two girls who made the film said they liked the college because they "don't do formal in this college" and they "get in stuff they hadn't got before." Without an appointment they go into the head's office and he happily agrees to be interviewed. The girls approach another member of staff and one of them says, "I was going through a rough patch and I got kicked out of schools and I went to a lot of places I had never been before and you helped me to get the qualifications that I needed." The staff member refuses to take credit for this and says, "All I do is try to create, with you, what you want to do."

Another film tells a story about dinosaur bones found in the grounds of a primary school by the school caretaker. Because the head trusts the children and understands their skills, they are allowed to measure and identify the bones themselves, and are totally involved. This is all illustrated with brightly coloured drawings by young children. The conclusion drawn is that school can be fun, and you don't have to have dinosaur bones.

At one school the timetable was identified as public enemy number one, and we saw children making different efforts to destroy it, tearing it up, rolling it into a ball and kicking it around or in one case eating it.

One girl who submitted a solo entry showing a sample of her own extensive work on cartoons and comic books. Her art classes in school had not been relevant. If students have a passion for something, she said, they will work really hard at it.

There was a dramatised scene where someone stopped a boy on a bicycle and asked why he was not in school. He had been suspended, he said, for "talking back" when he had tried to explain why he was late.

Many of the videos expressed a general feeling that "they don't teach you the subject, they teach you how to pass the exam," as one girl complained. Schools were accused of laying too much emphasis on academic achievement. One film had a whole class singing a song to which the refrain was "There's more to us than three A stars."

There were many requests for more subjects, for instance sign language, European politics, new age psychology, astronomy, cosmology, debating, juggling, diverse cultures, life skills, first aid and animal training. As one person remarked, "All the interesting things are extra-curricular – why aren't they in the curriculum?" In another film a student said simply that he would like to do a subject that no one else was doing.

The commonest plea, though, was for more a more effective voice in the government of the school. In one film we saw a boy standing by a building site saying that the children had been consulted but no one had paid any attention to their opinions. Only the governing body had known what was going on. With proper use of texting, computers, and video-conferencing this

problem could have been overcome. Teachers, parents and students could have been involved. "Everybody could be asked. Everybody could be heard." From another group we heard that this should include students who are not members of the school council. Students are not given the opportunity to voice their opinions freely, they reported, school councils don't effectively convey their ideas and opinions and most teachers don't put children's views forward because they don't want to challenge those in higher authority.

This was not the only complaint about teachers. Several films showed children mucking around or sleeping in boring lessons. Children felt they were often treated unfairly. "The single most important feature," said one school, in conclusion, "is the good teacher."

It was often stated that there should be more active lessons, more work experience, more trips outside school, more drama, less emphasis on testing and exams and, over and over again, better use made of IT (although there was one entry asking for more interaction in the classroom and fewer whiteboard presentations).

Even the films that consist entirely of children facing the camera and stating opinions, there is much to enjoy. There is discussion of a second competition in a year's time. By then it will be possible to see whether the Manifesto for Change has had any influence on government policy.