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**Reducing absenteeism, mental health pressures and growing SEND in English schools:
New Research from the University of Winchester.**

Creativity, play and hands-on learning could be key to tackling rising absenteeism, mental health pressures and the growth in SEND needs in English schools, according to new research from the University of Winchester.

The study — ***Cultivating the Skills and Dispositions Young People Need to Flourish in Life*** — by **Professor Bill Lucas and Dr Ellen Spencer**, reviews four core practices: **experiential learning, interdisciplinary learning, play, and creative education**. It finds strong international evidence that these approaches, often missing from English classrooms, can:

- **improve pupils' motivation, wellbeing and engagement**
- **strengthen collaboration and problem-solving**
- **deepen understanding and support attainment**

They also align with international frameworks endorsed by **the OECD, World Economic Forum, International Baccalaureate and Association for Science Education**.

The findings – drawn from a broad international evidence base - are published as the Government undertakes a rewrite of the national curriculum following the **Curriculum and Assessment Review** led by Professor Becky Francis. While the review has been widely welcomed, many education and employer groups called for reforms to go further.

Lucas and Spencer argue that the long-running national debate framed as **“knowledge vs skills” is a false binary which risks obstructing progress**. Children need both strong knowledge foundations and the opportunity to develop complex skills such as collaboration, problem solving and creativity.

The report identifies Steiner Waldorf schools — which embed the four practices in their education provision — as powerful case studies of how creative, practical and interdisciplinary learning can be woven into everyday teaching.

Professor Bill Lucas, Director of the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester, said:

“The recent Curriculum and Assessment Review has opened the door to curriculum reform and calls on schools and colleges to innovate. This research is a key contribution to that innovation.”

He added: “Creative education is particularly important. In an AI world, the expression of human creativity and intelligence is essential — but it needs to be embedded, not treated as an ‘extra’. England is currently an international outlier in not integrating creativity more explicitly into schooling. Waldorf education shows how this can be achieved.”

Fran Russell, Executive Director of Waldorf UK, said:

“This research shows that the distinctive approaches at the heart of Waldorf education are evidence-backed and highly relevant to today’s educational challenges. By integrating practical, artistic and hands-on activities across the curriculum, children’s participation widens, learning becomes more enjoyable, and wellbeing is strengthened.”

She added that the Waldorf approach is continuing to grow internationally — including in countries previously associated with high-stakes, knowledge-driven systems such as China and India — reflecting growing calls from parents, teachers and employers to rethink how schools equip young people with the skills and dispositions needed for life.

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Notes for Editors:

- **Full Report title:** *Cultivating the Skills and Dispositions Young People Need to Flourish in Life: Learning from four key Waldorf Education practices.*
- **Professor Bill Lucas** is Professor of Learning and Director of the Centre for Real-World Learning (CRL) at the University of Winchester, an internationally recognised education researcher and Co-Chair of the OECD’s Strategic Advisory Board for the 2022 Test of Creative Thinking
- **Dr Ellen Spencer** is Senior Researcher at the University of Winchester.
- **The report was commissioned by Waldorf UK** (Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship) as part of a programme of evidence-based research for Waldorf teaching practices.
- **Waldorf UK is the representative body for Steiner Waldorf** education in the UK, supporting 1 state and 16 independent schools and 10 independent kindergartens.
- The state-funded **Steiner Academy Hereford** is rated “**outstanding**” in three areas by Ofsted and ranked within the **top two schools in Herefordshire for GCSE results** in seven out of eight measures. It was ranked the top state school in England by the **Fairer Schools Index 2025**.
- **Most independent Steiner Waldorf schools and kindergartens inspected by Ofsted** are rated either “good” or “outstanding”. [A recent report by the University of Worcester \(Sept 2025\)](#) described Steiner Waldorf schools as having achieved a “significant educational transformation”.
- **Waldorf education is based on** the educational ideas of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and is designed to develop academic, social and emotional growth equally.
- The names ‘Steiner’, ‘Waldorf’ and ‘Steiner Waldorf’ are used interchangeably.

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