

Ben Whitaker and Steve Hope

Pick'n'Mix

Education

Why one-size-fits-all
education systems are flawed
and what parents can do about it





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Crown House Publishing Limited
www.crownhouse.co.uk

First published by

Crown House Publishing Limited
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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First published 2026.

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Cover image © Nikolay– stock.adobe.com

EU GPSR Authorised Representative
Easy Access System Europe Oü, 16879218
Address: Mustamäe tee 50, 10621, Tallinn, Estonia
Contact Details: gpsr.requests@easproject.com, +358 40 500 3575

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178583812-5
Mobi ISBN 978-178583816-3
ePub ISBN 978-178583817-0
ePDF ISBN 978-178583818-7

LCCN 2026942855

Printed in the UK by CMP, Poole, Dorset

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Introduction: Why Traditional Education Is Dead

The Woolworths analogy: why one-size education is as outdated as single-store shopping

For generations of children, Woolworths represented pure freedom. Walking into that familiar red-fronted store, with the toys and household goods, straight to the corner where magic happened. The pick 'n' mix counter stretched out like a sweet buffet – rows of clear plastic containers filled with every confection imaginable. Fizzy cola bottles, chocolate raisins, foam bananas, liquorice wheels, sherbet lemons. You grabbed a small paper bag, chose exactly what you wanted, paid by weight, and walked out with something uniquely yours. No two bags were ever identical because no two children had identical tastes.

Woolworths didn't die because of its pick 'n' mix. Whatever the precise reasons for its decline – and retail historians will argue about that forever – the pick 'n' mix counter was the one thing it did that nobody else could replicate: genuinely personalised, chosen by you, yours alone. That's exactly what disappeared from the UK high street when the doors closed for the last time in 2009.

Our education system made the opposite mistake. It kept the grey shelves and threw out the pick 'n' mix.

The premise underpinning our schools has remained unchanged for over a century: identical classrooms, identical curricula, identical standards. Every child, regardless of their talents, interests, or needs, gets the same education delivered in the same way at the same pace. It's the educational

equivalent of Henry Ford's famous quote about the Model T: 'You can have any colour you want, as long as it's black.'¹

But there's a difference between Ford and our education system: Ford eventually gave customers choice. Schools haven't.

Harsh may this sound but if you walk into pretty much any secondary school today, you'll find almost exactly the same setup that existed in 1920. Rows of desks face forward, a teacher delivers from the front, and students are expected to absorb, memorise and regurgitate on command. Bells dictate when learning starts and stops. Subjects are carved into artificial silos that bear no resemblance to how knowledge actually works in the real world. All preparing for those end-of-year exams that set the tone of every lesson: 'Is this on the exam, sir?'

This wouldn't matter if it worked. But it doesn't. Not for most kids, not for most purposes, and certainly not for the world they're entering. Based on a census taken in 2024, an estimated 111,700 children are being home-educated in the UK, marking a 20 per cent rise in just 12 months.² Globally, there is a steady growth rate of 2–8 per cent every year, according to some statistics from NHERI (admittedly, a pro-homeschooling organisation).³ In the US, as of 2024, estimates suggest that 3.7 million children are homeschooled⁴ (which is around 3 per cent higher than pre-pandemic levels).

The pick 'n' mix approach that defined our Woolworths childhood is exactly what education needs. Some children thrive with structure and routine. Others need creative freedom. Some learn through reading, others through building, others through discussion. Some race ahead in mathematics but need extra time with writing. Others devour literature but struggle with numbers.

The old model says: 'Take what we've got.' The new educational model says: 'Build what works for you.'

1 H. Ford (1922) *My Life and Work*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, p. 72.

2 H. Drew and O. Demetriades (2025) Why is home education on the rise in the capital?, *BBC*, 11 May. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cewdlp2jqkjo>.

3 B. D. Ray (2018) Multiple data points show increase 2012 to 2016 and later, *National Home Education Research Institute*, 20 April. Available at: <https://nheri.org/homeschool-population-size-growing/>.

4 Hidden Gems ABA (2024) 'Homeschooling statistics. Available at: <https://www.hiddengemsaba.com/articles/homeschooling-statistics>.

The brutal truth about schools designed for the Industrial Age

Schools weren't designed for learning. They were designed for sorting.

The brutal truth that nobody wants to admit is that our education system is working exactly as intended. It was never meant to nurture individual talents or foster creativity. It was built to sort children into categories: academic or practical, university-bound or factory-bound, leaders or followers. Our friend Sugata Mitra, pioneer of the Hole in the Wall experiment, says it best: 'It is quite fashionable to say that our education system is broken. It's not broken. It's wonderfully constructed. It's just that we don't need it anymore.'⁵

The system emerged during the Industrial Revolution when society needed masses of compliant workers who could follow instructions, work in teams, and tolerate repetitive tasks. Schools became human sorting machines, designed to identify the small percentage destined for leadership roles while training the majority for lives of industrial obedience.

Every aspect of traditional schooling reinforces this sorting function. Age-based year groups assume all seven-year-olds develop at identical rates. Standardised testing measures conformity, not creativity. Rigid timetables train students to work when the bell rings, not when inspiration strikes. Homework extends control beyond school hours, establishing the expectation that work continues after the official day ends.

The classroom setup itself betrays its origins. Many students still sit in rows like factory workers at an assembly line. Information almost always flows one way: from teacher to student. Questions are discouraged outside designated times. Movement is restricted. Free talking is forbidden. Independent thinking is deemed suspicious. This wasn't accidental. Horace Mann, often called the father of public education, explicitly modelled American schools on Prussian military academies. The goal was creating disciplined citizens who would serve the state without question. British education followed similar principles, producing the clerks and administrators needed to run an empire. He said: 'Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer [sic] of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.'⁶

5 Edufuturists (2022) Sugata Mitra keynote, *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZVjxZ871QI>.

6 H. Mann (1848) *Twelfth Annual Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education*. Available at: <https://faculty.etsu.edu/history/documents/hmann.htm>.

The sorting mechanism operates through artificial scarcity. Only a limited number can achieve top grades. Only certain subjects carry prestige. Only specific pathways lead to success. This creates competition instead of collaboration, anxiety instead of confidence, and a fixed mindset instead of growth. And it's all got to fit the bell curve! These bells are everywhere.

The most damaging aspect isn't what schools teach, but what they fail to teach. Real-world problem solving, financial literacy, emotional intelligence, creative thinking, entrepreneurship, digital fluency, critical thinking – the skills that actually shape a life, which matter more than trigonometry or the dates of Henry VIII's marriages, yet they're treated as optional extras.

The Industrial Age demanded workers who could follow instructions without question. The Information Age demands thinkers who can adapt, create, and lead. Yet we're still running schools designed for the former while claiming to prepare students for the latter.

Why parents are taking control and building their own education systems

Parents are voting with their feet, their laptops, and their wallets.

The statistics tell the story. Local authorities report increasing numbers of home education notifications. Online schools – fully accredited schools operating entirely over the internet – expand their capacity year after year, while alternative education Facebook groups accumulate new members daily. Micro schools (small, often parent-founded learning communities of ten to thirty children), forest schools (outdoor, nature-based education rooted in child-led exploration), and democratic schools (where pupils have genuine say over how and what they learn) multiply across the world. The fastest growing school in the UK is an online one.

This isn't a middle-class fad or a response to temporary disruptions. It's a fundamental shift driven by parents who've realised that their children's futures depend on skills the traditional system can't provide. These aren't isolated cases. They represent a growing movement of parents who've recognised that educational choice isn't a luxury – it's a necessity.

The trigger often comes from watching a child struggle unnecessarily. It's the bright kids labelled as failures because they don't fit the standard

mould or the creative children having their imagination systematically crushed. Entrepreneurial spirits are being trained into compliance.

But it's not just about problems with traditional schooling. It's about the opportunities now available outside it. Technology has democratised access to world-class education. A child in rural Wales can learn coding from Silicon Valley experts, study literature with Oxford professors, or explore marine biology with researchers in Australia.

The pandemic accelerated what was already happening. Parents got a close look at their children's education and many didn't like what they saw: busy work masquerading as learning; box-ticking exercises instead of genuine skill development; teaching methods that seemed designed to create confusion rather than clarity; and, it seemed, worksheets for everything.

Simultaneously, parents discovered they were more capable of facilitating learning than they'd imagined. They found resources that explained concepts more clearly than their children's teachers. They watched their kids thrive when removed from the pressure and artificial constraints of traditional classrooms.

The movement away from mainstream-only education includes parents from every background: working-class families pooling resources to hire private tutors; middle-class parents trading time for tuition fees; wealthy families abandoning expensive private schools for personalised alternatives. What unites them isn't income or ideology, but a simple recognition: their children deserve better than what the Industrial Age education system offers.

Across every country, education reforms are frequently announced in technical or political language that parents never fully grasp. When people do not understand the system, they default to suspicion. The tension between autonomy and central oversight becomes important. Parents want freedom, but they also want national standards, safeguarding, inclusion, and accountability. The false binary between 'state control' and 'parental choice' does not reflect how families actually think.

What you'll learn from this book (spoiler: how to hack education)

If you want to check out some of the key terms and practical tools, please go to the back of the book for more information.

This book will show you how to build an education system that actually works for your child. Not the system that ‘worked’ for previous generations, not the system that looks good to other parents, but the system that develops your child’s unique talents and prepares them for their actual future.

You’ll discover how to combine the best elements from multiple educational approaches into a personalised learning experience. Think of it as educational hacking – taking what works, discarding what doesn’t, and creating something better than any single approach could provide.

We’ll start by mapping your options. Traditional schools aren’t evil, but they’re not the only choice. To make it clear: we think it is a broad church and that mainstream schools may be *part* of the future, just not *the* future. Online programmes offer flexibility and personalisation impossible in classroom settings. Micro schools provide a community without conformity. Apprenticeships deliver real-world skills and professional networks. Gaming platforms teach complex problem solving through engagement rather than enforcement. You’ll learn to evaluate each option based on what matters: skill development, not test scores; real understanding, not memorisation; character building, not compliance training; future readiness, not past tradition.

The book provides practical frameworks for making decisions. When does traditional schooling make sense? How do you know if an online programme is legitimate? What red flags indicate educational snake oil? How do you measure progress without grades?

We’ll explore the skills your child actually needs. Digital literacy that goes beyond PowerPoint presentations. Financial understanding that prevents debt slavery. Communication abilities that work in global, remote teams. Creative problem solving that adapts to changing circumstances.

Technology gets its own deep dive, but not with the breathless enthusiasm you’ll find elsewhere. We’ll examine what actually enhances learning rather than what just looks impressive: artificial intelligence (AI) tutors that adapt to individual needs; virtual reality (VR) experiences that make abstract concepts tangible; collaborative platforms that connect learners globally.

You’ll discover how to build real-world experience while your child is still young, internships that teach more than textbooks, community projects that develop leadership skills, entrepreneurial ventures that combine multiple subjects naturally.

Moreover, the book addresses practical concerns that keep parents awake at night. How do you ensure proper socialisation outside traditional school settings? What about university admission? How do you handle sceptical relatives? What are some of the current legal requirements? How much does this cost?

We'll examine successful case studies from organisations who are already helping parents make the transition. They will, for example, tell the story of the homeschooled teenager who founded a profitable business before her eighteenth birthday; the online-schooled student who gained university admission two years early; the unschooled child who apprenticed with master craftspeople while peers struggled through irrelevant assignments.

To make that reality visible, this book includes ten organisations – individually profiled in one case study per chapter – that represent different parts of a growing education ecosystem. They are not presented as a recommended list, nor as a hierarchy of quality. They are examples of what is already being used by families who are taking a pick 'n' mix approach to education. This is not a menu telling parents what to choose. It is a view of the counter, showing what is available and how it is being used in practice.

Including these organisations is not us endorsing them carte blanche. They are not the only strong options, and they are not positioned as better than others we have not included. Each one has been chosen because it illustrates a particular role that families are already drawing on. Some are full schools, operating online or in-person. Some are short, high-impact experiences that sit alongside other provisions. Some focus on academics; others on well-being, character, confidence, or social development. A few sit outside what is traditionally labelled as education altogether. What matters is not the brand, but the function each one serves.

Together, they show that the pick 'n' mix approach is not aspirational or hypothetical. It is already happening, often quietly and unevenly, shaped by family circumstances rather than policy design. Parents are piecing together timetables, transport, online sessions, residentials and support programmes because they need something that fits their child now, not something that assumes stability, predictability, or uniformity.

To avoid any sense of promotion or comparison, every organisation that features in our case studies is explored using the same structure. Each case study looks first at who the organisation is, what it does, and what genuinely makes it different, without marketing language or claims of superiority. It then examines the gap the organisation tends to fill, focusing on fit rather than outcomes. This is followed by a clear explanation of how it actually works in practice, week to week and term to term, rather

than what it claims to believe. We include indicative pricing at the time of writing (late 2025) – so it is best to do your own research to get the most accurate options.

Each chapter also looks at the kinds of outcomes families commonly report – not as promises or guarantees, but as observable patterns. There are no glossy statistics here, and that is intentional. As Edufuturists, we have been abundantly clear for many years that the old measuring sticks of percentages, league tables, and purely quantitative outcomes are stifling what actually matters in education. The practical realities are then made explicit, including time, cost, access, and logistics, because an option that cannot realistically fit into family life is not a usable ingredient. Finally, every chapter is clear about who the organisation is *not* for, recognising that limits matter just as much as strengths when families are making decisions.

This structure is deliberate. It allows parents to think in combinations rather than replacements, and to compare roles rather than rankings. A pick 'n' mix education is not built by selecting one organisation and committing to it indefinitely. It is built by understanding what different ingredients do, when they are useful, and how they might sit alongside one another over time. One family might combine a mainstream school with an online marketplace of short courses and an outdoor residential once a year. Another might use a full online school alongside local clubs and well-being support. Another might move between options as circumstances shift.

The organisations in the case studies are not presented as answers. They are illustrations. They show that families are already designing education that flexes, adapts, and responds to real children, even if the wider system has not yet caught up. This part of the book exists to make that reality visible, practical, and grounded; not to prescribe a path, but to show that paths already exist.

Most importantly, as a result of reading this book we hope you'll learn to think like an educational entrepreneur. Instead of accepting what's offered, you'll design what's needed. Instead of hoping the system improves, you'll create alternatives that already work. This isn't about abandoning structure or lowering standards. It's about raising them. It's about expecting education to develop the whole child, not just their ability to sit still and follow instructions. It's about finding the 'sweets' that form part of what your child needs (and maybe even wants).

The transformation starts with understanding that you have more power than you realise. You don't need permission to supplement your child's education, and you don't need qualifications to recognise quality learning. You simply need the confidence to stop accepting a system that doesn't

serve your child's interests. The tools exist, the resources are available, and the community is growing. What is needed now is simply the confidence to use them.

Your child's education is too important to leave to chance or tradition. It's time to take control and build something better. The future belongs to learners rather than test takers, to creators rather than consumers, to problem solvers rather than instruction followers. Your child's future starts with the choices you make today. This book will help you make the right ones.

Note: For many of you who are trying to find quick solutions to the challenges of creating a system that works for your family, you might want to jump to Part II, where we help you build the system. We think Part I is super important to give the grounding and context to the solutions – there is no point sharing solutions unless we have fully defined the problems. But we appreciate that, for many of you, time is of the essence. We won't be offended if you skip Chapters 1 and 2!

Part I

The Education Menu

Education has spent a century pretending that one recipe suits every child. Part I tears that myth apart and puts all the options on the table. If the Introduction exposes why the old model is collapsing, this section shows what replaces it once parents stop accepting whatever the system happens to serve.

Think of Part I as the menu before you start building your child's learning mix. Not a list of overpriced specials, but the full spread: the classics; the modern fizz; the experimental flavours that the old system hopes you never find out about.

We start by stripping the industrial model down to its Victorian wiring. Not because teachers are failing, but because the design was built for a world that no longer exists. Chapter 1 shows what happens when a structure engineered for standardisation is expected to produce originality. It cannot. It never could.

From there, the menu widens fast. Traditional schools remain the boiled sweets of the sector. Reliable, familiar, and sometimes exactly what a young person needs. But they are only one option. The moment parents look beyond the school gate, the landscape explodes: online platforms offering genuine personalisation, micro schools and specialist hubs that operate more like creative studios, apprenticeships that put teenagers into real communities of practice, tech environments that teach faster than textbooks, and hybrid pathways that combine the best of them all.



Part I exists to help families navigate that diversity with confidence. It shows why the old system is struggling, what the future demands, and what choices now exist for any parent prepared to design an education rather than inherit one. By the end of this section, the question will no longer be whether you have options. It will be which combination will help your child thrive.

Part I is your pick 'n' mix moment. Everything that follows helps you choose well.

Education was never meant to be one size fits all.
So why are we still pretending it is?

Pick'N'Mix Education

empowers parents to build personalised learning systems by drawing on the full breadth of what education can be: online programmes and AI tutors, micro schools, apprenticeships, gaming platforms, alternative communities, and project-based learning plus mainstream schools.

This practical guide provides frameworks for evaluating options, measuring progress, handling legal requirements, and ensuring socialisation – a roadmap to educational freedom for every child who doesn't quite fit the mould.

Don't read this book if you're convinced all is well in the school system. *Pick'N'Mix Education* provides a hard-hitting exposure of why our school system doesn't work for all and provides a sensitive analysis of how it could be made to work. If you want some sound advice on ways forward, Ben and Steve offer plenty of suggestions for you to consider and start the process of school transformation.

Mick Waters, educationalist and author

This is a genuinely important book, and one I would recommend not only to parents but also to anyone still trying to understand why an education system so efficiently run continues to produce such strangely narrow human beings. The future of learning is not a curriculum. It is a conversation. This book is an excellent place to start one.

Sugata Mitra, Professor of Educational Technology (retired), Newcastle University, TED Prize Laureate, and creator of the Hole in the Wall experiments and Self-Organised Learning Environments (SOLEs)

Ben Whitaker is a freelance educational consultant helping organisations think differently, especially around AI and technology. He authored *The Ideas Guy* in 2025, blogs extensively at theideaguy.io, and since 2016 has co-hosted the Edefuturists podcast, which was started to help teachers with technology. Previously Ben was a religious studies and sociology teacher, Head of Sixth Form, and Digital Transformation Lead in schools and colleges.

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ISBN-13: 978-178583812-5



9 781785 838125

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