

How should schools respond to strikes for climate change?



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# Executive summary

The school strikes for climate movement seems to be growing. There were predictions that the strikes scheduled for 24 May were expected to be the best attended, globally, to date. Schoolzone wondered how teachers – and schools – were responding to the movement: how supportive they were and what teachers thought their schools should do about the climate change issue.

On the same day, the Labour Party revealed an intention to increase the coverage of climate change in the curriculum, should they come to power. Again, we thought it would be worth finding out via a quick poll whether teachers were supportive of this idea.

We asked our teachers over the three days of the end of May bank holiday for some response. We asked for their views regardless of whether they personally supported the movement or not, reminding them that Schoolzone has no position on it ourselves. We capped responses at 400.

## Findings

Around a third of the respondents had more than one or two students in their schools taking part in demonstrations – 14 schools had over 100 students taking part. For these, the nearest demonstration was only a few miles away, suggesting that this is

something of a local movement perhaps, but also probably restricted by young people's ability to travel to other venues. A quarter of respondents didn't know how far away their nearest demonstration was.

Over 80% of teachers are broadly in favour of the movement, with 40% in favour of the strikes themselves. Around a fifth agree with the demonstration, but not the strikes: mostly because of the negative impact on learning arising from missing school.

40% would take part in strikes themselves, while a similar proportion would not. There is a general feeling that colleagues would not typically go on strike.

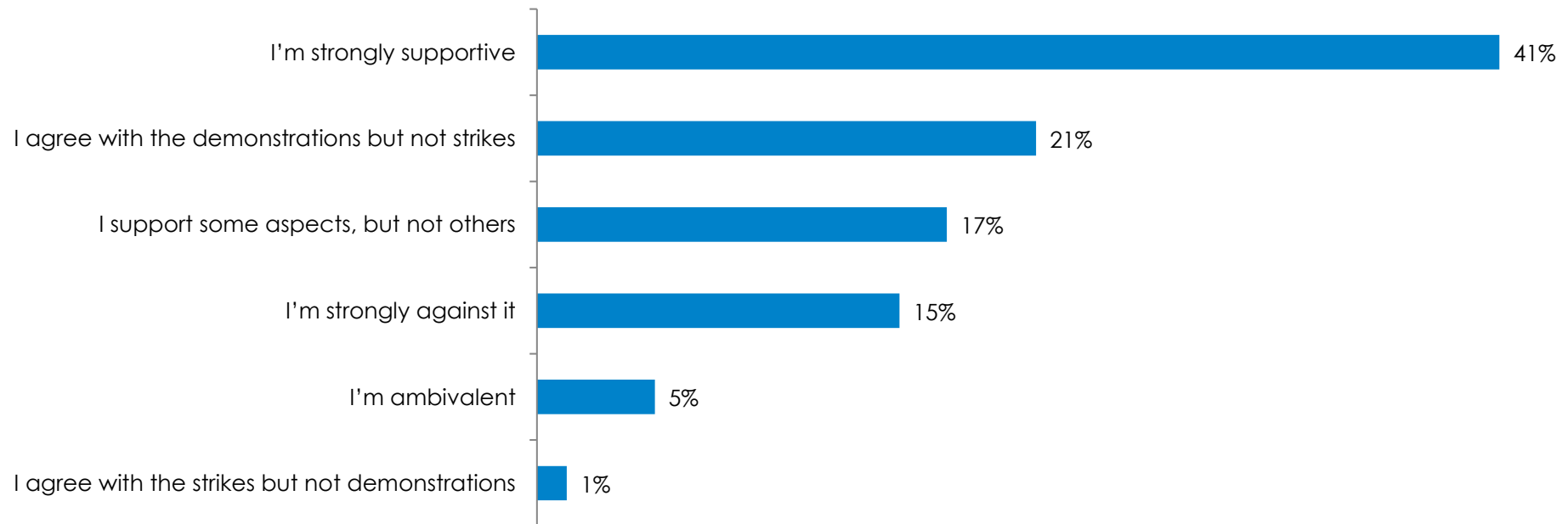
40% of teachers also think that their school could do more to encourage awareness of the issues involved with climate change, while slightly smaller proportions say that they do enough already in school, and/or that the curriculum covers it well enough.

While there is certainly support for children learning about the effects of climate change, with teachers being very supportive of the Labour Party proposals for the curriculum, there is not yet a huge amount of support for the strikes. Teachers seem instead to want some more help in supporting children to understand the issues in their own ways.

# Teachers views of the school climate strikes

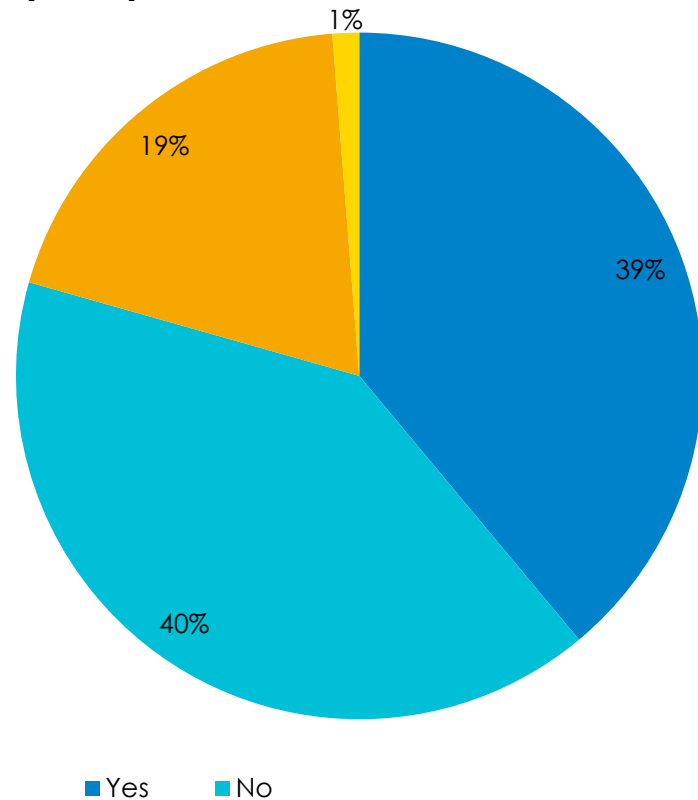
Around a third of teachers are against the strikes, though of these, a fifth are in favour of demonstrations, the difference being, presumably the fact that students miss school by striking. However, a sizeable majority (41%) are strongly supportive of their students taking part in the strikes.

## How do you personally feel about students in your school taking part in the school climate strikes? (n=397)



The balance between those who would and who would not consider going on strike as part of the movement is more even:

**Would you consider taking part in strike action yourself to protest against climate change? (n=398)**



We asked teachers how they thought their colleagues would respond to this question.

- A fifth didn't know, so perhaps these teachers haven't been discussing the issue in school very much.
- 38% said that they thought up a quarter of their colleagues would feel the same way.
- 36% thought that many, or most of their colleagues would feel the same way.
- Very few respondents thought all would.

Interestingly, those who would not strike themselves are more confident that their colleagues would not strike either:

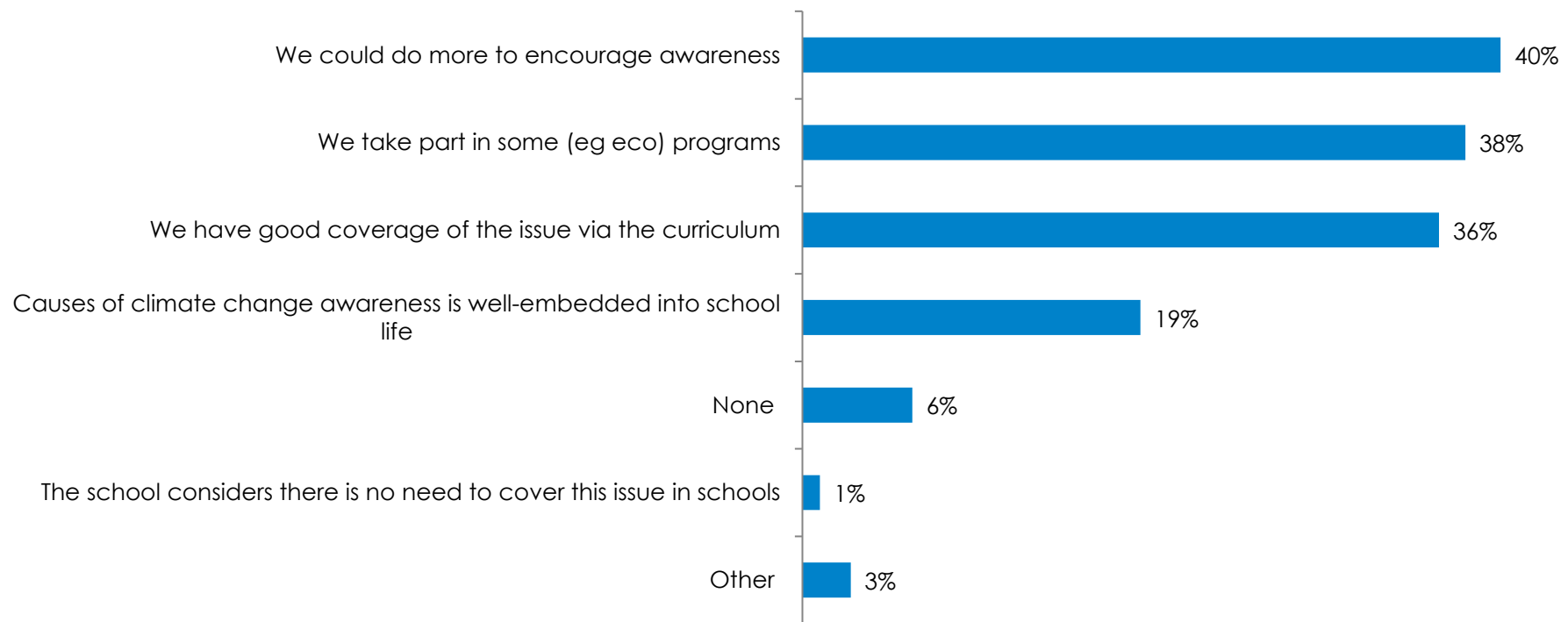
- 50% of no-strikers say that many or most of their colleagues feel this way.
- 52% of strikers say that only a small proportion of colleagues would also be prepared to strike.

So there does not seem likely to be a groundswell of action taken by teachers joining students on strike.

# School responses to school climate strikes

Although schools seem to be doing quite a lot already, with over a third covering climate change awareness via the curriculum and about the same proportion taking part in relevant non-curriculum programs, 40% of teachers think that their school could do more to encourage awareness.

## What attention does your school pay to climate change awareness? (n=398)



## Official school responses to the strikes

In the course of this poll – open only over the bank holiday weekend – we received a number of emailed responses, which reflected a general support for the ambition of the strikes movement but which were less supportive of the strikes themselves, for example:

- “School strikes are detrimental to the children's learning as they miss out on education. However, raising pupils' awareness would be beneficial. I also think that litter picking might make pupils aware how much we throw away.”
- “I am all for supporting the environment and young people taking up green banners as long as it is they that have decided to do so. I worry about the grown-ups and political parties that may be influencing young people to strike etc as I saw many political placards and slogans held by children that really didn't seem to have come from children for example, System Change not Climate Change.”

One head was moved to send us the letter he had sent home to parents, which he opened with:

- “This week I faced an interesting dilemma. A small contingent of Year 9 students (and independently a Y1 pupil) approached me seeking permission to take part in the youth strike on climate change. My initial reaction was that a strike should be an act of last resort and asked the students to consider what they had done in the past on this topic, that justified the use of this ultimate form of legal protest. Rather than this being the end of the matter, which I suspected it might have been, I received a detailed report in writing the next day of their reasons for wanting to go, their prior engagement with the matter, and therefore their reasons for believing that this was a proportional next step. This left me rather stuck between a rock and a hard place; as Headmaster, I have the legal responsibility for all of the students during school hours, excepting where they are absent from school on the grounds of ill-health. Furthermore, I am legally required ‘to actively promote fundamental British values’ in particular ‘the rule of law’.”

He went on to explain the rationale for the decision the school came to about whether or not to support the students in taking part in the strike. This letter prompted us to look at what other schools wrote home to their parents. See page 15 for examples.

Most reflected the fact that it was essentially a “good thing” for students to want to take part and a few (very few) outright supported it:

- “We are willing to support students taking part in the demonstration walk from... We are taking this position because we believe that the guiding aims of the IB mission statement are particularly relevant to us as an IB World School: *The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.*”

Other schools may not have gone quite so far, but made compromises, such as:

- “We did discuss this issue at a meeting a few weeks ago and we felt that we would be in a position to authorise student absence from 11am on that day if we had the written agreement of parents and that those attending had a current attendance of above 95%.”
- “If your son/daughter has expressed an interest in attending the climate strike on Friday 24 May, we are asking them to (with their family) sign up to an environmental pledge and

also submit an application to [redacted] expressing their reasons for wanting to attend the protest.”

- “I have taken the decision that members of the sixth form only will be allowed to attend the rallies in Oxford on Friday, but only with the express permission of their parents or guardians. If you feel strongly about this issue yourself, and you would like to give permission for your son or daughter to attend the rallies in Oxford on Friday, please email school to give your consent in writing.”

While other schools, in refusing permission to attend, pointed out that they already do quite a lot to address this issue and had made alternatives to the school strikes:

- “[The school] recognises the importance of this issue to young people and has routinely offered many opportunities to learn about climate change, to discuss the issues and to reflect on the steps that we can all take to reduce the impact that our actions have on the climate. For example, during the autumn term 2018, students in Year 9 worked with students from the University of Sheffield on a climate project and they will be presenting their finding to me shortly. High quality assemblies on climate change have been delivered to all Key Stage 3 students as part of this project. Students



learn about climate change in many subjects such as Science, Geography and PSHE. The School is also involved in an Energy Sparks Project with Sheffield City Council. The main focus of this work is to look at the School's energy use and consumption and how we can reduce it. The School is also working hard to reduce the use of plastics which are damaging the environment."

- "Please be advised that any student absence from school to take part in the strike action will be recorded as an unauthorised absence. Please also inform your child that students will not be able to engage in any form of protest in school on this day either, as this disrupts learning, especially for our Year 11 at a pivotal time in their examination preparation. Instead our MP will be visiting [the school] ... where he will be presented with a letter and will meet student representatives as part of this visit which will draw attention to the Government more effectively."

Most seemed to have put attendance at the centre of their thinking, perhaps justifying it with safety responsibilities, and taking the stance that regardless of whether parents gave permission, absences would be regarded as unauthorised:

- "If we receive explicit written consent (not via email) that you wish your child to attend the protest, we will not prevent

them from leaving school. However, the absence will be noted as unauthorised and parents and carers will be responsible for their child's safety and welfare during this time. Any student who tries to leave site without parental consent will be truanting and sanctioned in line with the school behaviour policy."

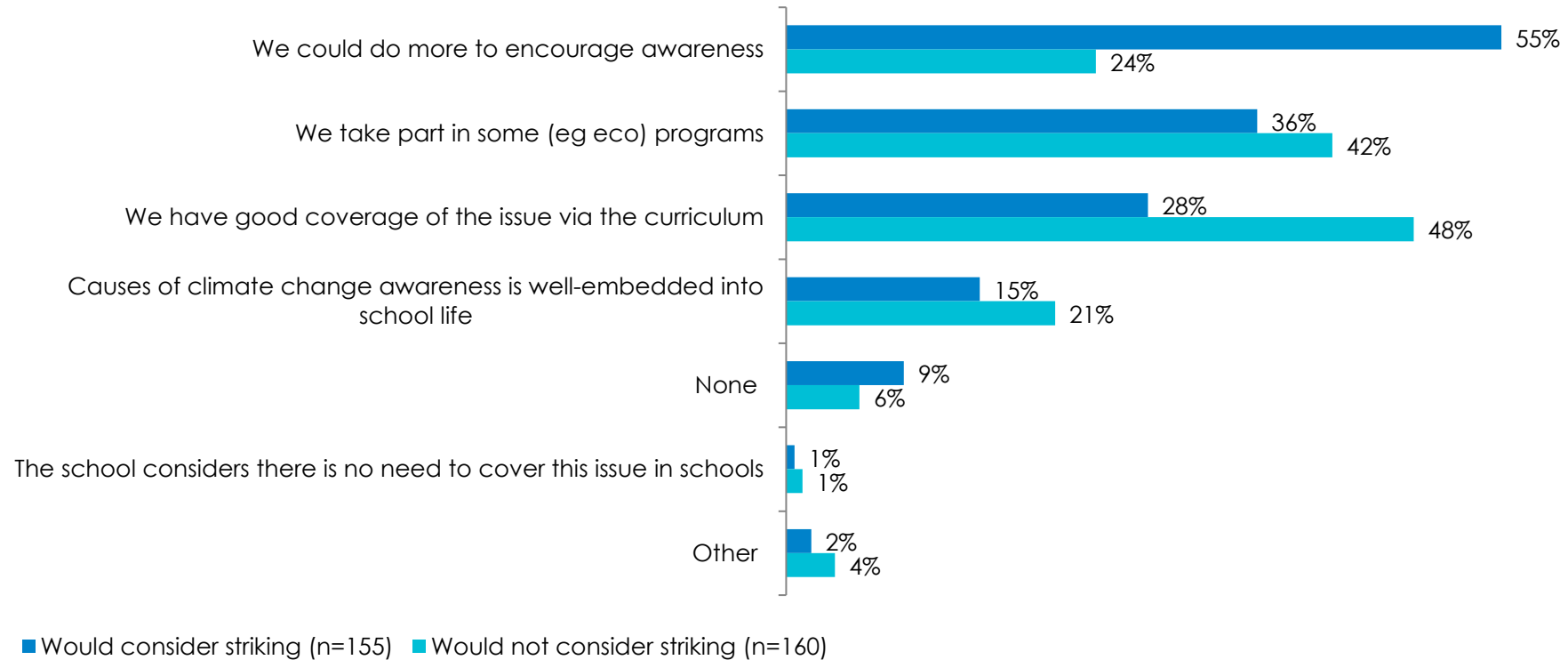
- "Any absences to attend climate strike events will be recorded as unauthorised absences from school."

Clearly this is a difficult matter for schools to address – it's not as if they are generally unsupportive of students learning about climate change, but their legal responsibilities understandably dominate. Furthermore, the strikes and demonstrations aren't single events – they are planned with no end date and if schools give permission for one attendance, they would then have to find a reason to stop.

Some teachers contacted us by email saying that they would like to do more in schools but had little or no budget, throwing down a challenge to publishers to produce balanced resources in accessible formats.

There seems to be a correlation between teachers who would themselves strike for the climate and those who think their school could do more. Similarly, those who would not consider striking are much more likely to consider that the issue is already covered well by the school curriculum.

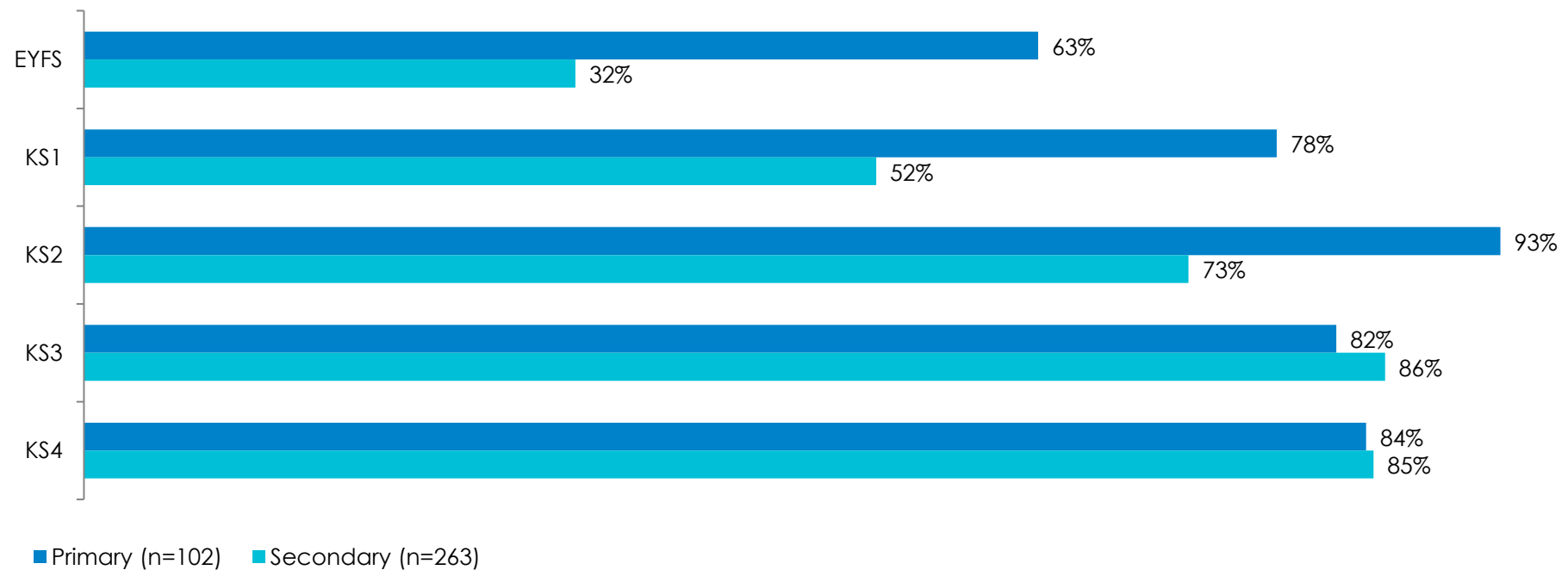
### What attention does your school pay to climate change awareness?



# Climate change in the curriculum

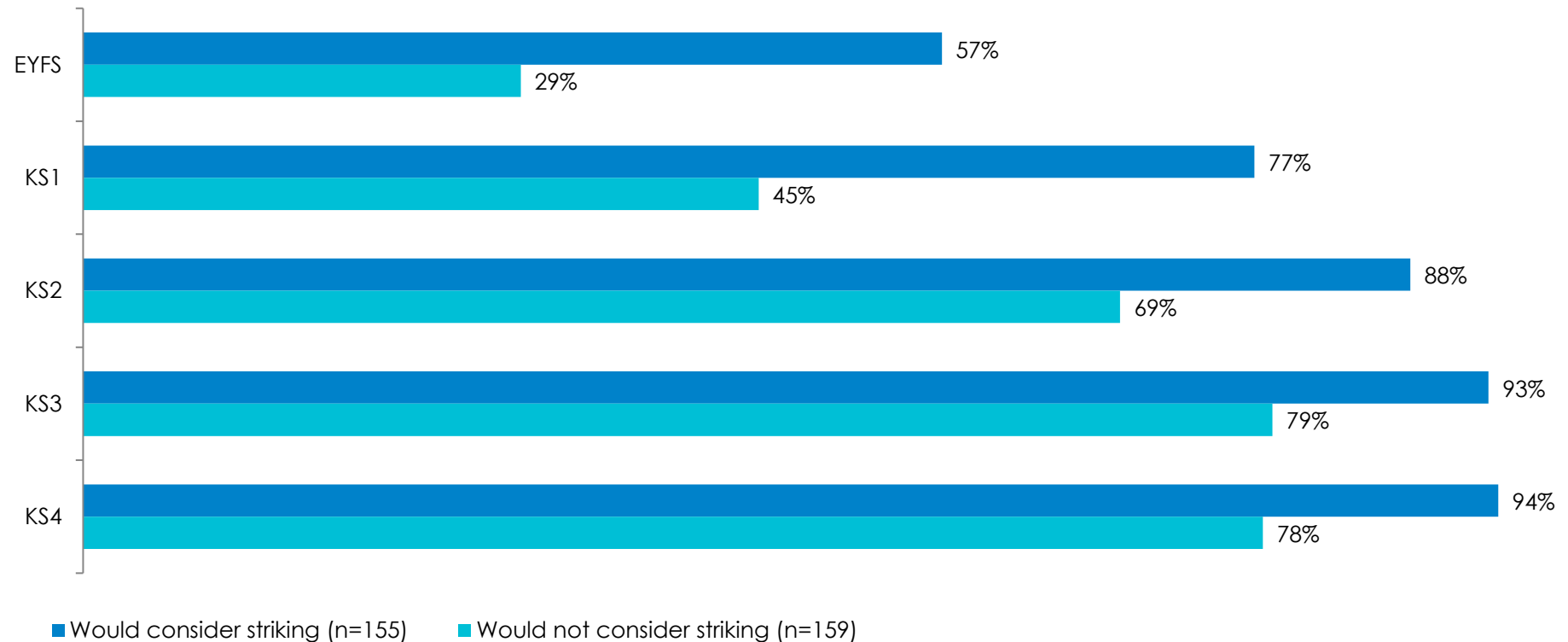
The Labour Party has recently proposed that there should be more coverage of climate change in the curriculum. Teachers were asked for their responses to the two main suggestions. There was widespread agreement that the impacts of climate change should be included throughout the curriculum, though secondary teachers were less likely to say that it should be covered in the primary curriculum. There is a lot of pressure to include new content in the curriculum from many different lobbying groups and it's rare to see such strong support from teachers for new content.

## Do you think that the ecological and social impact of climate change should be included in the curriculum at any of these stages?



Even those who would not strike (and who tended to think that there was already good coverage within the curriculum already) were strongly in favour of the suggestion that impacts should be included.

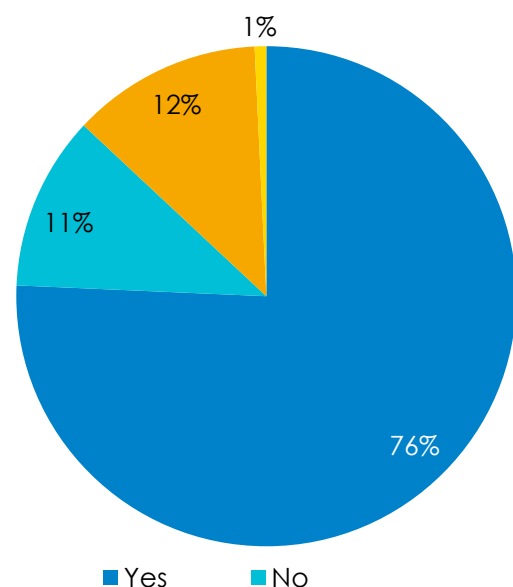
### Do you think that the ecological and social impact of climate change should be included in the curriculum at any of these stages?



Note that in the previous two charts, responses of 'None' (4%), 'Don't know' (3%) and 'Other' (2%) are omitted.

There was also strong support for the Labour Party suggestion that there should be more focus in the curriculum on knowledge and skills that young required for the green jobs of the future. This was approximately the same for primary and secondary teachers.

**Do you think there should be more focus in the curriculum on knowledge and skills that young required for the green jobs of the future? (n=399)**



There is unquestionably a high degree of support within schools and by schools themselves for raising awareness of the issues

resulting from climate change. While the direct actions of young people are grabbing the headlines at the moment, schools have been adopting green programs and projects for some time. However, 40% of teachers think their school could be doing more.

The call from some teachers for more resources perhaps reflects the continuing announcement of new threats to the environment or shifting anticipations, so that many teachers are left feeling unconfident about what the current thinking is. In other research carried out for a global charity last year, Schoolzone found a strong demand for resources that were very topical – but these need to be based on recent events and media coverage: a week or two only after the event. Students respond to the immediate and, thanks to social media, the immediate is becoming ever more so.

It's possibly also difficult for teachers who, as part of the generation that may be seen by young people as being the cause of the current climate change crisis, are trying to teach young people about an issue that is so sensitive. Young people may feel that they know best because they feel more and distrust the older generation who are trying to teach grandma to suck eggs.

If greater coverage of the issue is to be included in the curriculum, and if schools are to be encouraged to do more outside it, it may be that schools will need to take the lead from

children and young people. If not by supporting strikes, which is always going to be difficult, and which would perhaps undermine the strike idea anyway, then perhaps by taking note of what encourages young people to take an interest and to provide teachers with more support in delivering learning via a non-alienating means.

The question of trust is always a factor in issues-based education: whose voice will children and young people believe? Campaigners tend to have more poignant messages than climate change scientists and the opposite points of view are

very difficult to convey if schools want to achieve balance. Many young people may not want to hear the opposite view, either, so teachers face a real challenge in this context.

Or perhaps some of our teachers are right: that this isn't an issue for schools to focus on and that children and young people seem to be doing a perfectly good job or raising their own awareness – and ours – without the need for schools to interfere.

# Appendix – school letters to parents

Here are some examples of what school leaders are saying about the school strikes for climate.

- <http://tynecastlehighschool.org.uk/news/school-strike-for-climate-change-24th-may-2019/>
- <http://www.causewayschool.org/announcements/schools-strike-4-climate-action-friday-15th-march-2019>
- <http://www.cns-school.org/News/Climate-Strike/>
- <http://www.stkaths.org.uk/media/1884/climate-change-protest-letter-23-may-2019.pdf>
- <https://drummondhigh.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/school-strike-letter-07.03.19.pdf>
- <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c88f32677b903894af3099a/t/5c8ba1209140b70dd41f30da/1552654625391/Youth-Strike-4-Climate-letter-to-parents-13.2.19.pdf>
- <https://www.cheney.oxon.sch.uk/latest-news/climate-change-protest-24-may-2019/>
- <https://www.impington.cambs.sch.uk/news/?pid=1&nid=1&storyid=2442>
- <https://www.kaacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/Student-Strike-Day-Letter.pdf>
- <https://www.lrgs.org.uk/attachments/download.asp?file=381&type=pdf>
- <https://www.stopsleyhighschool.co.uk/page/?title=Youth+Strike+4+Climate&pid=172>

The logo for Schoolzone features the word "schoolzone" in a sans-serif font. "school" is in black and "zone" is in yellow. The text is centered within a white rectangular area that is framed by a thick yellow border. The border consists of four horizontal and vertical bars, with the corners being smaller squares.

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The logo for the British Educational Suppliers Association (besa) features the word "besa" in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a stylized graphic of three orange and yellow curved lines. Below the text and graphic, the full name "BRITISH EDUCATIONAL SUPPLIERS ASSOCIATION" is written in a smaller, uppercase sans-serif font.

besa  
BRITISH EDUCATIONAL  
SUPPLIERS ASSOCIATION

The logo for MRS Evidence Matters features a circular graphic composed of small, multi-colored squares. To the right of the graphic, the text "MRS Evidence Matters" is written in a sans-serif font, with "MRS" in a larger, bold font. Below this, the text "Company Partner" is written in a smaller font.

MRS Evidence  
Matters™  
Company Partner