It is an honour to serve for the first time under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. This debate is extremely timely, as it comes against the backdrop of recent strike action by certain teaching unions. Last week, on 1 October, members of the National Union of Teachers and NASUWT went on strike in 49 local authorities in eastern England, the midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, consequently denying education to pupils in 2,500 schools. I want to put on the record that, thanks to non-striking teachers’ dedication to their pupils and profession, many of the schools that expected to close were able to remain open.

Another wave of strikes is planned on 17 October in London, the north-east, the south-east and the south-west, where my constituency is located. I take this opportunity to urge teachers in schools in my constituency to think twice about strike action and, like their many fellow professionals who turned their back on last week’s strike, not to strike at the expense of their pupils’ education and welfare. A national strike of union members is planned for later in the year, before Christmas, and that will inevitably disrupt the lives of pupils and parents alike.

Let us turn to the origin of the decision to take industrial action. Last year, the two largest teaching unions, the NUT and NASUWT, voted to take industrial action throughout 2013. At first glance, the results of the ballots seem decisive: 82.5% of NUT members and 82% of NASUWT members voted in favour of strike action. We must, however, look at the turnout for the ballots: just 27% of all NUT members responded by returning their ballots, as did 40% of NASUWT members. In reality, strike action was therefore voted through by just 22% of NUT members and 33% of NASUWT members.

Even then, it is important to note that those unions do not represent the teaching profession of more than 750,000 teachers in its entirety. Taking that into account, strike action was agreed by the unions with a mandate of only 17.3% of teachers voting to strike. That is significant, because we must recognise the increasing divide between teachers or teaching professionals and the unions who claim to represent their voice.

In recent years, it seems that the only voice that unions represent is the growing tendency towards militant socialism that has gripped the heart of teaching unions. A breakdown of the NUT national executive shows that more than half its members have links to far-left organisations, with 21 of the 40 members having links to the Socialist party or the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty, while 11 were endorsed by the Socialist Workers party in their election to the executive, four
are members of the Socialist Teachers Alliance, one was a Socialist party candidate in the 1997 general election and there is even a member of the Communist party.

It is well known that union leaders do very nicely in pay and conditions out of their members’ subs. In the NUT, Christine Blower’s total remuneration is now £158,155, which has increased by 25% since she became general secretary in May 2009. That is more than seven times higher than the average teacher’s starting salary, and her pension contribution alone, of £42,236, is almost double that starting salary. Chris Keates of NASUWT earns a total remuneration of £139,834, which has increased by 78% since she became general secretary in 2004. Let us not believe that the unions, either in numbers or in voice, reflect the everyday lives of the teaching profession. Tens of thousands of teachers—the silent majority—work tirelessly to transform the lives of young people in their care, and do so without recourse to strike action or what might be termed “teacher absenteeism”.

A new generation of teachers is coming forward who are the best trained and best skilled work force we have ever had. This generation of teachers deserves to be rewarded for their ability to raise their pupils’ performance. They are increasingly turning their back on the unions as their mouthpiece, knowing that they are being given greater freedoms to teach and improve their pupils’ education in the classroom. Some are even tearing up their union cards. One teacher wrote on The Guardian “Secret Teacher” site that “we came into teaching for a reason. To inspire children, to go that extra mile, and to become better at what we do—ultimately for the students who are the reason we chose this profession. Yes, there are many issues facing us that do need action—but why is it that the unions’ suggested actions simply serve letting down the very people at the core of teaching?”

We need the best teachers to be in place, particularly in schools where the gap between the most affluent and the most disadvantaged pupils remains stubbornly high, to help turn pupils’ lives around. A good-quality education depends entirely on good-quality teachers, so rewarding good teachers must be at the heart of this Government’s school reforms. That belief is overwhelmingly backed by the public. In a recent Populus poll of 1,700 people, 61% agreed that schools “should be able to set the pay of individual teachers based on the quality of their performance as determined by an annual appraisal”, while 28% believed that teachers
“should...receive the same salary regardless”.
When asked what the most important factor is in deciding teachers’ pay, only
8% plumped for length of service, which is the current measure. The poll found
that 70% of people are opposed to teaching unions’ planned strikes, while 34%
believe that teachers should be entirely banned from taking strike action.
I do not believe that the Government should be in the business of banning
teachers from going on strike. It must be up to teachers themselves, not only as
responsible adults, but above all as responsible professionals, to choose how
they wish to be regarded. Do they believe that as professionals—that is how we
wish teachers to be seen—they should take strike action where no other
professionals would dare to? It must be up to teachers to face their
responsibilities and to ask themselves why, if it is not acceptable for pupils to be
absent from school, it should be acceptable for teachers to indulge in teacher
absenteeism. What possible example can that set? How can the authority of a
teacher’s professionalism be anything but diminished by strike action?
If teaching unions think that there is a genuine and deeply felt need to strike,
they will recognise that such a need is also felt by the entire school community—
pupils
and parents alike. Each individual school, rather than taking its cue from the
phantom democratic ballots of union leaders, should know whether strike action
is necessary at local level and whether taking the ultimate step of sacrificing a
day of pupils’ education is in those pupils’ interests.
The teachers’ cause would be strengthened if they had the backing of the entire
school community, including parents. One solution for assessing whether an
individual school has a truly effective mandate for strike action would be for it to
ballot its parents on whether they agree with any proposed strike action. After
all, parental ballots are not a new feature of our education system: they were
introduced by the Labour party in 1998 as a means of assessing whether
grammar schools should close.
Rather than strike action taking place with just over 17% of support from
teachers, industrial action backed by parents would appear far more legitimate
and have a greater chance of being taken more seriously. Allowing parents a
voice over teacher strike action would help to depoliticise strikes, which are
currently organised by a militant few at the expense of the welfare of the many
pupils and parents whose lives will be disrupted in the next few weeks.
Of course, rather than take strike action in term time, thereby disrupting the
education of thousands of young people and effectively denying them a day’s
learning, surely it would be better for teachers to strike during the school
holidays, when they are still at work in schools? We are frequently informed that just as a parliamentary recess is not a holiday for Members of Parliament, school holidays are not entirely holidays for teachers, who continue to work hard in their schools.

**Therese Coffey** (Suffolk Coastal, Conservative)

My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument. Does he agree that we should encourage head teachers and chairs of governors to do their utmost to keep schools open as a learning environment for children, given that being at home may not be suitably positive for learning reinforcement?

**Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood, Conservative)

It is extremely important that school leadership remains strong at this time. I am referring here to the chair of governors, who has a duty to reflect the community’s voice, and the head teacher. As we know, it is the leadership that decides whether a school should remain open or should close. In my own **constituency**, I have seen the head teacher make the decision. As well as telling teachers who wish not to strike to have the courage of their convictions and to cross the picket line and go into school, we must also tell head teachers to stand firm on their principles. They are the captain of the ship in the school and they must ensure that it stays open for as long as possible.

Going back to my point about teachers striking in school holidays, I do not believe that teachers are taking off the entire school holiday. They are working hard in that period when the pupils are away from school, so it should not make any difference if the strike action was taken in school holidays rather than term time unless the deliberate aim of the teachers’ unions is to cause the maximum possible disruption to pupils’ learning, which would be regrettable.

In conclusion, there will always be disagreements and battles over how schools are run and pupils are taught. That is fair enough. Teachers themselves may disagree over the direction of a policy or a Government, and that is their right, but such battles should be fought not by strikes but in the court of public opinion, with ballots that reflect the views of all teachers and parents, and,
ultimately, at the ballot box. They should not be fought, as those striking well
know, at the expense of the children whom they claim to serve.

Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk, Conservative)

It is a pleasure, Mr Pritchard, to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon. I
congratulate my hon. Friend Chris Skidmore on his excellent speech, which
outlined many important issues, and on his ongoing work to support the reform
of education, which is vital for our country. I note that we do not have
Opposition Front Benchers at this debate. The Opposition have remained
silent on the issue of trade unions, even though many of their Members of
Parliament are funded by those organisations.

Strikes benefit no one. They damage the education of pupils and inconvenience
parents and carers, who often rely on school when they are out at work. The
children who are let down the most are those from low-income backgrounds who
desperately need an excellent education to help them get on in life. Moreover,
strikes do not support the teaching profession. What we want is a highly valued
and respected profession that takes professional responsibility for what it does.
The strikes are in danger of undermining the well deserved public respect for
teachers.

The recent strikes have been particularly disappointing. They do not command
public support. A recent Populus poll found that 70% of the public do not support
the planned strikes, and, as my hon. Friend pointed out, teachers themselves do
not support them. Less than a quarter of teachers voted in favour of strike action
when they were balloted by the National Union of Teachers and the NASUWT.

I am pleased to say, though, that fewer schools closed than on previous
occasions. In last week’s strike in Yorkshire, the midlands and the east of
England, only a third of schools were fully closed to pupils. That was down to the
hard work and dedication of many teachers and head teachers. By comparison,
60% of schools in the same regions were fully closed in the national strike of
November 2011. That shows that those who seek wholesale disruption of our
schools are losing the argument, and less and less support for such action is
being shown in the classroom. Like my hon. Friend, I encourage teachers and
head teachers in constituencies that could be affected by the forthcoming strike
to keep their schools open. The majority of Britain’s hardworking teachers
understand that strike action is not the right way to express their concerns about education reform, and they need to put pressure on their unions to stop it. The NUT and the NASUWT have identified the issues of pay, particularly performance-related pay, and pensions as an underlying cause of the strikes. Most people get performance-related pay, so the concept is widely understood. It helps to improve performance and retain high-quality personnel. Teaching should be no different. The public understand that. In recent surveys, 61% of the public supported performance-related pay for teachers. Pay reform, which means moving to a performance-related pay system and away from automatic increments based on how long someone has been a teacher, will reward excellence and raise the professional status of teaching. It will help schools to attract high-flying graduates and career-changers, particularly to subjects for which it is difficult to recruit teachers because there are highly competitive jobs available elsewhere.

Schools in challenging circumstances, which often struggle to retain good teachers, can now, because of the additional flexibility that we are giving, use the pupil premium to attract the best staff and make the biggest difference to the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Russell Hobby, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said: “Basing pay progression on performance would bring classroom teachers into line both with head teachers, where it already operates, and with most other sectors”, so the leader of the head teachers’ union has suggested that performance-related pay would help. A recent YouGov poll for Policy Exchange found that nine out of 10 teachers think that the quality of teaching should be a major driver in pay and progression, while only six out of 10 think that years of experience should be a major factor in pay. Many teachers themselves support the changes. The unions should be helping us to work with head teachers to ensure that performance-related pay is implemented in a way that is fair to teachers, rather than calling for strike action, which will not only cause problems for the profession but potentially affect children.

The other issue is pension reform. Changes to teachers’ pension arrangements are in line with changes to public sector pensions in general. We all know that people are living longer, and the cost of public service pensions has increased by a third in the past 10 years to £32 billion. The new teachers’ pension scheme
remains one of the very best available. All the evidence suggests that it does help to attract people into the teaching profession.

The Minister for Schools and the Secretary of State for Education have had extensive discussions with the unions and others involved in education, and the policy direction on pay and pensions is now fixed. As I have demonstrated in my speech, the reforms command broad popular support, and support in principle from the teachers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood made some interesting points about why the teaching unions might be motivated to take strike action for ideological reasons, or for reasons relating to their pay and pensions, which appear to be pretty generous when compared with those of teachers. That is no excuse to damage children’s education, disrupt parents’ lives, which has an ongoing impact on the economy, and bring into disrepute the teaching profession.

We are willing to meet the teaching unions; we are planning to meet them again soon to discuss their concerns. However, we are very clear that the direction that we have set on pay and pensions is right, and it is part of our overall reform package to improve education in this country.

We have great esteem and respect for the role of teachers. All educational research suggests that the quality of teaching is the No. 1 factor in a child’s education that will make the difference between learning and not learning.

However, we have seen this week, in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies study from the OECD, exactly where we are in the skills league table, and during the past decades, our skills have not significantly improved. It is a huge worry that, in key skills such as literacy and numeracy, we have not seen the kind of improvement that those who said that exam grades had improved have claimed.

We face a big issue with our education system. We know that the quality of our education and skills is related to economic growth. We also know that children who do not reach the levels of literacy and numeracy that they need to reach will not get good jobs and will face more danger of being unemployed. Those are critical issues, which is why we have embarked on a wide-ranging series of reforms in education. First of all, there was the academy and free schools programme, to ensure that head teachers have the powers they need to improve results in their school. Secondly, there was our programme to reform exams and the curriculum, to ensure that we are teaching subjects such as mathematics, science and English in a rigorous way. That is why we have reintroduced marks for grammar, spelling and punctuation at GCSE level, and why we have addressed the rampant grade inflation that has been evident in our GCSE
results. However, possibly most important of all our reforms is the way that we are working to recruit the best and brightest to the teaching profession. There are a lot of tales of doom about teaching, but our figures compare very well with those of other countries around the world when it comes to the age profile of teachers. In many countries, those in the teaching profession are close to retirement; that is a particular issue in Germany. Here in England, those in the teaching profession are pretty young. Teach First, a programme that ensures that top graduates are attracted to teaching as soon as they leave university, has been very effective. It is now the biggest graduate recruiter from our universities, and teaching is now seen as an aspirational career by many graduates when they leave university, which is fantastic. I am delighted that this autumn we have been able to extend Teach First to the early years, so we now have teachers who are top graduates straight from university teaching three and four-year-olds.

A recent OECD study compared the rates of pay and pensions of our teachers with those of teachers in other countries. We perform above the average for OECD member countries, so our teachers are well remunerated, as is right, and we need to bear that in mind.

There is so much that we have to work on as a country to ensure that our education system is world class. It is about all the things that I have mentioned: teaching; the way that schools operate; and head teachers having the flexibility to run their school in a way that will deliver results for children. There are so many things that need to be done that it is vital that everybody in the education system works to those objectives. Progress is being made, and we have seen very positive results. For example, the number of girls studying physics and chemistry at GCSE is at a record high, and we have also seen the number of children studying maths and science at A-level go up. When we have these very positive results in our education system, it is very disappointing that there are still those who seek to disrupt that system, rather than help us and work with us on the progress that we are making.

I note that there is a new shadow Education Secretary in position, Tristram Hunt, although I am sad to see that he is not in Westminster Hall today. The former shadow Education Secretary, Stephen Twigg, refused to condemn the strike action; actually, I do not think that he supported or condemned it, but just said nothing about it, even though children’s education was being disrupted. What we need to hear from the new shadow Education Secretary is an answer to this question: does he agree that these strikes should be condemned, and does he agree with us that it is wrong for teachers to go on strike at this important
time in children’s educational careers, or is he in the pockets of the unions, like his predecessor and like the leader of his party? That is a question that I hope the Opposition will answer very soon.

It is very important to have had this debate, and to have discussed these issues at length. It is crucial for our children that they are able to attend school every day knowing that they will receive a good education. The best way of reforming a system is to participate and to have the debate in proper public forums, not to take out frustrations on innocent bystanders—those children and parents who do not have an alternative, including parents who may have to miss a day of work because a school is not open, and children, perhaps from low-income backgrounds, who are learning and who miss a day of their education as a result of this strike action.

I note the positive trend in the proportion of schools staying open. I hope that next week and the week afterwards we will see more schools stay open, and that today’s debate will encourage them to do so.