

ASSOCIATION NEWS – EASTER 2019

Childrens' Mental Health

It was so gratifying to welcome many members to the presentation given in March by Angelina Robin-Jones on tackling Mental Health issues in schools. This is reported in full elsewhere in this Newsletter. It is equally gratifying to learn that free training is being made available during the course of the new financial year for one-day courses in dealing with (not solving) issues about Mental Health. As an Association we are pleased that our lobbying of Government (alongside others of course) is showing some impact. This will still leave cover costs to be handled by school budgets but this will nevertheless enable a significant saving to be made when compared with commercial costs for such courses. As details become clear they will be reported straight away to DAGB reps in all member schools.

Funding

It is 25 years since the Association was first set up and the same length of time since a delegation of our members met with the (then) Secretary of State for Education to raise issues about the levels of funding schools in Dudley were receiving. We are still tackling the self-same problem today – it never stops does it? We have written to the Secretary of State, copied to all five of our local MPs, urging him to find extra funding; we have reminded him that much work is currently being done in schools from our education budget which really should be coming from Health and Social Care budgets and that, whilst we feel a strong moral obligation to do whatever we can to safeguard and support a large number of vulnerable young people, this reduces still further what we have got to spend on mainstream education. He has replied very sympathetically and there are indications that he is beginning to get the message but, as yet, no additional funds are forthcoming. He did acknowledge the point about the Health and Social Care budgets and thanked us for the suggestions that we had made. We are still awaiting responses from some of our MPs but those received so far do indicate a measure of sympathy for our concerns. Whilst we appreciate that sympathy, it does not (as yet) help schools to meet their budgetary demands and we are making sure that the Minister and others are made aware of that.

The Red Box Project

The term 'period poverty' has been coined to reference the situation in which girls and young women cannot afford to buy sanitary products when they menstruate. For most of us, this may be an unthinkable situation but for families living in poverty it can be a reality. We know, from research conducted by the charity Plan International, that this affects something in the order of 10 to 20 per cent of girls from the age of ten years old or so upwards. Under these circumstances girls may even be faced with the choice between paying for a meal or buying sanitary products. They may improvise but with attendant risks

to health. For many they will remain at home for a few days each month which impacts upon their school work and there is also, for a large number, a loss of dignity and self-esteem.

Members will be aware that the Chancellor announced in March that free sanitary products would be supplied for girls in Secondary Schools as from next September. As yet there are no details as to how the system will work, nor where the money will be coming from. As it happens we had already been tackling this same issue with the help of a charity, the Red Box Project, which attracts funding from various sources to provide schools requesting them with (Red) boxes containing a range of sanitary wear at no cost to school or student and guarantees to keep those boxes topped up as necessary. We have so far arranged for ten of our schools to be in receipt of this facility and we are lobbying Ministers in Westminster and local MPs to extend the system to Primary schools as well. We have spoken with schools in other parts of the country which have been using the Red Box scheme for some time and they have confirmed the positive benefits it brings in terms of improved attendance, improved educational outcomes and significant improvements in self-esteem. Even with the new Government initiative we still believe there is a short-term need for Secondary schools to be supplied with Red Boxes and will continue with our efforts to extend the scheme and, insofar as it is within our power, to ensure that the new initiative is at least as good as the Red Box scheme and that the costs are not being taken from other education budgets.

Unregistered Schools

The Government is rightly concerned about the number of students believed to be out of the school system despite being of school age. Nationally this figure is estimated to be about 6,000 but it is very difficult indeed to be accurate but they are being “taught” in schools which are unregistered. The problem is believed to be worst in London and in the West Midlands. This is separate from the 48,000 students who are understood to be home-educated in the U.K. At this point in time we are not aware of the situation in Dudley under either category but we are currently investigating both and expect to be able to provide a report by the next Newsletter.

Nationally there are a number of reasons why some families choose to home educate their children and some undoubtedly do a very good job but there is too much room for the system to be abused which is why the Government are currently consulting on establishing a register of children being home-educated. At the same time Ofsted are investigating unregistered schools and the initial reports do not make for comfortable reading especially as radicalisation may well be on the agenda at some point. In some cases Authorities are actually paying for some of these “schools” to provide education for a number of their children, commonly those who are permanently excluded from legitimate schools. It is rapidly becoming clear that issues of permanent exclusion, alternative provision,

unregistered schools, home education and SEND are to some extent intertwined and that means that work is needed to unravel these issues and to stamp down on bad practice.

In Conclusion

Good luck to all our children as they tackle SATs, GCSE , A level and other examinations this Summer and to our teaching staff for continuing to work tirelessly for children in our local schools against such an unsettled educational climate.

Brian Patterson,
Chair DAGB