

ASSOCIATION NEWS - WINTER 2015

Welcome

I must apologize for failing to include Merlin Joseph in the welcomes in the previous issue – Merlin is Chief Officer, Children’s Services. One assumes that she might well bring a touch of magic to the Borough !!

Congratulations

The very recent announcement of the DfE confirmed figures for Key Stage 2 results for Summer 2015 has put Dudley above the national average for primary schools, with an increase over last year’s figures. Our warmest congratulations to all those who have helped to contribute towards this very healthy position.

Fair Funding Formula

Jim Conway, DAGB Vice-Chair, and I attended the National Governors’ Association Annual General Meeting in London during November. Prior to the afternoon’s AGM we had a conference in the morning at which we had hoped that Sam Gyimah, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education, would speak – his responsibilities include, significantly, funding for schools. Unfortunately he was unable to attend and, apart from a video presentation from the Minister, we had in his stead Tom Goldman, from the DfE School Funding Unit. Whilst it was acknowledged that Tom was “brave to be put on the spot” he made it quite clear that, being a mere eight days away from the date of the formal Spending Review, that he could not divulge any of the contents (a) because nothing had, he said, been agreed as yet and (b) because if he did he would probably be removed from his post.

Nevertheless he did attempt to give an outline of what he was able to say and the problems being faced by the DfE. He did however admit that the DfE had not got the right answer so far to the problems faced by schools and he stated that DfE wanted school governors to help them to get a system in place which was manifestly different from that which currently existed; there were going to be very real financial pressures for schools in the next five years with the effects of inflation, increases in national Insurance and teacher pension contributions etc. He did attempt subsequently to field questions from the 200 or so delegates and I did manage to raise an issue with him. I asked “You spoke of Fair Funding but this has been promised for at least the last decade. It is high time it was delivered. *(This produced significant applause from other delegates)*. My question concerns the primary school sports premium, received for the first time three years ago, when the then Government promised it until 2020. Is this guaranteed, and at the same level?”. Tom responded with “I can’t comment on fairer funding. As for the sports premium, ***don’t assume that the promises of the Coalition Government will all be overturned, but the new administration can’t be bound by these***”.

Subsequently, as we now know, a revised Fairer Funding Formula is promised for 2017-18 and the Minister, Sam Gyimah is reported as saying “It is patently unfair that Knowsley (on Merseyside) received nearly £750 less per pupil than Wandsworth”. We also know that Pupil Premium is to remain at its present level. There is no doubt that it must be extremely difficult to find an ideal method for achieving fairer funding and, with the same sized “pot” any change will lead to there being winners as well as losers. Certainly it looks as if the London Boroughs are likely to be amongst the losers. However, even if Dudley should end up amongst the winners we need to acknowledge that if the “pot” is, as is predicted, the same size then we could well see an effective reduction in its purchasing power of the order of 8% over the course of the current Parliament, so that we may not be that much better off (if at all) in the process although some authorities may find themselves significantly worse off.

It is worth remembering that DAGB was formed, some twenty years ago, when Dudley was the second lowest funded Authority in the country, and when a delegation of governors met with the then Secretary of State for Education to “make the case” for better funding.

Staff Recruitment Issues

Nationally there appear to be serious issues both with staff retention and with recruitment according to the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and this is echoed by other teachers’ unions; naturally enough the Secretary of State, Nicky Morgan, and the DfE paint a very different picture. Most local governors, however, who have been involved with staff recruitment over a number of years, will generally confirm that the number of applications for teaching posts is less ‘than it was’ and it is not uncommon for there to be some difficulty in filling some posts. There is national evidence of a 27% increase in spending on supply staff during the course of the last two years which does appear to substantiate the NAHT statement. Furthermore the fact that the government has been offering bursaries of up to £30,000 per year in order to attract graduates in shortage subjects such as science and mathematics does not suggest that there is an excess of applicants for posts in these subject areas. Equally worrying is the need, so it appears, to recruit teachers from overseas or to use unqualified staff to teach in areas where it has proved difficult to obtain qualified staff. This cannot be in the best interests of students.

We do not know the Dudley position in respect of teacher recruitment as there is no requirement for schools to report on this and the only indications are those from local schools which use the appropriate HR services, so may well exclude the academy sector.

Association Meetings

We are delighted to be able to report that we have secured the Regional Schools Commissioner, Pank Patel, as speaker for a meeting at Saltwells E.D.C. on Thursday March 10th at 7.00 pm. The commissioner’s office is going to be of increasing importance to all

schools and not just to those who are currently academies. We will be arranging for questions for the commissioner to be sent in prior to the meeting and we hope to see a very high turnout for this meeting.

Currently we are also making the arrangements for governors to meet with constituency members of parliament in the New Year and details will be sent out as we start the January term.

A year ago we held a very well-attended meeting dealing with the Primary School Sport Premium. There is to be a follow-up meeting on Friday March 18th at the West Bromwich Albion football ground so please put this date into your diaries as well. The theme will deal with ensuring that the sporting legacy is sustainable into the future and we would encourage every primary governor, especially those with a remit for sport and physical education, to join us all on that afternoon.

In conclusion

As I write Christmas is still around the corner but I realize that it will be 2016 by the time this gets read. Consequently may I wish you all a very happy New Year despite all the challenges that it will surely bring. Get those dates (above) into your diaries and encourage others to join you in attending the events others are in train for later in the year as well.

Thank you for your continuing support for our work.

Brian Patterson,
Chair DAGB