

Association News – Christmas 2013

The real question is deciding just where to start when looking at changes being made within the education sector in this country !!

Universal Free School Meals.

The Autumn Statement made by the Chancellor at Westminster recently confirmed that all children in Reception and in Years 1 and 2 will be entitled to receive a free daily lunch at their school as from September 2014. There are some very convincing arguments for doing this; it is expected to improve overall levels of health, improve children's academic and physical performance, promote positive eating habits, enhance social cohesion, improve concentration and give additional support to families (many children from families with low incomes are not eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and we are advised that 4 out of 10 children, from all age groups living in poverty are not eligible for FSM). The cost to the country is £450 million in the first year of operation and £635 million in 2015 – 2016. In addition the intention is to make available £150 million for the enlargement of dining space and/or kitchen extension to accommodate this provision.

This all sounds welcome and straight-forward but it ignores many practical issues. In many schools, especially the smaller primaries, the school hall doubles up both as the dining room and also as gymnasium – any enlargements will take time to implement and the available money may well not be sufficient for the task – without enlargement it may be necessary to extend the school day to enable lunch to be served to so many – and there appears to have been no consideration given to the necessity for increased expenditure on lunch time staff. The provision of such free meals comes from a report in which Universal free school meals for primary school pupils were a key recommendation in the recent review of school food produced independently for the DfE. [The School Food Plan](#), published by Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent in July this year and which recommended that government should embark on a phased roll out of free school meals for all children in all primary schools. This begs the question as to whether this or future governments might extend the scheme to cover Key Stage 2 children as well. Should this be the case then the extension of dining space and/or kitchen enlargement needs to be addressed with this in mind – however well-meaning the authors of this policy may be, the sheer practicalities are being overlooked.

We are currently seeking further clarification on the implementation of this action and doing our best to ensure that the decision-makers are made fully aware of the real-world situation.

Pupil Premium.

Currently the Pupil Premium is awarded to those, amongst others, in receipt of FSM – there needs to be clarification in the light of the Universal Free School meals, as to exactly how

this will work after next September. As with the earlier topic we are seeking further clarification.

In 2014-15, the total funding will rise to £2.5 billion, with £1300 for primary-aged pupils, £935 for secondary-aged pupils and £1900 for all looked after children, adopted children and children with guardians. Increasingly this is becoming so significant a component in the overall school budget that it is little wonder that Ofsted are expecting governors to be fully conversant with such resource and how it is being used and especially that they monitor the impact of its use in closing the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers

Some one third to one half of the schools in the Borough are engaged from time to time in providing education for GRT children – because of their (potentially high) levels of mobility, and other associated issues, funding is only issued to the schools at which they were registered on the annual census day. As and when they move on to other schools either locally or elsewhere no money follows them, so the receiving schools have to make provision for them with no financial support. This represents a group of (academically) disadvantaged children, many of whom might otherwise qualify in addition for receipt of the pupil premium – clearly this is a serious issue as these children deserve the best education they can get, as with their non-GRT peers. Whilst recognising the difficulties involved in the provision of funding in respect of these youngsters, we do feel that it should be possible to find a mechanism whereby schools should get better funding to assist them without it being taken away from others.

Sport and the Arts

Elsewhere in this Newsletter are articles concerning the Olympic and Paralympic Legacy and the use of Artsmark within schools. We do believe strongly that, if we are going to cater for the needs of ***all*** young people in our schools, we need to provide numerous stimuli and not focus ***solely*** on the academic. It is regrettable that schools have felt themselves forced in many cases to reduce the amount of time given over to sports, to the arts and to music and to move the emphasis even more heavily on what Ofsted are seeking.

Increasingly more of our young people are becoming addicted to video games and to activities which keep them indoors, concentrating on screen-based forms of entertainment and, in the process, missing out increasingly on social interaction and fresh air. It is worth noting that many other organisations are commenting on this and attempting to stem the tide. Notably, but not uniquely, the National Trust has taken up the cudgels and has initiated a project widely advertised at their properties entitled “50 things to do before you are 11 and three quarters”. Many of the “50 things” include some that many of us used to do when we were ourselves young but which are less commonly encountered nowadays. The National Trust website lists these and also introduces Project Wild Thing, another of

their initiatives to get children more connected with the natural world. We would encourage readers to visit this website and investigate the contents to see what could be done for the children in our schools.

Problems with Social Media

More and more frequently these days we read of children being abused, not only in the physical sense but also by way of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Cyber-bullying is a real worry to parents and to teachers and we appreciate how difficult it can be to deal with such a threat. We would urge governors to seek answers within their own schools, being all too conscious that this problem is not only happening during school time – this makes it still more difficult to tackle. There have been several cases in which teaching staff have also been the victims so this is not only restricted to the young. We are attempting to urge senior leaders in the country to do more to protect young people whilst recognising the apparent enormity of the task – any constructive suggestions would be most welcome.

GCSE and League Tables

Changes to “the rules” now mean that if a student attempts a GCSE examination on more than one occasion, their school can only “claim” the first result in the calculation of the annual statistic which measures the achievements of that school. As a direct consequence many schools have withdrawn their November entries so that, hopefully, their students will do better in the Summer than they would have done in the Autumn. Many schools will say, however, that the earlier entry enables the student to acclimatise better in readiness for the later one. Surely that same statistic should be measuring what the student has managed to achieve during their five years in secondary school (and by implication, what the school has managed to achieve) rather than the point when they achieve it?

Children’s Centres Closures

We note that the consultation surrounding the potential closure of a number of the Authority’s Children’s Centres is on-going, despite recent announcements in the press – we sympathise with the Council in its need (externally imposed) to save money but, at the same time, recognise the good work that these Centres do. Do please respond to the Consultation (available through the council website) whether your own school is directly involved or otherwise.

Jane Porter

Most governors will, by now, be aware that Jane, Director of Children’s Services, retired at Christmas. Jane taught in schools across the Borough, was an Ofsted Inspector and became Assistant Director before serving as Interim Director following the departure of John Freeman and later had the same role before being confirmed in the substantive post. Jane

has been a tireless worker in developing education locally and we wish her well in her retirement.

And, Finally

We trust that all of our colleagues had an enjoyable Christmas and we extend to all our very best wishes for a happy and fulfilling New Year. By the time that this is read, 2014 will be upon us, and we will need all our strength and determination to cope with still more changes in the educational landscape, both locally and nationally.

Brian Patterson

Chair, DAGB