

ASSOCIATION NEWS – EASTER 2017

Childrens' Mental Health

On March 23rd in excess of sixty members attended a presentation at Saltwells EDC on the issues surrounding the growing concern over incidences of mental health problems affecting children whilst still at school. We did include an article on this topic in a recent Newsletter and, for those who did not see it, this article is reproduced in the "Previous Articles" section on our DAGB website. The presentation, given by Michele Perry Springer, a senior educational psychologist in the borough, was very well received by those present and, as she is herself a school governor, the content was extremely relevant to our needs. We have recommended to the Local Authority that this should be included as a regular element of the governor training provision in future.

Fair Funding Formula

Many of our members may not have appreciated that the Association was set up, about twenty years ago, partly in response to the level of funding the Authority received from the Government of the day for its educational provision. At the time Dudley was the second lowest-funded Authority in the country and a small group of our governors met with the then-Secretary of State for Education to make the case for better levels of funding. Our position relative to the other 151 Local Authorities has improved (believe it or not) since then and we currently lie just above the level of the F40 group (the group of the forty most poorly-funded Authorities). It would be good to think that our 'improved' position was the result, even if only in part, of that visit.

The mechanism for determining how much funding each Authority receives is totally archaic and this problem has been recognised by Government who have, for the last few years, promised to create a fairer distribution of that funding. So far, so good. However that really means a different way of sharing out the same pot of money, so that, assuming that there are no other factors to consider, we should expect to be rather better off under such a redistribution. Of course in any such approach there are bound to be both winners and losers and a large number of Authorities have baulked at the proposed changes since they would get a reduced share of the same cake. However, there are numerous other factors to take into account in terms of increased expenditure (pay increases, employers superannuation contribution, national insurance contributions, Apprenticeship Levy etc) so that, instead of "winners and losers" there will really end up by being "marginally better-off authorities" and "decidedly-worse-off authorities" and very few of the former. One aspect of the proposed Formula is the increased level of per-pupil funding for secondary school pupils, to the detriment of those in the primary sector. Naturally the Association, along with numerous other bodies, including teachers' unions, has made clear to the relevant Ministers as well as to our own Members of Parliament, our very real concerns about this unacceptable situation. At the time of writing, the consultation on the Fairer Funding

Formula has closed but there are some signs that the Government may have to vary its approach to this – but we all wait in hope. Meanwhile we have invited Ministers to meet with Dudley governors to discuss with us the implications of this upon standards and have indicated our willingness to meet with them in London as an alternative. Significantly the Public Accounts Committee has come out in condemnation of the suggested Formula and we understand also that Parliament’s own Select Committee on Education has expressed similar concerns.

Whilst writing of funding, I have read just now of ways some schools (not in Dudley) have felt it necessary to raise additional funds – I know personally of one school in the Cotswolds which, through the Summer, uses its grounds to provide for tourist car parking and makes a very useful sum in doing so. In the news a few days ago were details of another school which has asked parents to donate office stationery, toilet rolls, cleaning products and the like in order to free up the money budgeted for such purchases to be used for genuine educational purposes. Perhaps the Ministers responsible for our educational systems would care to make a donation?? What an absolutely appalling situation !!!

Taking Holidays in Term Time

Members will doubtless remember the case of a parent in the Isle of Wight who took his child on holiday during the school term and was subsequently fined by the Local Authority for so doing (£60 or £120 if not paid within the relevant time frame) – he challenged this in court and was then cleared of the “crime” based upon the otherwise reasonable level of attendance of his child at the school. This has just been the subject of a High Court decision which has, in its turn, reversed that decision; judges said that the “reasonable level of attendance” in no way justifies the fact that he did take his child away in defiance of current legislation. Whilst this may well “rumble on” in some form or another for a while, it might be useful for governors to discuss this with the senior leadership team at their school so that they have a robust agreed action in respect of such absence.

It seems, based upon statistics just released, that 27% of unauthorised absences in England are specifically the result of parents taking children on holiday during term time. Whilst the law is very clear on this, the issue of determining what constitutes “reasonable” justification is rather different and remains the responsibility of the Head Teacher to determine. The £60 fine constitutes a very blunt instrument in deterring “offenders” and one can well appreciate the issues that parents frequently face in respect of the costs of holidays escalating at certain times of the year. One of the results of those same statistics was to report that parents employed in the leisure/holiday business cannot themselves take holidays other than away from the school holidays – totally understandable of course. It seems that it is going to be very difficult to find an equitable way forward in respect of this issue.

Other current issues

It is gratifying to read that it is now (sic!!!) accepted that the effects of poor standards of behaviour upon educational outcomes has been underestimated in the past – why is it that some things which are so blatantly obvious require expensive research to “prove” them?

At last we are seeing the end of Key Stage 1 testing and greater emphasis will now be placed on Baseline testing. There might however be a measure of concern about the accuracy of such tests bearing in mind the number of reports we are seeing about the degree of lack of preparedness of Reception children for formal education. Too frequently we are hearing of such children coming to school still in nappies and with very poor table manners. Clearly this is a growing social problem but it has a negative effect upon schooling for these youngsters.

Finally the media have recently reported on schools which will not permit children to take toilet breaks during lessons. We are all familiar with the “you should have gone when.....” but perhaps governors might like to check on, and approve, the rules, if any, that apply in their own schools.

We conclude with our thanks to all members for their support and wish everyone a good Summer. Good luck with KS2 and GCSE examinations!!!

**Brian Patterson,
Chair DAGB**