

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

The School of the Future – Learning for the 21st Century. Issues paper

PURPOSE

1. To provide the Committee with a brief indication of the issues that might be considered for the policy review on the school of the future set against the context of existing educational outcomes.

TIMING

2. For the meeting on 24 October. The Committee intends to complete the Review by Easter 2003.

SUMMARY/ RECOMMENDATIONS

3. That the Committee considers the context and issues raised in its review of the school of the future.

BACKGROUND

4. The Committee is beginning a policy review on the School of the Future; terms of reference have been agreed and a reference group is being established. The Committee Secretariat has also consulted schools and other relevant organisations with views sought by the end of November.

CONSIDERATION

Context

5. The evidence shows that we are making real and important progress to deliver on The Learning Country agenda for education and training in Wales. This is being hard won by pupils and practitioners themselves, together with the whole range of stakeholders seeking to put the

interests of learners first. Standards are improving progressively and many learners are achieving well. However, the data also demonstrate that there is plenty yet to do to meet the needs of learners across the board. Some key data in this context is set out below.

Demography

6. At January 2002 there were 510,629 children aged 3 to 16 in Wales, learning in early years or other settings. The number is projected to fall to 458,000 by 2015, levelling out at around 473,000 from 2026. Annex A shows the distribution of age groups projected for 2002 and 2015). Assuming that investment is maintained at existing and planned levels, there is the prospect of continuing to reduce class sizes and increasing the opportunities available to learners in this age group – and others. While projections for teachers are not available over such a span, since January 1997 teacher numbers have risen from 26,500 to 27,452. Of the 2019 schools in Wales in January 2002, 1624 are primary.

Outcomes

7. Standards are good or very good in about 50% of lessons in both primary and secondary schools. The overall attainment of pupils in nearly every core subject and every Key Stage continues to improve year on year notably at KS2. There are fewer schools where less than a quarter of pupils achieve 5 GCSE A* to C. The numbers of 16-year-olds leaving full time education with no recognised qualification in Wales fell to 1122 in 2001 achieving the target for 2002 a year early. This early progress puts the 2004 target of getting the number of pupils leaving without a recognised qualification below 1000, well within reach. 50 percent of pupils now gain at least 5 GCSE grades A*-C. More young people than ever are better prepared for the world of work, training and education. All of this is supported by stronger, bespoke programmes for continuous professional development in Wales, and new provision to enrich pupils' experience at school.

8. By contrast, an estimated 13,300 16 to 18 year olds (12 per cent of the total age group), are not engaged in education, training or employment. Indeed the percentage in full time education has little changed since 1999. Over a thousand pupils leave compulsory education at 16 with no qualifications. There is clear evidence that schools do not meet the needs or aspirations of a significant minority of learners with around a quarter of 15 year olds displaying negative attitudes towards schools and learning Transition management between Key Stages 2 and 3 is under developed. Partly in consequence achievement at Key Stage 3 has plateaued by comparison with that at Key Stage 2; varies sharply between schools; and is less strong than in England. Absenteeism rates at school remain at around 10%.

9. To the extent that children's experience of school is limited or demoralising, the price for individuals and the community is bound to be high. Almost 800,000 people in Wales have low

levels of basic skills. The Future Skills Wales survey reports that half of all employers say many school leavers lack the skills they expect them to have. A third say the same of graduates. School leavers particularly lacked communication skills and graduates, practical experience. The latest evidence shows that there are significant variations in the outcomes achieved by schools working in similar socio-economic environments. It shows that much remains to be done to bring the least well performing schools to the standards of the best and to show the talents of all our children – wherever the communities from which they come.

So what does this mean?

10. Clearly there remain problems of under-performance and under-attainment of such importance. Many present serious challenges for schools. Is it likely that they will be met if one generation of parents and carers succeeds another expecting to recognise the bulk of what children experience? Will they be met if the public treats only the current diet of terms, timetables and learning (much of it based on agrarian and industrial calendars of the distant past) as valid? A new agenda has been set for training and education in Wales, not least through The Learning Country. It is surely inconceivable that its delivery will leave the structure, character and purpose of schools unaffected. Indeed, there must be a question as to whether traditional concepts of the school as an institution will be entirely adequate to cope with the increasing pace of change (be it social, cultural, economic or technological) for the foreseeable future and the concomitant needs of learners. The Committee may wish to consider how far in changes in school shape are themselves necessary and how far they can be given direction with the support of practitioners and other stakeholders to the benefit of learners in all communities in Wales.

Areas for consideration

11. The shape of considerations is broad – and the Committee has invited ‘blue skies’ thinking in any area. The following issues appear to deserve early attention.

Schools as permeable institutions. What goes on outside schools, in partnerships is increasingly important for learning. Schools cannot be as isolated, inward looking, self regarding organisations for the future. The very different needs of pupils cannot all be met in one site or setting. This is something that is important for all children, including those at risk of disaffection. It is also significant if the percentage of pupils who do not think that school is for them is to be reduced. From this perspective, schools are not stand-alone institutions but components of learning networks that are both horizontal (eg linking with voluntary bodies, employers or other providers) and vertical (eg to FE and HE especially over widening access). However, as yet the infrastructure of support, standards of quality, and breadth of provision, are all relatively under-developed. The Assembly Government's consultation paper on learning Pathways for 14-19 year olds will draw attention to this – but the issues arise for younger learners too. In short, how can schools be best supported to become more community and business facing? Should the existing structure of terms and timetables (together with the associated legal framework and staff terms and conditions) be changed substantially so that schools can respond to learners and wider social, needs more flexibly?

Schools as programme platforms. Schools are increasingly funded from a number of different sources. So even though they remain legal entities , and pupils' attendance is required, in principle, the learner's experience of delivery could take place at home, out of hours, during vacations, in partnership settings with employers or other priorities. As in the context of Community Consortia for Education and Training Post-16, what counts are programmes of learning tailored to the needs of individuals and delivered in ways that are fit for purpose. So how far is partnership with other providers (even with service providers outwith training and education on full or part service community models) likely to impact on the current institutional shape of schools? Are there pitfalls to avoid? How far should the structure of the syllabus be tailored to age as opposed to development and achievement? Are strategic alliances, federations or other integrations with other schools or other providers likely to be helpful in spreading best practice and raising standards?

Schools as catalysts. Much is known about how children learn – but the direct application of this knowledge, and the sharing of good practice is not perhaps as strong as it could be. Similarly the implications of performance and other data for pedagogy – for the use of different styles of approach for different needs and contexts – have yet to be reflected in practice to any depth. Techniques to enable pupils to learn how to learn are themselves under developed. In addition there is little discussion of the knowledge, skills, understanding and values, such as bilingualism, that young people will need in 15 to 20 years time – little attention given to what objectives and outcomes need to be fulfilled if the training and education system in Wales is to serve the interests of learners successfully two decades hence. The Committee may wish to consider how all this might best be approached for the years ahead partly in anticipation of the next National Curriculum review.

Schools as organisation and service exemplars. Learners' needs are diverse. They cannot be met by one profession, in that setting, alone. There is no prospect of staffing schools properly over the long term save by increasingly diverse skills mixes, multi-professional development and multi-agency working. Leadership teams will need to shift from a preoccupation with management and maintenance to continuously transforming schools' business systems – just as similar teams in other well-performing services and institutions are doing. It will be necessary to consider what this will mean for staff development, taking full account of STRB recommendations on workload and practice overall. Similar considerations emerge as regards the role of teachers in working with non-QTS staff, supported by administrative and other assistance so that the process of learning can be managed effectively in even more complex delivery systems.

Schools as modern and ICT based learning resources. The Assembly Government's commitment to capital investment for schools has several facets. It is designed to secure a progressive transition from inherited nineteenth century or other worn out and inappropriately located stock, to up to date provision serving evolving educational needs. It is designed to secure facilities appropriate to the delivery of the Curriculum; make wider use of opportunities for community learning; to improve provision for SEN; and to address other community needs for example childcare, family support, and health promotion. If we are to take account of the needs of the next 15-20 years then new build projects and major adaptations now need to take into account of current and future developments in both learning and technology.

This embraces our strategic approach towards capitalising on ICT in schools and treating it as central to achieving a step-change in progress for the future - from ITT to curriculum development; from reaping the potential of the new interactive whiteboard to the building-in of cabling (or wireless networking) at the outset for local area networks with other providers such as HE and FE; from administrative support to practitioners to the introduction of planned distance learning. Given the Assembly's commitment to sustainable development and equality of opportunity for those with disabilities it must also include access and the suitability of materials and technologies in associated capital provision.

CONCLUSION

12. There are major opportunities ahead to narrow the gaps in educational outcome as between localities, and schools serving communities of similar socio-economic characteristics. Effective peer group comparison; the application of best practice; and rigorous attention to the mechanisms of social inclusion are the ways to raising expectations for all – and to building vigorous schools of the future. At the same time there are now opportunities to experiment and innovate in ways suited to the circumstances of Wales, provided by the Education Act 2002. That said, The Learning Country set out the principles underpinning education and training in Wales; whatever shape the school of the future may take, these will endure.

Annex A

Population Projections by selected age ranges

	Projections	
	2002	2015
0 to 3	126.982	130.883
3 to 6	138.163	130.202
3 to 7	173.664	162.585

6 to 14	342.8	292.429
7 to 14	308.29	259.989
8 to 19	508.009	441.899
14 to 19	236.703	212.221
3 to 19	642.278	569.658
3 to 16	525.702	458.334

Sources: