

Children and Young People Committee

CYP(4)-01-11 – Paper 1

Evidence from Minister for Education and Skills

1. Introduction

1.1 Improving the education system in Wales is at the core of this Government's priorities for children and young people. This Government has been clear that we want to drive forward an ambitious, imaginative and radical programme for educational renewal. Three of our key promises centre on improving outcomes for children and families - more frontline spending in schools; doubling the number of children benefiting from Flying Start and tackling youth unemployment. Our ambition is to deliver a great start in life for all Welsh children and our dynamic action plan to achieve this was set out in our manifesto and now defines what we do in Government.

1.2 Education is fundamental to both personal fulfilment and to our national prosperity. However, it does more than shape the life chances of individuals or achieve economic success. Education is also fundamental to building a just, inclusive and fair society.

1.3 It is clear from a number of sources; while there have been significant improvements since devolution, that educational standards in Wales are not as good as they could, or should be and that the system is failing to consistently deliver good outcomes for our young people. In addition to the evidence from PISA, end of key stage and external examination results supports the view that the abolition of performance data publication (league tables) in Wales, has contributed to the growing attainment gap between Wales and England.

1.4 In my view we have three main issues to tackle in Wales – literacy, numeracy and reducing the impact that deprivation has on educational attainment. This means a strong focus on learning, accountability, collaboration and maximising the potential of the teaching workforce.

1.5 As such, I welcome the opportunity to set out for the Committee my vision and priorities for the next 18 months in relation to the responsibilities I have for children and young people.

2. Accountability

2.1 In February I set out a comprehensive programme of school improvement in a 20-point action plan, to raise the bar on the standard of education that is delivered in Wales.

2.2 I also commissioned a report on the Structure of Education Service in Wales, undertaken by an independent Task and Finish Group, Chaired by Viv Thomas. This review took a forensic look at the performance of providers at all levels: schools, colleges, local authorities, regional and national organisations. The group found examples of exceptional achievement but also a disappointing degree of inconsistency in quality.

2.3 One of the issues clearly identified in Wales is the capacity problems deriving from very small authorities and it is blatantly clear that we need to be working on a far more collaborative basis. There also needs to be transparency in the system, so that at all levels we account for the performance of our learners and are challenged, where things are not going well. Where progress is not made we will use interventions and powers, in an appropriate and consistent manner. Estyn reports variability in the level and effectiveness of challenge that local authorities provide to their schools, with local authorities generally effective at responding to failure. But many are less effective at preventing poor inspection outcomes and at challenging their schools to strive for excellence.

3. Raising School Standards

3.1 To focus on standards I have established a Schools Standards Unit to drive through improvement in the whole system. The Unit will work in partnership at all levels of the education sector to identify strengths and weaknesses, share good practice and support improvement.

3.2 The Unit is collecting and analysing crucial information and system knowledge to build a shared understanding of historical performance, trends, patterns, benchmarks and of what excellence looks like.

3.3 The unit will work with Consortia and use stock-takes to review performance and identify priority actions. There will be regular interaction with consortia/local authorities to agree progress and actions to support improvement. Pilot stock-takes are currently taking place, with more formal stock-takes due to take in the autumn.

3.4 The Standards Unit is also developing a banding system designed to give us a clearer focus on educational performance and progress.

3.5 Banding is about grouping our schools according to a range of factors to identify priorities for differentiated support, as well as those from whom the sector as whole can learn. Attendance will be included alongside other measures of school performance in the banding exercise to ensure that there is a focus in this area. There will be a zero tolerance of truancy. The most important aspect of this process will be the support, challenge and sharing of best practice that follows and will help ensure that we direct our resources most effectively to where they are needed most.

3.6 We will support the banding process with the development of a framework and statutory guidance on school improvement, which will be key to delivering long term, sustainable improvements. Schools will be expected to progress targets for all pupils so that all students make one year of educational progress in a calendar year. We will expect all schools to set targets for continuous improvement by the end of the year.

4. Education Structures are effective and efficient

- We will work with ADEW on strengthening Local Authority/Consortia school interventions and ensure that the Schools Causing Concern Guidance is amended by the end of the year.
- Estyn's New Common Inspection Framework is beginning to bite. This evidence will provide information that will be used alongside the data analysis of the SSU.
- We will ensure that all schools embrace the principles of collaboration through mechanisms such as Professional Learning Communities, through the terms and conditions of the School Effectiveness Grant. We will require Local Authorities to outline how they are achieving this by the end of 2012.
- We also expect LAs to participate in consortia arrangements or suffer financial penalties.
- We will identify financial savings through regional collaboration and divert to the front line by the end of 2012.

5. Schools and Governing Bodies

- All schools will produce an annual public profile containing public performance information to a common format by the end of September 2012. We will also expect school development plans to set out how they reach approved standards based on inspirational targets we will set for education in Wales. These must be endorsed by the governing body. The first plans will be published in relation to planning for the 2012-2013 academic year.
- Governors play a vital role in the school system and are a key resource to a school. In recognition of this all new governors will undergo induction training and all chairs of governors will be trained in relation to chairing and using data from September 2011. Local authorities will provide a clerking service and secure training for clerks.
- Schools will also be asked to demonstrate that Governing Bodies have considered family of schools data and other relevant performance data and has set in place plans for improvement in the 11-12 academic years. This will also be necessary to ensure that a school will have a successful Estyn inspection and I have already written to Governing Bodies in relation to the need to publish an annual report.
- We have already put in place legislation regarding Governing Bodies and we expect to see more federation schools under single governing bodies. Progress is already being made with the five federation pilots that have been established.
- We will be seeking to legislate in relation to school closure decisions and at what level those decisions are taken, with a view to enabling more decisions to be taken locally and more quickly than current arrangements.
- We will also ensure that we increase spending on education by 1% above the block grant allocation. We also welcome the commitment by the WLGA to raise the amount of funds delegated to schools to 85%.

6. Literacy and Numeracy

6.1 Literacy and numeracy are fundamental skills. These skills are not at the level that they need to be and so a number of actions are in place to ensure that there is improvement in learners' performance in these areas:

- The Foundation Phase has been widely praised across the sector and is supported by parents. However we need to ensure that it does not in anyway lead to a relaxation in literacy standards. As such a baseline assessment of each child's development needs will be carried out when they enter Foundation Phase and used to inform their future learning needs.
- We will be establishing a new National Literacy and Numeracy Framework. This will be for learners 5-14. National literacy and numeracy tests will complement these frameworks and will exemplify how pupils are performing against national criteria at the end of each academic year. It will enable schools and both parents/carers to see how they can best support our children to the best of their ability.
- This will achieve a greater consistency in teacher assessments. This will ensure that there is continuous assessment that addresses variability in teaching practice. These will be in place in the autumn of 2012 for Literacy and Numeracy.
- We have produced and recently published a National Literacy Plan focusing on 7-11 year olds, with programmes for catch-up reading and for stretching the highest ability pupils. In addition a National Reading Test will be in place for academic year 2011-2012 in both English and Welsh.
- We will also develop a National Numeracy Plan that introduces a National Numeracy Test for academic year 2012-2013.
- Following on from the PISA 2009 results and the identification of a need for more practical application of skills, we intend to integrate internationally recognised assessments of transferrable skills for learning into school assessments at age 15. As such, all schools have been urged to focus on skills-based teaching of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving.

7. Teaching Workforce

7.1 It is important that the Welsh Government, Local Authorities and Consortia support teachers and raise the esteem in which they are held.

7.2 We need to produce better qualified teachers who can deliver more effective teaching and learning in the classroom, to improve outcomes for learners. It is vital to share best practice and the identification of system leaders and the active participation in Professional Learning Communities will be important in both progressing and sustaining educational improvement.

7.3 Head teachers are fundamental in driving improvements and we will provide them with the support and tools to raise standards in their schools. We are consulting on changes to the performance management arrangements for Head teachers. For all teachers, performance management will link Professional Standards and Continuing Professional Development to ensure these elements work more effectively to drive improved teaching and learning.

7.4 All practitioners regardless of their specialist area, will need to demonstrate excellent literacy and numeracy skills. One INSET day per year will focus on literacy and numeracy for all teachers.

7.5 A number of measures are also currently being developed to strengthen Induction and Early Professional development for all newly qualified teachers in Wales. These will include:

- amending the Practising Teacher Standards so that literacy and numeracy are embedded within the standards (from September 2011);
- directing the Induction and EPD funding at the core priorities of literacy; numeracy; reducing the gap between poverty and attainment; behaviour management; ALN; and reflective practice (from September 2011)
- revision of the Induction regulations and Newly Qualified Teacher assessment arrangements to ensure that the Induction and EPD programme is focused on literacy and numeracy (from September 2012);

In addition we are:

- reviewing the role and functions of the GTCW to ensure that the needs of all educational practitioners in Wales are best served.
- working on building a bank of resources on high quality teaching strategies to support all educational practitioners. This will be developed during the forthcoming academic year and be available on the Welsh Government website for teachers in Wales to use to inform their practice;
- placing a strong focus on high reliability teaching practices with a new focus on the content of teaching within the School Effectiveness Framework. Through quality resources and exemplification, practitioners will be encouraged to improve their pedagogical skills, especially in literacy and numeracy;
- developing a practice and research based Masters Programme for teachers to undertake early in their career to improve the quality of teaching practice to start in September 2012.

7.6 It is also important that we aim to change the culture of Continuing Professional Development by developing a system that ensures that teachers work together, as part of their day-to-day practice and work to support the development of excellent teaching through Professional Learning Communities.

8. Infrastructure

8.1 The Government is committed, with local authorities and others, to improve the education and training estate in Wales. The 21st Century Schools transitional and other capital funding has committed over £477m from 2009-10 to 2014-15, supporting 66 projects from primary schools to universities.

8.2 The transitional funding programme was implemented as a precursor to the 21st century schools programme, part of a unified capital fund for all education capital funding.

8.3 The reduction in capital provision as a result of the reduced budget to the Welsh Government has meant that the timing of Welsh Government contribution to projects has been re-profiled and officials are in ongoing discussions with local authorities to programme in commencement and funding of projects.

8.4 In Digital Wales, we committed to continuing to support learning through ICT – ensuring that our teachers and young people have the skills to operate effectively and safely in the modern digital world.

9. Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Reform Agenda

9.1 We are aiming to reform the existing system of statements for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). My Department has commissioned pilot projects, established in partnership with eight local authorities and other key stakeholders, to consider a range of alternatives to the current statutory framework. These pilots are scheduled to end this year and an evaluation report and cost benefits analysis will follow at the start of 2012.

9.2 Legislation will be needed to take forward any changes and it is intended that we will also transfer, from Welsh Ministers to local authorities, responsibility for delivery of existing duties contained within the Learning and Skills Act 2000 for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities aged over 16 who are placed in a specialist FE setting.

9.3 In addition, consideration is being given to transferring funding to local authorities for post 16 SEN provision in special schools and out of county placements, and additional support for post-16 SEN in mainstream schools, from specific grant to Revenue Support Grant (RSG).

9.4 The net result of these changes will be a coherent pattern of services led by consortia of local authorities to provide multi-agency services based on the needs of the learner as close as possible to their home.

10. Legacy Report

10.1 The Committee in its Legacy Report recommends that the issue of inadequate and poorly maintained school toilet facilities is subject to on-going scrutiny in the Fourth Assembly.

10.2 The Welsh Government recognises the concerns articulated in the "Lifting the Lid" report and is committed to taking action to address these, within the current accountability framework whereby responsibility for the provision of adequate and sufficient toilet facilities for pupils rests, in the main, with Local Authorities.

10.3 To this end, Welsh Government officials are working with local authority colleagues and representatives of the Children's Commissioner for Wales to produce best practice guidance for responsible authorities to assist them in discharging their responsibilities to keep their facilities clean and well-maintained.

10.4 That guidance has been consulted upon and is being finalised with a view to being published by the autumn. In support of this, the Welsh Government has also undertaken the "Mind the Germs" and "Teach Germs a Lesson" campaigns to raise the profile of hygiene in schools, and other education and childcare settings, to ensure that children and those responsible for them are informed and supported to use the facilities hygienically and effectively.

10.5 In the past the Welsh Government has provided formula funding for local authorities for general repair and maintenance alongside their own general capital funding, which they could use to address the need to refurbish and improve school toilet facilities and we expect that local authorities will continue to commit funding to this in the future within the wider context of their capital investment plan. The Welsh Government ensures that any new build it funds complies with good practice and relevant regulations in its building specifications, including in relation to school toilets.

11. Conclusion

11.1 I have set out in this Paper the key delivery actions that are in place or being developed which will improve the standard of education in Wales. Given the breadth of the education portfolio and the important role it plays to wider WG commitments, I have not been able to capture all the work underway in all areas. Should the Committee wish, I will provide additional information.

11.2 There is no time for complacency at any level of the education system by either elected members, administrators or the teaching workforce. Learners are of paramount importance and deserve the best. However what has struck me is the willingness and motivation from all those involved in the provision of education in Wales to drive change forward and see improvement.

11.3 With collaboration across the sector and a determined and continued focus on standards of education in Wales, I am convinced that we will ensure better outcomes for learners in Wales and would welcome the Committee's input into taking this forward.