

Alun Davies AC/AM  
Gweinidog y Gymraeg a Dysgu Gydol Oes  
Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-735  
Ein cyf/Our ref ARD/05537/16

Mike Hedges AM  
Chair - Petitions Committee  
National Assembly for Wales  
Ty Hywel  
Cardiff Bay  
Cardiff  
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3 January 2017

Dear Mike

Thank you for your letter of 7 December to the Cabinet Secretary for Education, seeking views on petition P-05-735 'Make Foundation Phase more effective for our children, provide more teachers and abolish Year 2 stats'. This has been passed on to me for response as early education provision falls within my portfolio.

I welcome Ms Osborne's statements that she and her colleagues love the ethos of the Foundation Phase. This is something that came out strongly from the independent evaluation of the Foundation Phase. The Foundation Phase is based on approaches in Scandinavian countries and we know from the evaluation that the approach also works in Wales and has led to improvements in attainment and attendance. The Foundation Phase was also identified as a particular strength of the curriculum by Professor Graham Donaldson in his wider review of the curriculum and assessment arrangements, particularly the aspect of experiential learning which will be a key element for all ages in the new curriculum which we shall be implementing across Wales from 2021.

The Welsh Government clearly stated its ongoing commitment to the Foundation Phase in Taking Wales Forward. Given the cut in public spending from the UK Government there remain challenges in maintaining funding for all public services. However, we have demonstrated our commitment to the Foundation Phase by retaining the funding for local authorities to be able to fund the enhanced adult to pupil ratios which are needed for the Foundation Phase.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

The Foundation Phase ratios were set in order to enable delivery of the Foundation Phase curriculum and its pedagogy, as evidence showed that high staff to pupil ratios are needed to deliver the approach of structured, active educational play and experiential learning, through outdoor as well as indoor learning.

The staff to pupil ratios are as follows:

- 1: 8 for 3 - 5 year-olds (Nursery and Reception classes); and
- 1:15 for 5 - 7 year olds (Year 1 and Year 2).

The terms and conditions of the Education Improvement Grant (EIG), the funding source for maintaining staff to pupil ratios, stipulate that the funding must be used to support the requirement to work towards Foundation Phase staff to pupil ratios as part of a high quality and effective Foundation Phase curriculum.

I recognise the importance of ensuring that the workforce has the necessary skills and knowledge to be excellent Foundation Phase practitioners. As Ms Osborne points out in her petition, training is important as a specific tool but it is more important that we consider a variety of approaches to professional learning, which fit in with a wider approach of practitioners in schools and nurseries learning from each other in a self-improving system. This is a more integrated and sustainable approach which will embed development at a deeper level and this will become increasingly important as we move towards implementing a new curriculum from 2021. Foundation Phase practitioners are also able to access the Progress for Success European Structural Funds programme which provides support for anyone in the early years, childcare and play workforce to up-skill in recognised sector qualifications at Levels 2 and 3.

I must clarify that the National Reading and Numeracy Tests taken by learners in years 2 to 9 are not the same as the SATs tests that are taken by learners in England, neither is the purpose of our tests to make comparisons between children in Wales and those in England. First and foremost, the aim of the National Reading and Numeracy Tests is to help schools across Wales assess their learners' reading and numeracy skills and gain a clearer insight into learners' development and progress. The age-standardised score from each test shows how well each learner has done compared to others of the same age in Wales. The diagnostic information from the tests is used alongside other forms of assessment to allow teachers to identify strengths and areas for improvement. The results of the tests are not included in the set of performance measures for primary schools or secondary schools in Wales. In England, by contrast, primary schools are ranked by their learners' test scores.

The Welsh Government always stresses to schools and parents that learners should not practice for the tests and that a broad and balanced curriculum must be maintained throughout the school year, including leading up to and during the test period. Schools that engage in drilling their learners for the tests are going against the guidance issued by the Welsh Government which states that teaching to the tests and overemphasis on preparation is unacceptable.

We do know from the evaluation that there is inconsistency in delivering the Foundation Phase according to its full pedagogical principles. This is something that we are addressing and we set out our approach to doing so in our Foundation Phase Action Plan which was published in November 2016.

The Action Plan, developed through an expert group of key stakeholders, sets out our vision and aims for early education over the next few years - to embed high-quality Foundation Phase pedagogy and practice in order to give children the best possible start in their education. It sets out a national approach to continuously improve the way in which our Foundation Phase curriculum for three to seven year olds is implemented and delivered in our schools and nurseries.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alun', with a horizontal line underneath it.

**Alun Davies AC/AM**

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