

Nicky Morgan MP
& Nick Gibb MP

Mr Steve Hitchcock
St Peter's C of E Primary School
Moor Lane
Budleigh Salterton
Devon
EX9 6QF

On Behalf of a group of Devon,
Plymouth & Torbay Primary Schools

May 31st 2016

Dear Mrs Morgan and Mr Gibb,

We are writing, as a large group of primary school headteachers from Devon, Plymouth and Torbay to ask that you act now to put a stop to the chaos and resulting damage that your Government is currently inflicting upon children, families and staff involved in education in this country. We call into question the quality of political leadership and lack of coherent vision of the current Government.

As a group of headteachers from successful schools we would like the Government and the Department for Education to consider the following improvements to the education system:-

1. Reassess your approach to Initial Teacher Training allocations.

We are pleased to see that the White Paper recognises the need to alter the current allocations system that has led to such uncertainty and concerns over sustainability this year.

We suggest that the following criteria are applied when allocations are made:

- a. Quality of Ofsted grade.
- b. Demonstrable capacity to recruit to allocated numbers based on previous 3 year recruitment level.
- c. High employment rates over a 3 year period that indicate meeting employers' needs.
- d. A partnership agreement between a viable number of schools, for example a minimum of 10 schools, to train a minimum number (20) trainees and a SCITT/HEI that demonstrates that it is school-led provision with Ofsted accountability.
- e. Allocations are made for a period of 3 years to increase business viability and planning. Mechanisms to alter allocated levels can be reviewed in exceptional circumstances based on demonstrable need, supported by a strong business case or poor performance to be built into this 3 year cycle.

2. Acknowledge and address the serious teacher recruitment crisis and the reasons for it, including the haemorrhaging of teachers and leaders from the profession due to excessive workload and changes to pay and conditions.

As headteachers in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay we are now receiving a fraction of the applications to teaching/leadership posts that we once enjoyed. The overall quality of prospective candidates for teaching posts is diminishing and this is taking place now. None of the measures put in place by the current Government are impacting on this issue. It is not just about numbers, but the quality of graduates. The recent Department for Education workload review is simply too little and too late. Graduates, with university fees to repay and high housing costs, are choosing to enter other professions where conditions of employment are better. Experienced teachers and leaders are leaving or retiring early without high quality teachers and leaders to replace them. Surveys such as the independent research by ComRes 2013/14 state:-

- over half of teachers (52%) say that they have seriously considered leaving their current job in the last 12 months and nearly half (47%) have seriously considered leaving the profession.
- two fifths of teachers (41%) say their job satisfaction has decreased in the last 12 months.
- teachers' biggest concern regarding their job is workload (79%), followed by pay and pensions (66%), changes or reforms in the curriculum (59%) and school inspections (51%). The vast majority of teachers (86%) say that their workload has increased in the last 12 months.

Children and school leaders deserve the best quality graduates in their schools if the vision of a world class education system is to be realised.

We suggest you:

- a. Commission an independent review of teacher pay and conditions to redress the teacher and leadership recruitment crisis.
- b. Incentivise a higher proportion of high performing graduates into teaching. (It is not merely a question of graduate applicants, but also the quality).

3. Reassess the vision for pupil assessment and testing.

Although we believe we should have the highest expectations for children's learning, we do not believe it is helpful to push more and more until these become unrealistic and impact on the breadth of the primary curriculum. The world needs artists, athletes, dancers, musicians, mechanics, scientists etc. These foundations are laid in primary schools, but curriculum time is increasingly under siege narrowing the primary timetable in favour of mathematics and literacy. In the pursuit of PISA league table positions, we are losing sight of any considered vision and of our focus on the purpose of learning.

The purpose for primary education is to establish not only secure foundations in learning, particularly of English and Mathematics skills, but also to develop a love of learning so that pupils move on to secondary education with the right skills and motivation to tackle an even more challenging curriculum. To secure a level of mastery, pupils need sufficient time to practise and embed their skills, but with the vast amount of content that needs to be covered, it is a real challenge to ensure sufficient time. Many parents will question why we are so obsessed with teaching their children the core subjects.

Teachers do not want to teach to tests but, with a punitive accountability regime, it is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid. Formal SATs testing does not help either teachers or pupils to attain higher standards. Our young children are among the most tested in Europe. Parents are questioning why their young children need to sit so many tests and at such a young age.

We suggest you:

- a. Treat 2016 as a pilot year for the New Curriculum and ensure that data from these tests is not reported nationally or used to create league tables. Individual results should be reported to parents only.
- b. Listen to schools about a more appropriate level of expectation in the core curriculum, allowing us time to teach to fewer objectives more effectively, which would also provide time to teach a broad and balanced curriculum.
- c. Review SATs testing and the whole primary assessment system. Teachers should be trusted to assess children using teacher assessment systems. It would be more appropriate to invest time in teaching, including teacher assessment, rather than testing. Teacher assessment can be quality assured through external moderation and Ofsted. You can use this for accountability purposes.
- d. Abandon all forms of centralised baseline assessments for 4 year olds. Teachers should assess children using their own methods and not subject pupils to tests in their first months at school.

- e. Do not introduce any more tests. The proposed times tables test at the end of Key Stage 2 will add yet more stress to 10 and 11 year olds, who are assessed on their arithmetic skills anyway.

4. Address the current funding crisis which is threatening to undermine the quality of our provision.

The Government says it wants fairer funding but you are imposing real term cuts on our schools now. This financial year we all face significant additional costs relating to higher employer pension and National Insurance contributions (for an average-sized primary school this could amount to extra costs of over £30k). The Government's freeze on overall school funding will cut the real value of funding per pupil by an estimated 8% during this parliament. There is nothing fair about cutting school funding overall, or about allocating additional resources to some schools by cutting funding for others. Small and rural schools face an uncertain future as they are less viable.

We suggest you:

- a. Replace this proposed redistribution of an inadequate and dwindling education budget with a proper assessment of the funding needs of our schools. All schools will be losing staff, cutting back on resources and training budgets. Parents will want to know why.
- b. Recognise the impact of the current funding crisis on small schools and make informed and transparent decisions which acknowledge how your policies will affect their future.

5. Acknowledge the impact of current educational and social policies on our most vulnerable pupils and their families and ensure, in future, that prioritising the development and delivery of high quality support for pupils with Special Educational Needs is facilitated by the system and is genuinely encouraged and rewarded.

We fully embrace our responsibility to promote pupil wellbeing and to meet the often diverse and complex needs of every child. Despite the additional workload incurred, we have stepped in to mitigate the impact of the reduction of support from other agencies as austerity measures have been implemented. The current primary assessment system does not acknowledge the wide variety of additional needs pupils have and that many pupils will not pass or reach the national benchmarks. Many pupils with significant needs will not reach national standards and are being marginalised by being labelled as 'not making the grade'. Any decent society protects the vulnerable. Currently, being inclusive jeopardises our ability to perform effectively against the external accountability measures you have put in place.

We suggest you:

- a. Revitalise support services so that we can be confident that our children and families have access to the help they need to address their mental health, social care, financial and housing needs, thus enabling us to focus on our core business of teaching and learning.
- b. Recognise that the progress of children with additional needs does not run parallel to that of children without additional needs and that judging attainment against standard 'age related' expectations, or relative incremental improvements, will invariably marginalise these children and penalise inclusive schools.
- c. Recognise the challenges we are facing as a result of changes to SEND systems and address the constant battle we currently have to engage in (via reams of paperwork), in order to access the funding and support our children are entitled to.

6. Acknowledge and respect the expertise of educational professionals across the spectrum and stop imposing on them endless new initiatives which do little to improve provision for our children.

In the last 5 years, there have been over twenty new initiatives or changes, with no evidence that they effectively raise anything, except workload for schools. Most fundamentally, the Government shows no sign of recognising that there is a huge gap between its rhetoric of 'raising the quality and status' of the teaching profession, and the daily experience of schools. Teachers are struggling to cope with huge workloads, leading to demoralisation and exhaustion. In devising its policies, the Government shows little regard for our knowledge or expertise.

We suggest you:

- a. Ensure that the Department for Education's protocol which promises a year's lead-in time for Government initiatives is properly applied and ensure all policies undergo a rigorous workload impact assessment.
- b. Go further than just developing an independent 'College of Teaching' and instead devolve full responsibility for national policy to those that know education best. If you are serious about a school-led system, then you need to change the balance. Processes and policies should come from schools, which is the antithesis of your current approach. For instance, when a new National Curriculum and assessment system is devised it ought to be based upon proven educational research and kept in place for a period of 7 years. If research indicates prior to this time that it needs amending then this should be decided by educational experts outside of the political system. During the 7 year period, research should continue to be conducted and new methodologies and pedagogies trialled. If further change is required at the end of 7 years it can then be based on the outcomes of this research.
- c. Do more to deliver workload solutions for the profession. This would show you respect and acknowledge the work we do. The three reports released this spring will not make the inroads into teacher workload that are necessary. We agree that the marking report should be adhered to by all schools. However, the planning report misses the point. We already try to adhere to the recommendations made but we currently have insufficient funds for adequate non-contact time and for the resources needed to plan properly for each lesson. In which other profession do employees prepare their work in their evenings and at weekends? The data report acknowledges the problems we are facing but has failed to deliver real solutions. With the high stakes accountability system in place and a mastery curriculum with excessive objectives to cover, schools will continue to be slaves to producing unnecessary evidence and data. The current demand for this has been most recently demonstrated by the KS2 exemplification materials released by your own department!

We agree that children and young people should attend schools with the highest expectations and wish to work with you to secure the best possible outcomes for our children whilst ensuring they have the opportunity to enjoy their time at primary school.

It is time this country trusted and allowed the profession to develop a clear vision for a world class education, focusing the system on outcomes for children and young people.

We look forward to your prompt, written response to each of our suggestions.

Yours sincerely,



Steve Hitchcock

Headteacher of St Peter's C of E Primary School, on behalf of the following schools;

Newport Community School Primary Academy
Withycombe Raleigh C of E Primary School
Pilton Infants' School
Marwood Primary School
Ottery St Mary Primary School
St Martin's School, Cranbrook
Shiphay Learning Academy
Kenn C of E Primary School
Kenton Primary School
Dartington C of E Primary School
Pinhoe C of E Primary School
The Topsham School
Chudleigh C of E Community Primary School
Sidmouth C of E Primary School
Alphington Primary School
Elburton Primary School
Ilfracombe C of E Junior School
Appledore School
Woodlands Park Primary School
West Hill Primary School
Shaldon Primary School
South Molton Community Primary School
Bovey Tracey Primary School
Goosewell Primary School
South Brent Primary School
Stockland C of E Primary Academy
Thornbury Primary School
Clyst Heath Primary School
Bratton Fleming Community Primary School
Holywell C of E Primary School
Bishops Tawton Primary School
Yeo Valley Primary School
St Sidwell's Primary School & Nursery
Feniton Primary school
Tipton St John Primary School
Ermington Primary School
Ugborough Primary School
Exminster Primary School
Sandford School
Bidwell Brook School
Ellen Tinkham School
Horwood & Newton Tracey Community Primary School
Chulmleigh Primary School
Great Torrington Bluecoat C of E Primary School
Exeter Road Primary school, Plymouth

Sherwell Valley Primary School, Torbay
Caen Community Primary School, Braunton
Lynton CE(VA) Primary School
Parracombe CE(VC) Primary School
Kentisbury Primary School
Goodleigh C of E Primary School
Ilfracombe Infant and Nursery School
Buckland Brewer Community Primary School
Parkham Primary School
Winkleigh Primary School
Monkleigh Primary School
Swimbridge CE Primary School
Shebbear Community School