

28 July 2014

Dear Education Secretary

Please Think About How Best to Support Education and Teacher Professionalism

There must be something very liberating and exciting about being the new education secretary; there are so many chances for you to make a real difference and to change some of the unhelpful things that have been happening in education over the last few decades. I have been working as a teacher and manager in schools and colleges for over twenty years now: for ten of those years I have been involved in teacher education too, in a number of Universities. I am now a doctoral researcher in education, investigating teacher professional identity. I talk to teachers in all kinds of schools who are working with our young people on a daily basis, and I see the lived realities of teachers' lives. My work and research with teachers in secondary schools and colleges has established some important facts. Firstly, and I know this is something that you, the rest of the government, and every parent will be pleased about: the majority of the teachers in our schools are motivated by a genuine desire to do their best for children. Teachers are not always happy that what their experience shows is 'best' is the same 'best' or 'outstanding' as Ofsted's definitions, or as league tables measure. However they try, for children's sake, to satisfy the league table requirements as well as to meet the needs of our young people. Secondly, we know from the findings of the teacher workload survey, which were published in February 2014, that teachers work long hours. They work 50 or more hours a week (more for head teachers). It's because of that fact that teachers get fed up with the jokes about twelve weeks' holiday a year, and finishing at 3pm every day. My own work has found that as well as working these long hours, teachers spend much of their own money on schools. A head in a primary school was telling me recently that she had spent over £5000 in one year to buy necessary equipment for her school. That was paid out of what is already a relatively small salary. There is no chance of ever claiming that back. Thirdly, teachers also reported their worry about being micromanaged. They reported that they were unable to be creative and responsive to the needs of students because of the constraints of tests and examination specifications. They also felt that there were frustrating constraints placed on them by managers who were trying to enact government policy in meaningful ways. Some teachers are concerned that performativity, and performance related pay, are used as sticks. They are concerned that policy 'games' mean that education is moving out of the control of those who know about pedagogy and education, and into the control of commercial enterprises, often with their own commercial agendas. Teachers feel that their professionalism is undermined and eroded, that their creativity and judgment are ignored, and that they are not valued. You will have seen the strength of this feeling on the recent strike day, on social media and in feedback from constituents and other MPs, and it must be a concern. There are a number of things that would help. First of all, finance education properly. We need smaller schools, small class sizes, and teachers who have the time to do their jobs and the pay which reflects the responsibilities they have as professionals. We need well-resourced schools and classrooms. Secondly, accept and understand that learning is not linear. It is the nature of learning that it isn't linear; rather, it is a multifaceted process which is affected by factors which are both close to and at a distance from an individual student's life. Their background,

their relationships, family support, their friendships, all impact on learning, in complex and often surprising ways. Please accept that, and acknowledge it in some of the measures of performance and success which are often used, and which at the moment are often low in validity: they may not be measuring what you think they are measuring. As well, please don't measure the unmeasurable. In thinking about this you might want to remember the letter from the head of Barrowford Primary School, in Nelson Lancashire, to the year 6 leavers. That letter went viral for a reason. Children are so much more than the sum of their test results; we should celebrate the fact that they do other things that make them into fully rounded, responsible human beings: they are not just the products of test factories. Finally, value teachers' professionalism. Teachers train hard for a long time to become professionals, and subsequently engage in many hours of continuous professional development. A theme that comes out in my research is that teachers always say that they never stop learning, in, about and for their classrooms. They are experienced in pedagogy, in teaching, in learning, in developing our children. Please listen to them; accept that at the moment they are underpaid and devalued, and change that. It would be foolish to suggest that every teacher is great. In my experience and research however, I have found that the very large majority are indeed great. Many are unsung heroes. Some who are less than great need support and time, not punitive performance management regimes, micromanaging and increasing levels of stress. Believe and trust teachers. Support and reward teachers. Please. Doing that could be the start of the most important period of office a Secretary of State for Education has ever had.

Yours faithfully

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