

28 July 2014

Dear Education Secretary

### **The Future of Teaching and the School Curriculum**

I write as a teacher and school leader of many years' experience of working in maintained schools in the West Midlands. I continue to work as an adviser to schools and am chair of governors in a sponsored academy. I am also studying for a professional doctorate at the University of Manchester; my research theme is school leadership. I am greatly concerned by the way in which Secretaries of State have used their powers to dictate, or to change at short notice, the content of the curriculum and the way in which it is taught. Whether a government minister wishes to send every school a copy of the King James Bible or The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, it is an unnecessary intrusion into a school's right to determine what is appropriate for the communities that it serves. In the last twenty years, politicians in Conservative, Labour and Coalition governments have appeared to be convinced that the only way to improve the quality of provision in public services is to introduce market principles developed in the private sector. That in itself is worthy of challenge, when numbers-driven performance measures are unquestioningly given precedence over professional expertise and judgement. But even within that context, education is at particular risk of political intervention. Transport ministers do not personally instruct the construction industry as to which material it should use to build a new motorway. Health ministers do not tell doctors which medical procedures to use to treat liver disease. Yet successive Secretaries of State for Education have increasingly taken upon themselves the powers to dictate to professionals how they should teach and what children and young people should learn. The value of subjects is judged by their economic functionality. The staging of learning is determined by the apparent belief that if this country is below another country in whichever league table is currently fashionable, then the solution is to teach children more things, earlier. I recently attended a conference for teachers at which a senior official of your Department talked about the latest version of the history curriculum. With commendable honesty, he said 'there's nothing about progression or skills development, it's 'teach this, teach that': it's just a list of stuff'. I hope that during your term of office you will talk of teachers' responsibility rather than just of their accountability. I hope that you will trust those with training, experience and a research base to develop a curriculum that is not 'a list of stuff', but that is designed to prepare young people to become active and critical citizens of a complex world. As Dr Terry Wrigley put it in a recent paper: 'A century of research into children developing knowledge has taught us how much this depends on their personal engagement with the realities they experience, and reflection on that experience mediated by language and other cultural tools. This involves shifting fluently between different levels of concrete experience and abstract representation, applying ideas and skills from the past, collaborating with others, and stepping back to evaluate and re-plan the learning process. There are serious limitations to what can be acquired through rote learning, memorisation and behaviourist conditioning. In my work with secondary schools I am aware of considerable frustration among head teachers and their staff that not only are they regularly criticised for not 'meeting targets', but that those targets are constantly changing without warning or explanation. For example, in September 2013 the then Secretary of State

announced a change to the ways in which GCSE results would be reported in performance tables. This directly affected students who were already in the last of their five years at secondary school. The Secretary of State said that the change was to prevent schools 'gaming' the system. Leaving aside the slur on teachers' integrity, the reality was that schools had to inform students and their families that examination entries had to be changed at the last minute, to announce that courses had to be cancelled or amended, and to explain why they could not sustain an exam entry policy that might give students a better chance of achieving the best possible qualification. I would urge you as the new Secretary of State to avoid making such moves that disrupt young people's learning and disrespect teachers' professionalism.

Yours faithfully

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