



# BRIEFING PAPER

School Sector

UNISON West Sussex briefing paper for all School Support members

May 2022

## Is the Education White Paper 2022, a missed opportunity for West Sussex Schools?

Whilst many might believe the Education White Paper supports addressing fundamental concerns that exist in education, such as focusing on identifying children at risk of not meeting their full potential and providing them with the appropriate academic, pastoral and specialist teaching support to thrive, **in reality it is short on new ideas and highlights a concern that 12 years of successive Conservative Governments have failed to get it right.** It is a surprise to hear that developing good reading, writing and math skills have only just been identified as a focus for providing good education outcomes for children and this should have always been a fundamental expectation in a system where Government have got the basics right. Good literacy and numeracy teaching to develop those skills should be the building blocks of any education system and it is widely understood that leaving school with good grades in English and Math is necessary to secure a good job. Whilst it might be true that there is a wider positive economic impact to society and an individual's earning potential from increasing educational outcomes, the Governments expectation on the benefit it could deliver is overstated.

## A focus on the continued academisation of schools is further tinkering with school structures

that has no evidence to changing the day-to-day classroom experiences of pupils or providing for better educational outcomes. **It is Government policy that has led to an education landscape that is incoherent and messy,** with different arrangements for academy and local authority-controlled schools. The continued drive on this just risks further debate from entrenched views. Where is the evidence that demonstrates those schools that have made the change, have seen any benefit in school improvement, that couldn't have been made within the local authority system with adequate investment?

## The Government would be better advised to focus on removing barriers that exist to those on low incomes

and in areas of deprivation, including access to digital skills, breakfast and after school clubs, sports and performing arts opportunities. School leaders and pupils would appreciate funding for new equipment to promote sports activity which has a proven link to better physical and mental health. This and **increased access to services for mental health** support and relevant

support for catch-up tutoring following on from the pandemic, is needed if the Government is serious about **addressing the devastating impact the pandemic has had both on learning and mental health for young people.**

## **The Government makes bold claims, but the impact of the pandemic has been felt more in areas of greater deprivation**

and amongst the most vulnerable pupils in our schools. The attainment gap before the pandemic had stopped closing, with children in the most disadvantaged areas being 18 months behind by the time, they take GCSEs, and **the gap is now significantly wider as these areas most impacted and the families and pupils that live in them have fallen even further behind.** Where is the Government's pledge to "Level-up" showing any signs of working, for these families and pupils?

The Government will need to invest more heavily in the most disadvantaged regions and in the pupils and schools where the impact has been felt most. There seems to be no understanding of the part the home environment and deprivation plays in academic success. The Department for Education's (DfE) own data shows that any progress on closing the attainment gap was made before 2014 and there was already a widening of the gap two years before the pandemic.

The pledge to an increase to education of 32.5 hours per week will make little difference to most pupils as this equates to 9 am to 3:30 pm each day and many schools already provide this. There is no evidence this provides for better outcomes and only the DfE seems to believe this is important or will make a difference. Some commentators have indicated this will not result in actual teaching time but a likely extension to break periods and lunchtimes, however, that might at least introduce unintended benefits

from increased opportunities for socialization, but it is doubtful that was the Government's intention.

## **It is a matter of public record that schools are chronically underfunded, both nationally and in West Sussex.**

Nothing can be delivered without an increase to investment and resources in our schools and this also includes staffing and a necessary increase to the wages, terms, and conditions of all education staff. **There was nothing in the Education White Paper 2022 that addresses the pay and conditions of public sector workers, working as support staff. These staff are predominantly women** and amongst the lowest paid working in education. There is currently a retention and recruitment crisis for both teachers and support staff, and this is a widespread concern in many schools in West Sussex. There is some agreement that pay for teachers starting out in their careers will be competitive with other undergraduate pay, but the White Paper only addresses a concern for teachers starting pay and delivers nothing for support staff in schools who worked throughout the pandemic as frontline essential staff supporting children in our schools. It is these education staff that are facing a **cost-of-living crisis on low and increasingly uncompetitive pay**, and it is these staff alongside teachers, that will be needed to deliver on supporting pupils to achieve higher grades and improved outcomes. Many of these staff continue to be turning away from working in the education sector and this increases not only the workloads of teaching staff but also risks the potential for improving educational outcomes, after years of resource cuts under Government Austerity policies and despite Government insistence this has ended, there is still significant restructuring in schools often as a need to address budget issues.

## There is no commitment to increasing funding levels which remain inadequate,

and no strategy for addressing child poverty, food poverty or the attainment gap that is only getting bigger, no attempt to deal with workloads, address mental health concerns for pupils and education staff, including school leaders, the education system is insufficient and Government policy hasn't even got the basics right, when continued pressure on school budgets will lead to further need to restructure and cut support staff and teaching roles in schools, or to cut pastoral support and other welfare posts needed at this time. Further cuts and efficiencies in education classroom staff, are not possible without a reduction in provision and a reduction in educational outcomes. **The concerns in Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) are greater as the impact in High Needs and budget concerns in that sector of education are greater still and concerns on staffing and the cutbacks to education support services have not been listened to by Government.** The White Paper does not commit to any increase needed to address the concerns in SEND Schools and Alternative Provision (AP) and we will need to see if these concerns are addressed in the SEND Review Green Paper but to deliver this Government will need to eliminate every local authority Dedicated Schools Grant Deficit and ensure parental confidence that the plans will meet the needs of all young people with SEND. This will be a difficult task considering the time required for any proposals following consultation, to become legislation.

## The Governments message is ACADEMISE, a simple and misleading response

and march towards **academisation** that results in **unnecessary and unwelcome structural change** with no evidence,

of any improvement in educational outcomes. **There is no evidence that multi-academy trusts (MATs) are more effective or resilient in managing their finances based on research carried out by the Education Policy Institute (EPI).** This argument for the capability and resilience of MATs, refers only to very large MATs of 10-15 or more schools, and represents another mistake by successive Governments with no answers to address the issues schools face and those concerns parents have about the education system and how it is failing young people, through a lack of vision and a lack of investment.

## A focus on quality teaching is right, a focus on the key skills and grades required to get a good job and higher earning potential is right,

although the Government indication of the benefit to the economy is likely exaggerated. It is a positive societal change to address the learning gap and inequality that exists, and which has been widened by the pandemic, but this will take more than high ambitions to deliver, and **these changes take time to produce real benefits to society and our communities.** Obviously, the Government will argue, the path to that ambition and the Government's future vision of education and the changes needed starts with this White Paper.

However, whilst the ambition could be praised, the **Government's vision is limited and flawed, it is a mistake for the White Paper not to recognise the pivotal role that both teachers and support staff play now,** and to tackle the concerns support staff also have on pay, during a cost-of-living crisis. It is another mistake to not recognise or make use of the significant skills and experience support staff already have in supporting pupils, and to outline how those skills will be used and the role they should play in supporting teachers and pupils in the future.

# The vision of the White

**Paper** only furthers an aim to recruit more teachers at a time when teaching is not an attractive career option for many graduates. **It is a failing not to recognise the role played by support staff and for UNISON to have to remind them of that role.** The White paper only commits to the creation of more academies in the future with schools becoming members of powerful MATs, when many schools, even smaller academy schools, do not see this outcome as desirable. This shows just how far Government Ministers are from understanding the needs and concerns of education staff, expected to deliver these ambitions in the classroom and the concerns of pupils, and parents about education and the impact the pandemic has had on young people. The white paper fails to address the continued disruption to education or provide funding to mitigate the future risk of this. The Government has identified areas of concern, but it clearly demonstrates no understanding of the challenges faced by school leaders managing inadequate budgets and without the additional funding necessary to adequately resource their schools effectively to deliver those ambitions.

**Sadly, without this additional funding and a greater vision to eliminate the attainment gap for the most disadvantaged in our communities, it is high on ambition but represents a missed opportunity to deliver real change for West Sussex Schools.** It fails to provide the assistance, education staff working hard every day, need to support young people in achieving improved educational outcomes, and it also fails to remove the inequality and disadvantage, that the pandemic has intensified.

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