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Pembroke education director resigns

Graham Longster, the 58 year-old Director of Education and Children's Services at Pembrokeshire County Council, has resigned. He has taken retirement from the local authority, which has been in difficulties for some while. His resignation follows persistent criticism of the authority over the quality of its safeguarding of young people.

An Estyn report in June 2011 concluded that the authority was unsatisfactory overall and had an unsatisfactory capacity to improve. The main concern for Estyn was that it judged that the authority's policies and systems for safeguarding children were "not fit for purpose". Pembrokeshire had met only seven of the Welsh Government's 12 benchmark expectations for the last four years. There were also concerns about the performance of school pupils in the county at Key Stages 1 and 4 and that primary and secondary attendance rates were only adequate and declining. Yet it was safeguarding that was the critical issue. Estyn judged that "there has been a systemic corporate failure to respond sufficiently to safeguarding issues" at Pembrokeshire County Council. Since then the council has tried to reform its procedures, and Estyn noted that it had responded well to most of its recommendations to two earlier reports.

There was criticism of Mr Longster in June when a primary school child had his hands tied behind his back by a teacher and the authority was slow to react when the school did not deal with the problem strongly enough. The Welsh Government Education Minister, Leighton Andrews, issued a written statement and letter critical of the authority at the time. There were calls for Mr Longster to resign then, as a Ministerial Board was sent in.

Mr Longster was Head of School Improvement and Inclusion at Pembrokeshire before his appointment as director in May 2010. He had previously been deputy head of a local secondary school. He succeeded Gerson Davies upon his retirement.

Mr Longster sent an email to colleagues explaining his decision. His email said that his position had "become increasingly untenable in recent months ... I am not prepared to continue to work under the direction of members of the Ministerial Board. It is disappointing to leave at such a critical time as I very much wanted to achieve a measure of recovery. Unfortunately, I am perceived externally to be part of the problem relating to safeguarding. I believe that my continuation in post would only prolong these difficulties for the authority," Pembrokeshire County Council issued a statement to *Education Journal Wales/Cymru* saying that Mr Longster had "notified all schools and colleagues that he would be retiring at the end of the Autumn term 2012."

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A critical period

Welsh Education is facing a critical period and a crucial next few weeks. First and foremost in the mind of the Education Minister, Leighton Andrews, will be the impending results of the next Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) when the performance of fifteen-year-olds in Wales will be assessed on an international basis and more crucially politically, against the performance of their peers in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, especially after the poor and disappointing performance achieved by Welsh students in 2009. Although the Minister wisely set the target for Welsh Education to be in the top twenty of the Pisa league table by the next series of results in 2015, everyone is holding their breath for some signs that the results in Wales are starting to improve. If they are not, expect an even bigger furore than last time; if, indeed, that is possible!

The increasing politicalisation of Education has been seen recently in the war of words between Cardiff and London over the GCSE re-marking fiasco. The statements made by the Chair of Ofqual before the Education Select Committee in Westminster that Leighton Andrews was ordering the re-marking because of the poorer performance of the Welsh students in the exam was both unworthy and wrong. But, it is a stark reminder that if you ever think exam regulators and quango chiefs are politically neutral, then you need to think again. It is, at least, encouraging that Ofqual has now apologised to the Minister and the Welsh Government for making these unfortunate remarks. Meanwhile, Ofqual will have its own mind elsewhere as head teachers, trade unions and parent organisations queue up to bring their own legal action against the perceived unfairness of the regulator not to allow the GCSE English Language scripts to re-marked for students in England.

“...you cannot plan your educational strategy around the top-performing elite minority and ignore the very real needs of the majority.”

Hence, three of the Welsh Minister’s strategies to raise the standards of pupils’ performance in Wales have been rolled out. Last year, we had the National Literacy Strategy. Now, the National Numeracy Programme (NPP) has been launched, closely followed by the innovative Master’s in Educational Practice Programme for newly qualified teachers. With the announcement this week by Jane Hutt, the Finance Minister in the Welsh government, that the kitty is bare and she has little room for manoeuvre, both schools and local authorities face a further tight period of either budget restraint or

cuts. It is partly against this background that improving performance in Welsh schools should be seen and contemplated.

Meanwhile, perhaps educationalists in Wales should take comfort in the knowledge that not all is well across the water as both political critics (including some notable Conservatives) and educational experts (even one of the Government’s own advisers) join in their condemnation of the hastily conceived and ill thought out new E Bacc strategy. As mentioned in last week’s editorial, you cannot plan your educational strategy around the top-performing elite minority and ignore the very real needs of the majority. This was something which the Labour Leader Ed Miliband reminded us all about at his Party Conference this week. At least he recognises that in future educational thinking and planning you need to think about providing a system which embraces the needs of all kinds of pupils including those who would benefit from more and better vocational education or for those with special educational needs. As the GCSE row reminds us, all pupils need to be treated fairly and equally, whether they live in Wales or England!

Professor Ken Reid
Editor

National numeracy plan for Wales

The Welsh Government has announced details of its new National Numeracy Programme (NPP). The strategy has been devised following the disappointing performance by Welsh students in the last Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) results when they were outperformed by their peers in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The results showed that Welsh pupils aged fifteen were the equivalent of half an academic year behind others for mathematical literacy.

Concern about pupils' poor literacy skills has also been raised in a succession of recent reports by Estyn. Therefore, the Welsh Government has decided to act by introducing its new NPP which will include implementing compulsory literacy tests for all pupils from Years 2 to 9. The new Welsh NPP has been devised following extensive consultation with international experts in the field of both numeracy and school improvement.

The NPP will focus on four key areas. These are:

- a) Enhancing numeracy across the curriculum.
- b) Advancing teaching practice in numeracy.
- c) Supporting learners quickly and successfully.
- d) Communicating the power of literacy.

The plan will be introduced from 2013 and the NPP will be used and adopted by both schools and local authorities throughout Wales. However, the scale of the problem should not be underestimated as a recent report on pupils' performance in England found that more than 20,000 boys and 10,400 girls left primary school this summer with the reading skills of a seven-year-old or worse and in Wales this position is proportionately even worse.

Ofqual apologises to Welsh Government

Ofqual has issued a formal apology to the Welsh Government for making the suggestion that it ordered the re-marking of the English Language GCSE papers because it was concerned by the poorer performance of the Welsh rather than the English students in the Exam.

In fact, the decision made by the Welsh Government was based on entirely different criteria. The Minister asked his officials to look into and examine the circumstances surrounding the GCSE English Language results. The subsequent Report was prepared by the officials within the Qualifications and Learning Division of the DfES which, on behalf of the Welsh Ministers, Undertakes the functions relating to qualifications in Wales as set out in Section 30 of the Education Act of 1997.

The Report found that "the methodology for determining the grade boundaries for candidates in Wales did not deliver comparable outcomes for the 2012 cohort when compared with the 2011 cohort and that some candidates, particularly those on the C/D boundary, are likely to have been disadvantaged when compared with their peers in 2011."

The Report also raised a series of questions for the future about the suitability of having formal examinations, marking and grade boundaries set by the needs of the curriculum in England as determined by the Government in London and as regulated by Ofqual and questioned whether all aspects of the existing system are currently 'fit for purpose' for the needs of students in Wales. No doubt, this will now form part of the ongoing Bevan Review.

Wales launches new Master's Degree

The Welsh Government (WG) has announced the launch of a new Master's degree in Educational Practice (MEP). The degree is aimed at newly qualified teachers as part of their professional development. The degree is fully funded by the WG and is highly practical, research-informed and grounded in the best professional experiences. It is hoped that the MEP will equip new teachers with the knowledge and skills required to mitigate the effects of socio-economic deprivation on educational attainment, improve learner outcomes and support a model of lifelong improvement of professional practice.

The curriculum content of the MEP is focussed upon nine modules taken over a three year period. These are on:

- a) an introduction to teachers' professional inquiry;
- b) child and adolescent development and learning;
- c) behaviour management;
- d) literacy;
- e) numeracy;
- f) additional learning needs;
- g) reducing the impact of poverty on attainment;
- h) leadership
- i) action enquiry.

The MEP will be delivered regionally across Wales by an alliance of Cardiff, Aberystwyth and Bangor Universities, working alongside the Institute of Education, University of London, and lead to a Cardiff University award. The programme commences in the Autumn, 2012.

Cardiff University and the Guardian launch new Masters degree

Cardiff University and Guardian News & Media have announced a partnership which will create a new Masters degree in Journalism with Digital Media.

During the year long programme the core fundamentals of journalism will include a digital focus, as well as reporting, writing, publishing and technical skills. The course will be run from a central London location and it will be taught by a mix of guest lecturers and a permanent Director of Studies appointed by the University.

"Animals' Tails" wag in Welsh and English on Monday night

Next Monday evening (8th October 2012), *Animals' Tails/Cynffonau Anifeiliaid* will be launched at a party in the Royal Hotel, Cardiff. The party is being hosted by the Doggerel Press, a new imprint. It will focus on children's poetry, publishing small collections of poems, initially in both English and Welsh.

Chris Waterman, series editor, is really excited about the first book in the series: "I was delighted that John Doe agreed to join the Doggerel Press. I cannot imagine a more extra-ordinary book to launch our new publishing house." "Reactions to the tails from children have been really encouraging. The best question was "Why isn't there a fishy tail?" Another young reader went away determined to write her own animal tail."

John Doe was taken by surprise by the reaction to the book. "All I wanted to do was to play with words and let children know that poetry should be fun. It was really interesting to work with Bethan on the Welsh versions of each poem and a challenge to capture the essence of the original in the translation."

Bethan Thomas said: "Translating *Animals Tails* was the most interesting translation job I've ever done, given the brevity of the original poems. I'm really excited to be involved in the first English/Welsh poetry project.

If you would like an invitation to the launch, or to speak to the author, please contact Kate at the Doggerel Press (www.doggerelpress.co.uk) on 01494 412007 or email kate@doggerelpress.wwww

Commissioner slams youth services

In his annual report, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, Keith Towler, argued that youth services in Wales deserved to be valued and directed with strong strategic support at a national and local level. In his report, which was published on Thursday, the Commissioner insisted that youth services in Wales play a significant role in the lives of many young.

He stressed that for some, youth workers were the main trusted adult in their lives outside their families and for many they were the only trusted adult. Mr Towler warned that shrinking budgets and changes in the criteria of funding streams for children and young people's services were in danger of pushing youth services across Wales to the bottom of priority lists.

He expressed concern that issues that had been brought to his attention throughout the year suggested that some young people in Wales had no access to good quality youth services. The Commissioner for Wales said that young people and practitioners had complained that youth services were undervalued and swamped by conflicting priorities. He argued that youth services should not be seen as a "soft target", and he added that he was committed to providing a clear focus on the issue for the remainder of his term as Commissioner.

Key figures

- Every young person not in education, employment or training costs around £97,000 over their lifetime, rising to £300,000 depending on the benefits they claim
- Every £1 invested in youth work generates £8 worth of voluntary activity
- A project providing a full range of services and in contact with 125 young people a week would cost £75,000 a year, or £16 for each contact
- It costs around £35,000 to keep one young person in a young offenders institution

Investors in Families/Buddsoddwyr Mewn Teuluoedd re-launch in Wales

On Tuesday 9 October 2012, Investors in Families will be re-launched in Wales across the Central South Consortium. Already, 150 primary and secondary schools in Wales have gained the award and the offer is being extended to all the schools in South Wales.

IIF is an accreditation scheme that recognised the work that schools and other settings undertake to improve children's outcomes in the seven core aims. Chris Waterman, Executive Director of IIF explained: "The focus on working with families in Wales makes IIF a really important tool for schools and other setting to use." In addition the schools in the Central South consortium, IIF is also working with schools in Newport and Pembroke. "I am looking forward to the time when the IIF award is available to every Welsh school that wishes to achieve it. All the material is available in English and Welsh, which makes it very attractive to Welsh-medium schools."

For further details of Investors in Families contact Chris.waterman@e-strategix.co.uk or telephone Chris Waterman of e-strategix on 0773 606 9191.

RWCMD announce partnership with Music Theatre Wales

Music Theatre Wales and the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama have announced a three year partnership following £51,000 of funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

The partnership will explore ways in which a specialist opera company and a conservatoire can collaborate for the benefit of both students and the public. The partnership will include a range of activities, including performances of new opera and work by and with composers associated with Music Theatre Wales.

USA tops world list but China is catching up

The United States again tops the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* list, published this week, both in terms of the number of its institutions in the Top 200 (there are 76) and in having the No.1 slot again. The California Institute of Technology held its No.1 position. Caltech is a small university, with only around 2,000 students. It scored near the maximum in four of the five core mission areas analysed. Only in terms of its international outlook did it score poorly.

Oxford University moved up two places to No.2. Three years ago it was at No.6, equal with Cambridge. Its UK rival falls one place this year, to No.7, while the third British university in the Top 10, Imperial College, holds its position one place lower at No.8. Cambridge has this week acquired an AAA rating from the Moodies financial ratings agency, which will keep its borrowing costs low.

Outside the Top 10 most British and American universities are slipping down the league table as institutions from East Asia in particular rise up the table. Of the BRIC developing countries, China is moving up while India and Russia do not have a single university in the Top 200.

The UK has 31 universities in the Top 200, one fewer than last year as the University of Dundee falls out of the list. This puts Britain in second place in the world, well ahead of the rest of Europe. English universities not surprisingly dominate the UK list, with 27 of the 31. Four come from Scotland and none from Wales or Northern Ireland, though all four of the home countries are represented in the second half of the list with those ranked from 201 to 400.

The UK was followed by the Netherlands (12 universities in the Top 200), Germany (11), Canada (8), Australia (8), Switzerland (7), France (7), Japan (5) and Sweden (5). China has only two universities in the Top 200, but it has a growing number of others in the next group of 200 institutions that are likely to break into the Top 200 in the future. This reflects major investment in higher education and research in China.

The University of Cardiff is just outside the Top 200, in the 210-225 band. It is one of three Welsh universities in the second half of the table, from 201 to 400. Aberystwyth and Bangor are in the 276-300 band. In addition to the three Welsh universities in the 201 to 400 part of the listing, there are nine English universities, four from Scotland and one from Northern Ireland.

Full tables of data are available at <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/>

New speakers announced for top conference

Three more top speakers have been added to the list of high-profile speakers lined up for the prestigious North of England Education Conference being held in Sheffield next January. Professor Tanya Byron is a consultant clinical psychologist specialising in child and adolescent mental health. She has an NHS career spanning 20 years working in many areas of mental health.

Tanya is a well-known broadcaster on TV and radio, an author of books on parenting and a regular contributor to leading national publications. She is also an independent national and international government adviser on children, young people and the digital media.

Joining Tanya at the local authority conference that traditionally draws people from all over England and Wales as well as the North of England will be Jean Gross CBE. She has been a teacher, an educational psychologist, head of children's services in a local authority, and a Visiting Fellow at two universities. Until recently she was the government's Communication Champion for children, responsible for promoting the importance of good language and communication skills for all children and young people, and co-ordinating efforts to improve services for those who need extra help.

Completing the latest line-up of speakers is Roger Sutcliffe. After a couple of teaching spells, he became a freelance trainer in philosophical enquiry and thinking skills, especially critical thinking, with teachers at all levels. He is a Visiting Lecturer for an MA in teaching philosophy at Heythrop College in London, but increasingly promotes the idea and practice of 'philosophical teaching'.

School governing is Big Society in action, research finds

By Susan Young

The Education Secretary's description of school governors as "local worthies" who view their role as "a badge of status" is challenged by a major research project which was presented at the BELMAS conference at the end of July. Professor Chris James has surveyed over 2,500 chairmen of governing bodies and 600 headteachers to provide the clearest-ever picture of a group of people embodying the ideals of David Cameron's "Big Society".

The research identified that chairmen typically spend between three and five hours a week on governing, with just over ten per cent spending ten hours a week or more on their duties. Most heads and chairmen agreed that their governing bodies were working well.

Professor James, Professor of Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Bath, said the research discovered chairmen had a very high level of motivation towards their school, to education and the students, and typically displayed a strong sense of duty.

He said: "It's a duty, a vocation. They feel they must do it, to give something back. There's something quite unfashionably good and useful about this. It's a hugely interesting phenomenon. If you ask chairmen for their experience they say it's stressful, particularly around being inspected by Ofsted. There is a catalogue of challenges: and yet, the overall experience is that they absolutely love it."

Professor James added: "If you ever wanted an example of Big Society in action, and being successful, you need only look at school governing. Ten per cent of chairmen of governing bodies spent more than ten hours a week in school on governing matters: what would be the cost of that if we had to pay for it? It works well, comparing well with other types of organisation, and yet governing goes unnoticed in a lot of places. Many people don't understand what governors do: it's largely hidden."

Major findings in the paper, *The Role of the Chair of the School Governing Body in England: Steering the Ship through the Storm of Reform*, include:

- The context for governing bodies is currently 'very challenging'
- Chairmen of governors typically work in, or are retired from, professional occupations, often in education
- They are experienced: in education, in their careers and in governing
- They often have a strong link with their school having or having had a child or children attend it
- They are typically over 40 and White British
- There is an even gender mix

The research also uncovered the importance in the relationship between the head and the chairman of governors and its relevance to whether or not the governing body works well. "One of the headteachers described the chairman of the governing body to us: 'He is just wonderful as a partner, just like having another husband at work,' " said Professor James.

"It is a major pivot point. You can't adjust around it if the relationship is malfunctioning and the governing body and school are not working properly. When the relationship is purring the governing body is purring. If there is a failure in this relationship, it feeds back into the functionality of the governing body putting the school at a disadvantage."

What makes a good relationship between chairman and head teacher? Professor James says no particular structure is necessary. "There has to be some kind of bond, some kind of mutual respect and concern - but they're not friends. There needs to be a bond that enables all topics to be discussed and they need to share important characteristics and commitment like: honesty, openness and trust between each other. When it's going well with a good head teacher and a good chairman they are challenging each other with high pressure, high-level dialogue about issues in the school. If it isn't working, they need to sort it out."

One Nation Labour - Not New but Blue Labour

By Demitri Coryton

So now Benjamin Disraeli and Sir Robert Peel are Labour's new icons. In a well-received speech at the UK Labour Party conference in Manchester, its leader Ed Miliband used the party's new catch phrase 'One Nation', filched from Disraeli, no less than 47 times. Other Shadow ministers, including Stephen Twigg who covers education in England, followed his example. How will the Labour Party in Wales feel about clutching to its bosom Tory relics of the past?

Mr Miliband spoke approvingly of Disraeli while his Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, name-checked that other long-dead 19th century Tory leader, Sir Robert Peel. This is slightly weird. The One Nation phrase came from one of Disraeli's novels, not from a political speech. It manifested itself in practice as a way of getting around one third of the working class in England (though not Wales) to vote Tory, which enabled the Conservatives to become the natural party of UK government for most of the 20th century. In power Disraeli was, of course, a great imperialist. He made Queen Victoria Empress of India. When it comes to Disraeli's predecessor, Sir Robert Peel, Yvette Cooper was right when she told the Labour conference that he had founded the Metropolitan Police on the basis of policing by consent. She overlooked the fact that before that he had also founded the Royal Irish Constabulary on a very different basis. Such are the new heroes of Blue Labour.



Benjamin Disraeli

When it comes to Labour's education offer there was also something rather strange about that. The Big Idea of Stephen Twigg's speech was the Technical Baccalaureate, which would address the needs of the "forgotten 50 per cent" who don't want to go to university. The only problem with this is that the 50 per cent are not all forgotten. BTEC has been providing a valuable and valued vocational qualification for years. It has seen off previous attempts to replace it, like GNVQs and diplomas. We don't need yet another vocational qualification when we have a perfectly good one already.



Sir Robert Peel

Wales led the way in the Bacc stakes with the Welsh Baccalaureate, but whether it will want to go down the same road as England with this Technical Baccalaureate is another matter. The creation of a Technical Bacc to match Michael Gove's academic English Bacc is an echo of Sir Mike Tomlinson's attempt to create a single over-arching diploma that would bridge the vocational-academic divide and give parity of esteem to both. What happened to that? It was killed off by the last Labour government as Tony Blair and his English Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, were not prepared to do anything that might have undermined A-levels. The result was a very weak shadow of Sir Mike's original proposal that Labour created and the Coalition buried.

Labour in Wales has never been as obsessed with the Blairite/Gove agenda of academies, free schools and league tables as the party in England has been. While Welsh delegates in Manchester were no doubt pleased to see Ed Miliband make a well-received speech, it is unlikely that the One Nation label will be warmly embraced here as Welsh Labour has enough heroes of its own without needing to import Tory ones from England.

Supporting Welsh students

During his ministerial statement on student support made in the Welsh Assembly on Tuesday, the Minister for Education and Skills, Leighton Andrews (Lab, Rhondda) announced that from September 2013, the maximum tuition fee that institutions in Wales would be able to charge in the academic years 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2015-16 would be frozen at £9,000, subject to an approved fee plan being in place.

He pointed out that the maximum tuition fee loan for students ordinarily resident in Wales would increase by the rate of inflation in each academic year and therefore in 2013-14 the maximum loan would be £3,575. But the minister added that students would continue to be eligible for the non-means-tested tuition fee grant to cover the remaining element of the tuition fee. Mr Andrews explained that students starting their studies on or after 1 September 2013 would be eligible for a maximum maintenance grant of £5,161, a maximum maintenance loan of £5,150, dependent on household income, or £7,215 if they were studying in London and a partial cancellation of up to £1,500 of their maintenance loans when they started repayment. He said that in total, the Welsh Government would provide over £1 billion for the tuition fee grant, over £750 million for maintenance grants, and around £1.8 billion for tuition fee and maintenance loans until the end of the financial year 2016-17.

Angela Burns (Con, Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) asked how the student finance package would help social mobility. Leighton Andrews replied that the biggest risk to social mobility was the fee policies of the coalition Government at Westminster. He added that the Welsh Government had ensured that no one would be put off from going to study in England, in Wales, in Scotland or in Northern Ireland because of the new fee regime that had come into effect.

Simon Thomas (PC, Mid and West Wales) asked the minister to confirm the number and percentage of English-domiciled students who had chosen to study in Wales, and the funding shortfall that had resulted from that. He also asked the minister if he had met the target that had been set by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales of attracting 17.2 per cent of Welsh students in Welsh universities from Communities First areas by 2012-13. Leighton Andrews replied that he expected that the obligations that HEFCW had adopted in its corporate strategy in respect of recruitment from Communities First areas would be fulfilled. Turning to the impact of decline in student numbers from England, he confirmed that there had been a 14 per cent drop in students applying to English institutions and a drop of 13 per cent in those applying to Welsh institutions. He added that in terms of the outcome and the impact on budgeting, the figures currently available were not the final figures.

Affordability

Aled Roberts (LDP, North Wales) said that his party's concerns related to the changes in assumptions during the course of the Assembly, the impact that that might have on the teaching grant that was available to universities and also whether there would be a need for HEFCW to look again, on a recurring basis, at the core and margin policy, because of affordability of the policy during the subsequent years. But Mr Roberts stressed that the main concern across the chamber was the ongoing sustainability for any incoming Government post-2016. Leighton Andrews said that although the policy had been costed through to the 2016-17 financial year, there would be changes to the costings once the final figures were received. But he added that in broad terms with regard to the balance of the numbers of English students coming to Wales and Welsh students going to England, the policy could be afforded.

David Rees (Lab, Aberavon) asked how the policy would impact on support for part-time study. Leighton Andrews said that part-time study was one of the most complicated areas in terms of the new fee regime. He pointed out that the Welsh Government had deferred the implementation of the proposals for part-time study by a year to see what happened in England. But the minister acknowledged that it would be necessary to start a debate about the nature of part-time study as there was increasing evidence to suggest that people in work who were seeking to study on a part-time basis may want to do more online learning.

An examination system for Wales

During oral questions on education in the Welsh Assembly on Wednesday, Lindsay Whittle (PC, South Wales East) wanted to know what discussions ministers had had about the creation of a distinct examination system for Wales.

The Deputy Minister for Skills, Jeff Cuthbert (Lab, Caerphilly) replied that the Welsh Government was waiting for the publication of the review of qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds before considering the best route forward for the examination system in Wales. "This," he said, "as well as the marketplace review of awarding organisations, will receive a formal Government response in January."

Mr Whittle wanted an independent exam system for Wales. He thought that the establishment of the English baccalaureate meant that a distinct qualification system for Wales "is almost already a reality". Mr Cuthbert pointed out that the English baccalaureate is not a qualification in its own right as the Welsh baccalaureate is. "There could well be further divergence with England, if it is justified, and we will know more about that when the review of qualifications reports," the Minister said.

Byron Davies (Con, South Wales West) was concerned about the growing rift between the exam systems in Wales and England. Jeff Cuthbert replied bluntly: "It is the UK Government Secretary of State Michael Gove who has created the difficulties for students in Wales and elsewhere by his untimely and unevidenced announcements that he will abolish GCSEs. What those learners in England will go through over the next couple of years, knowing that the Secretary of State does not value their qualification, is almost beyond belief. We in Wales will not be railroaded into anything like that sort of decision. We will consider the evidence-based review that I have referred to earlier, and our decisions will follow that."

Free School Breakfasts

During education questions on Wednesday Sandy Mewies (Lab, Delyn) asked for an update on the free school breakfasts scheme. Education and Skills Minister Leighton Andrews (Lab, Rhondda) replied that more than 76% of primary schools currently participated in the scheme. The 2012 school census showed that, in the week prior to census week, 35.6% of pupils at participating schools took at least one free breakfast.

Ms Mewies extolled the virtues of the scheme which she said her party had pioneered and asked for an assurance that the programme would continue. Not surprisingly, her colleague Leighton Andrews was "very happy to give that assurance". The Welsh Government was committed to the scheme and had budgeted for it. "We are, of course, looking to ensure that we support that through local authorities as we move ahead," the Minister said.

Darren Millar (Con, Clwyd West), the Shadow Minister for Health, claimed that there was "absolutely no evidence of an improvement in educational attainment as a result of your free breakfast scheme". The Conservatives believed that "parents, not teachers, should give their children breakfast". He thought that the money spent on the scheme could be better spent on other things like books and teachers.

The Leader of Plaid Cymru, Leanne Wood (PC, South Wales Central) supported the scheme because of its impact on reducing poverty. Plaid Cymru would go further in using schools as community assets to tackle poverty.

Teaching posts

Mark Isherwood (Con, North Wales) asked the Education Minister how the Welsh Government was helping teachers find permanent positions in Welsh schools.

Speaking in the Welsh Assembly session of education questions on Wednesday, the Education Minister, Leighton Andrews (Lab, Rhondda) replied that "to avoid producing more teachers than can gain employment in Wales, we have made significant reductions to the number of places on teacher training courses in recent years, using an annual data analysis to inform decisions on how many new teachers are required to meet the demand from schools."

Tackling exclusions and supporting libraries

The rate of exclusions between years 6 and 7 increased by 186 per cent in 2010-11, Paul Davies (Con, Preseli Pembrokeshire) said during education questions. What was the Welsh Government doing about that? The Education and Skills Minister, Leighton Andrews (Lab, Rhondda) replied that over the last decade the Welsh Government had “supported a number of programmes to support transition between primary and secondary school, and best practice has been developed”.

Mr Andrews noted that Estyn had looked at transition arrangements, and that best practice was widely available. “I am very encouraged by what I see in a number of areas now around Wales, where secondary schools are working closely with their cluster primary schools to ensure that young people understand the new school environment into which they are moving.”

Kenneth Skates (Lab, Clwyd South) claimed that many studies had shown that access to books, good libraries and the support of specially trained educational librarians can be effective in raising literacy levels in young people, yet there was no legislative requirement for a school to have a library or a librarian. What was the minister doing with those schools that did not have a library? The Minister did not think that this was a major issue, though he praised the use of public libraries as a resource for schools, especially where the use of new technologies was concerned.

Improving standards of literacy and numeracy

Education Minister Leighton Andrews (Lab, Rhondda) made a statement on the Welsh Government’s policy on raising the standards of literacy and numeracy during Assembly education questions earlier this week. He claimed that there was “a comprehensive national programme to ensure that significant improvements in standards of literacy and numeracy are achieved in schools across Wales. There will be significant support to teachers and learners to deliver these programmes.”

His colleague Joyce Watson (Lab, Mid and West Wales) thought that the key to success would be to work with the teaching profession to ensure that the plans are deliverable. She wanted assurance that there would be adequate training and support for teachers to deliver the new framework and that any additional workload would be built in. The Minister replied that there would be support for teachers to implement the new measures. “We know that the vast majority of schools already use a wide range of tests to screen or assess the progress of learners and we are seeking to ensure that we have consistency across Wales.” There would be a national support programme to ensure that all teachers and learning support assistants were able to implement the requirements of the literacy and numeracy framework. “There will be additional resources available and there will be support through this process,” the Minister promised.

William Graham (Con, South Wales East) referred to the Leitch report, which had recommended that the United Kingdom should aim to be a world leader on skills by 2020. It suggested that, in order to do so, 95% of adults should have achieved the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy. Mr Graham wanted to know how new national numeracy programmes would succeed where previous ones have not been so successful. Mr Andrews replied that for the first time there would be reading and numeracy tests for all in years 2 through to 9.

Faith schools

In answer to a question from Darren Millar (Con, Clwyd West) Education Minister Leighton Andrews made a statement about faith schools. “The Welsh Government recognises the historic and current contribution that maintained schools with a religious character make in every part of Wales. The document, Faith in Education, developed jointly with the Church in Wales and the Catholic Education Service, and launched in June 2011, affirmed this position.”

The Minister sought to reassure people about capital funding for faith schools, saying that the Welsh Government had allocated sufficient funds for the sector. “I do not envisage there being any particular difficulties with regard to the funding of new faith schools,” Mr Andrews said.

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Email: info@educationpublishing.com

Web: www.educationpublishing.com

The Education Publishing Company Ltd.,

Devonia House, 4 Union Terrace, Crediton,
Devon, EX17 3DY, UK.

Email: info@educationpublishing.com

The Education Publishing Company of Australia,

PO Box 390, Sandy Bay, Tasmania 7006, Australia.

Email: epca@educationpublishing.com

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