

Why schools might be cautiously optimistic going into the new year

Against the backdrop of a looming general election and uncertainty about a deal / no-deal Brexit, the current government have formally announced a swathe of education policies, including increased funding, which suggests that education may be a key decision-maker in any imminent campaigns. So what should we make of the announcements that have already been made, and of the leaked policy document reported by the Guardian which suggests further education reforms?

At SSAT and Wrigleys Solicitors, we are pleased that the government are finally acknowledging that, since 2010, school budgets have been stretched to breaking point. If delivered intelligently, the £2.6bn promised for 2020/21 should bring school funding back to 2015 levels with the £4.8 billion for 2021/22 and £7.1 billion for 2022/23 returning school funding to pre-austerity levels. The efforts of grassroots movements such as WorthLess? should be applauded for raising school funding as a national concern. It is not a coincidence that the government chose to focus on schools for the first of its non-Brexit-related policy announcements. However, much remains to be seen as to the impact this will have on the ground. We should continue to scrutinise the emerging details as they are released. School leaders we've spoken to continue to be concerned by several key uncertainties:

- How this will be rolled out? Will schools who are currently above the national funding formula see further real-term cuts in 2020-2021?
- The need to properly implement a national funding formula that addresses historic inequalities, without taking money away from schools in areas of the highest disadvantage.
- Whether the various promised pots of money will be new money from the Treasury or be redirected from elsewhere?

We also need to see further detail of what the government will expect from schools in return for the additional funding. The Spending Review, in its own words, marked 'a new focus on the outcomes the government will deliver' with outcomes and metrics underpinning implementation plans for the promised funding. The government is therefore expecting more 'bang' for its 'buck' with the Department's School Resource Managers tasked with ensuring schools make the most of every pound given to them.

Above all, while any increased funding is very welcome, it will not have an immediate effect on the issues that almost a decade of austerity has created. The huge gaps in mental health support, counselling and other frontline services will continue; and schools will continue to act as the 'fourth emergency service'. Families will continue to rely on foodbanks and many parents will continue to worry about the cost of providing three meals a day during the summer break. Until the government acts quickly to resolve these issues, the increased funding for schools will, sadly, only have a limited impact – and will certainly not close the current disadvantaged gap.

Other announcements are also welcome, such as the Department's decision to remove 'outstanding' schools from inspection, something that Ofsted has long been arguing for. But again, this must come with more money for the inspectorate, who have seen over 50% budget cuts since 2010.

Likewise, the proposal to raise starting teachers' salaries to £30,000, making them some of the highest graduate salaries, is much needed; at a time when many schools are facing significant recruitment issues. However, this must be funded beyond the funding uplifts for 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23, otherwise the impact of the extra money in returning school funding to pre-austerity levels will be limited. The whole mainscale pay grade, pension contributions and national insurance must also be considered when working out the funding arrangements.

We are less sanguine, though, regarding the policy announcements leaked to and reported by *The Guardian*; which include a renewed effort to academise all schools, funds to incentivise MATs to take over schools-no-one-wants, new guidelines around behaviour including greater powers to exclude and encouraging school leaders to confiscate or ban mobile phone.

All of these issues should ultimately be resolved in the best interests of students and at a local level; with schools empowered and supported to work in partnership with local partners and communities. It would be wrong for central government to make changes where arrangements already work well, to dictate how headteachers should ensure good behaviour, or to take decisions about good and outstanding schools structures away from local governance. Both SSAT and Wrigleys Solicitors support school leaders making the best decisions for the young people they serve. This belief in the autonomy of schools to do what is right for their students is shared by both organisations; but can only be achieved when schools are given the necessary resources.

The increased funds promised by the current government will go so far; but we need all political parties to take a longer-term approach to school funding. Education must be seen as an investment, not as a cost, and governments of any colour must work with and trust the leaders and teachers in our schools.

Above all, the needs of the children must be at the centre of education policy-making; which is why both SSAT and Wrigleys Solicitors are proud to be fighting for deep social justice every day through our work with schools.