



**Welsh Liberal Democrats
Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru**

Putting pupils first

**Improving school standards
in Wales**

Policy paper for debate

Spring Conference 2013

Introduction

1. We believe that a pupil's aptitude is defined by a number of factors which include, but are not limited to; intelligence, character application, whether they have any specific learning difficulties, social factors, whether the course fits their aptitudes and their access to self-study facilities.
2. The way to develop the best results for individual students is to focus on their individual abilities, needs and challenges. That way we can develop a school system that puts pupils first.
3. However, it is clear to us that reform will not take place overnight. This is a programme for a full term of the National Assembly. But we also believe that a much longer effort is needed to reform education. The constant policy changes, strategy churn and u-turns have not made it easier for local education authorities and schools to improve.
4. As a result, we will not expect schools, teachers and pupils to adjust to another round of structural reform so soon after one has been implemented. We will instead seek to adapt our proposals to the new system, focussing on the core support that needs to be offered to individual pupils and ensuring that expertise is spread throughout Wales.
5. This paper is divided into two sections. In the first, we look at how we can support schools to switch their emphasis to individual pupils. We propose a series of initiatives that will enable schools to help pupils to achieve their potential, no matter what their background or ability. We believe that a renewed emphasis on individual pupils will provide the boost necessary for pupils to achieve the high standards that we want in Wales. Many of these programmes would be administered by each school, but our intention is not to tell schools how to best provide this support. Instead we will provide a framework, which schools can use fit to their unique circumstances.
6. The second section looks at system-wide changes that can be made to help drive up standards across our schools. They focus on issues such as building capacity and improving accountability. In addition, we look at how we can best improve teacher quality. Our belief is that schools need to be supported to become excellent.
7. Throughout this policy paper, we have concentrated not on government but on schools, not on structures but on pupils. The Welsh education sector has seen years of upheaval. Now is the opportunity to focus on ensuring the system we have delivers the very best result for our pupils.

PART I: PUTTING PUPILS FIRST

1. Monitoring the performance of individual pupils

- 1.1 Raising pupil standards must be at the heart of any approach to education reform in Wales. At the centre of this approach must be the identification of students who are not meeting their potential and then assisting them to reach this. In order to do this, we must ensure that we have access to data on how pupils are expected to perform as well as how pupils are actually performing.
- 1.2 It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a wide variety of performance within schools, especially between pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds. As well as this, we are seeing evidence that some schools are focussing on simply those students likely to achieve the top grades or C-grades in order to achieve a better set of results. We believe that all pupils should receive support to meet their potential.
- 1.3 Increasingly, we are seeing evidence that new approaches to assessing the performance of individual pupils (as opposed to whole schools) means that interventions can be targeted at those pupils who are failing to meet their own potential. This ensures that interventions are more directly -targeted and therefore more effective.
- 1.4 Five striking examples of this are outlined in the report *Making a difference at key stage 3: Learning from five successful schools*¹ which examines how performance has been improved in a series of school in Wales to identify common techniques.^[1] The analysis suggests that with appropriate use of internal evaluation and monitoring, standards can be raised in schools on an individual basis.
- 1.5 The report concludes that “each of the schools focuses on the trajectory of its pupils as much as on their absolute standard of attainment. Thus all pupils are helped to achieve to the highest standard of which they are capable. To be able to do this most effectively, the schools maintain all-encompassing databases that include records on attendance, behaviour, predicted and actual attainment, effort and additional support needs ... The comprehensive datasets held on each pupil have two principal benefits. Firstly, they form the basis for the setting and monitoring of challenging targets. Secondly, having been used to identify pupils who are not reaching those targets, they inform the type of action that is undertaken.”

¹ Upton, Stevie *Making a difference at key stage 3: Learning from five successful schools* (Institute of Welsh Affairs, 2011). The schools profiled are Cwmtawe Community School, Newtown High School, St Joseph's RC High School in Newport, Ysgol David Hughes in Anglesey and Ysgol y Preseli.

- 1.6 It also recommends how such a monitoring system should be used. Such monitoring systems should be devised to be appropriate for the schools and concludes that “to demand that all schools follow a process for monitoring and evaluating performance, and for implementing changes in light of that evaluation, is vital for improvement. To prescribe precisely what that process should look like and how it should operate would be as damaging as to continue with a laissez-fair approach.”
- 1.7 It is clear that the government cannot simply mandate a system for schools to operate in order to monitor performance. However, government support will be necessary in order to ensure that the schemes that are rolled-out are robust and accurately identify and support those pupils who are not meeting their own potential. The question is how we offer that support in a manner that best enables schools to produce a monitoring programme that allows pupils to reach their potential.
- 1.8 The government’s School Standards Unit has been established to promote the widespread take-up of best practice from schools across Wales. This body would be immediately available to establish a programme to help schools and the new regional consortia to develop these monitoring regimes. However, it would not be possible to assist in the development of, and audit the success of, a pupil monitoring programme in every school at once. We propose that the Unit and their regional consortia would need to focus on those schools that need to raise standards the most to begin with; perhaps using the government’s banding data as a stop-gap solution.
- 1.9 The School Standards Unit should therefore be used to work with schools to develop their own versions of this individual pupil monitoring programmes, starting with the schools that are proven to create the lowest “value-added.” The best measure of this ready for immediate use is the government’s school banding system and, as such, should be the basis of the initial phase of the programme.
- 1.10 It is our intention that across the course a whole Assembly term, the majority of schools should have adopted some form of individual monitoring programme and others should be on the way to doing so. The School Standards Unit will ensure that schools’ monitoring programmes are successful.

PROPOSAL I: We will support the development of an individual pupil monitoring programme to measure pupils’ progress , allowing schools to target efforts at those pupils who are not meeting their potential. This should

be rolled out gradually, starting with the schools who demonstrate the least “value-added.”

2. Tackling inequality through the school system

- 2.1 Welsh Liberal Democrats have long been concerned about the disparity in achievement between pupils from different economic backgrounds. It is deeply worrying that pupils on free school meals still underperform their peers by one-third. In order to create a fairer society, we should ensure that everyone is able to access the same quality public services regardless of their background.
- 2.2 It is clear that pupils from poorer backgrounds require additional support in order to reach their potential. Our pupil premium policy has focussed on children in receipt of free school meals, but should be expanded to include looked-after children.
- 2.3 Welsh Liberal Democrats can be rightly proud of their achievement in implementing a pupil premium in Wales. As a result, the poorest pupils in Wales – those entitled to free school meals and looked-after children – now receive an additional £450 to help with their education. However, this is only a short step towards our overall goal of £2,500 per pupil. Welsh Liberal Democrats will continue to campaign for a pupil premium that matches our expectations. If this is not in place by the end of the Assembly term, we will continue to prioritise obtaining funding for a pupil premium worth £2,500 per pupil.
- 2.4 We anticipate that the total cost of this, excluding the £32.4 million that has already been committed, will be £158 million per annum.
- 2.5 However, it is also imperative that we ensure that the pupil premium is well-spent and focussed on those pupils that need it. As a result, we would wish to update the government’s guidance to schools on how they use the pupil premium money. The current guidance from the government makes it clear that the grant should not be used on core services. In addition, the Sutton Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have undertaken research into the effectiveness of the pupil premium in England. In particular, the Sutton Trust has audited the cost, outcomes and value for money of various education programmes to assess their impact on tackling educational inequality.

- 2.6 Whilst we believe that raising the money available to schools will be of value by itself, we need to ensure that this money is effectively spent. We will argue for a full audit of how the pupil premium has been spent, commissioned from the independent Wales Audit Office, which would evaluate the relative value for money for of programmes. The School Standards Unit should then use this information to renew the guidance to provide greater detail to schools on effective schemes.
- 2.7 It should not be up to any government authority to decide on which schemes a school should spend its money on, but schools must be willing to account for their spending. As is already the case in England, they should be required to post on what they have spent their pupil premium money on their website and local education authorities and Estyn should ensure that schools are also assessed on how well they tackle the attainment gap between pupils on free schools meals and not.
- 2.8 We will also institute the first national targets and benchmarks relating to tackling the gap between deprivation and attainment, so that national government can be held accountable for its progress against this crucial target.

PROPOSAL II: We will continue to expand the pupil premium until we reach our target of £2,500. In addition we will ensure that schools are provided with comprehensive guidance on how they can best use the pupil premium money and that they are accountable for their spending.

3. Providing the necessary support in crucial “middle phase”

- 3.1. David Egan, writing for the Bevan Foundation, has said that “increasingly there is evidence that the age phase 8-14 is perhaps the most critical in relation to student engagement and aspirations, a stronger focus on supporting disadvantaged students through this phase of education” is needed.² In part this stems from education research that suggests that formative experiences are gained at this age but also that government policy has delivered new initiatives for ages 3-7 (through the Foundation Phase) and 14-19 (through Learning Pathways.)
- 3.2. In particular, it is considered that this period is important to those pupils who are more likely to be interested in a vocational pathway for education. The reason for this disengagement and the impact of this transition is not yet fully

² Egan, David “Educational equity and school performance in Wales” in Bevan Foundation, *Poverty and Social exclusion in Wales* (2010) p.79

studied. As a result, the government should commission research of a high quality to determine why pupils become disengaged at this age and how schools across the UK, and indeed elsewhere, that have had success at maintaining and improving standards across this crucial period.

- 3.3. In the meantime, we must begin by implementing changes that we know have been successful in some schools. For example, we would want to encourage catchment areas to formalise links between primary and secondary schools by improving secondary school induction. However, we have in the past proposed experimenting with alternative teaching methods in the first few years at secondary school in an attempt to improve the experience in those schools. For example, we have suggested the idea of transition teachers, who are more focussed on the earlier years of secondary school. They would provide a better balance of pastoral and academic teaching and their increased focus would enable them to identify children who were struggling.
- 3.4. A Welsh Liberal Democrat government will develop a coherent “Middle Phase” Strategy which would focus on these issues and be developed over the course of an Assembly term. In the first instance, the strategy would identify and commission the necessary research as well as examine whether small scale projects in some catchment areas could be trialled elsewhere. We would also trial projects such as transition teachers in catchment areas where it is expected that fall-off is the greatest.
- 3.5. Individual pupil monitoring would continue throughout this phase rather than measuring pupil success on the teacher assessment at Key Stage 2 and GCSEs at Key Stage 4.

PROPOSAL III: Over the course of an Assembly term we would deliver a Middle Phase Strategy focused on ensuring that pupils are supported through this important stage. This will include a better balance of pastoral and academic support. We will also encourage more research into this emerging issue and adapt our policies to ensure it is implemented.

4. Supporting the highest achievers

- 4.1. We believe that debate around how to support students often focuses on low attainers and that some pupils can benefit from additional support to ensure that they meet their potential to achieve the best results. In some cases, this may well involve extra-curricular activity that cannot be provided in schools, to ensure that the most able pupils are able to improve their academic experiences.

- 4.2. Examples may well include preparation for applying for the very best universities, access to higher-level qualification or more tuition for able musicians. Our aim would be to make sure that similar programmes were available to students with the right abilities regardless of their background or which school they attend. Again, we would not necessarily dictate what programmes will be available into which schools could enrol their pupils. However, we would seek to provide some guidance on which programmes would be the most useful.
- 4.3. It is our aim that this support would be funded nationally, so as not to increase the financial burden on schools. We would consult as to whether the scheme should be administered nationally or regionally. This programme would exist to allow schools and local education authorities or regional consortia to develop innovative programmes to support the highest achievers. It would be an additional programme and would supplement schools' existing extra-curricular activity. We estimate that it would cost around £10m per annum.

PROPOSAL IV: We will establish a nationwide high attainment programme, funded nationally, which will develop and co-ordinate access to programmes for high achievers.

5. Reforming the curriculum

- 5.1. The Minister for Education is currently undergoing a wide-ranging review and assessment of the National Curriculum, beginning with some smaller task-and-finish groups into specific areas, such as Welsh history on the history curriculum and the teaching of ICT. This review was commissioned on 1st October 2012 and will be delivered in two phases, with the second phase due in September 2014. After this, they will begin with implementation.
- 5.2. It is not yet clear how this review will look when it is finished. The Minister said at the time that, "the review will respond to concerns about the reliability of teacher assessment highlighted by Estyn, consider whether standards/levels of attainment contained within our curriculum are sufficiently stretching and explore the impact of changing assessment on the wider curriculum. I have asked officials to consider, in particular, the use and usefulness of the current approach to level descriptors and attainment targets, the most appropriate modes of assessment, how assessment data is used and reported, and the

timing of the assessments that are undertaken and which subjects it is necessary to assess.”³

- 5.3. This statement is relatively unspecific and it is possible that the review could become either more prescriptive in either the content of what is in lessons or how teachers are expected to teach. This review has the potential to substantially reform the curriculum in Wales. We must consider if, when this review is published, we wish to oppose the programme and subsequently propose a second radical overhaul within a short space of time.
- 5.4. Any government would wish to review the implementation and operation of a new curriculum periodically and we will do so during the Assembly term. In particular, we would seek to ensure that any changes to the curriculum were less prescriptive and allow schools and teachers the ability to vary the teaching methods to suit local circumstances.
- 5.5. However, one issue which does need to be taken seriously is the mis-match between skills learnt on a curriculum geared towards GCSEs, which focuses on acquisition of knowledge, and the curriculum needed to achieve the government’s PISA targets, which would need to focus knowledge-application. We would also measure any proposed new curriculum against whether or not it meets our aim of championing skills as much as qualifications.

PROPOSAL V: We will engage constructively with the Government’s Curriculum Review and not prejudge its outcome, but will argue for improvements to the ‘application of knowledge’ section of the curriculum and seek to ensure that schools and teachers have sufficient freedom to excel. We would also audit the effectiveness and implementation of any curriculum after three years.

³ Written Statement by the Minister for Education, 1 October 2012.

PART II: MEETING THE STANDARD

6. Accountability and governance

- 6.1. We believe that in any area of public life, accountability improves performance. This is true for democratically-elected bodies, but it is also true for bodies who provide public services. At the moment, scrutiny of the work of a school is carried out by the governing body and by the local education authority. In addition, parents carry out informal scrutiny. However, we believe that the accountability of schools for their performances needs to be improved.
- 6.2. As the body responsible for the running of a particular school, the Board of Governors should be the primary focus for monitoring how schools are improving. Volunteer Governors play a valuable role in their community, often to a high standard. We are concerned that the level of expertise of governors could be higher. Mandatory training should be developed as well as an expectation of 75% attendance (excluding periods of absences for illness, parental leave etc.).
- 6.3. However, we would accompany this by simplifying the roles of the governing body. We believe that they should focus on strategic oversight of the school, especially issues such as selecting the head teacher, setting strategic goals, monitoring standards, budget oversight and acting as a court of appeal". The day-to-day management of the school should be an issue for the staff. We would also launch a public awareness campaign to encourage people to become governors and to raise the status of the role.
- 6.4. In addition to this, we would trial a system of catchment area-wide governing bodies to see if school governance can be more effectively provided with several schools being covered by one governing body. We will focus on those areas that are having trouble recruiting governors and try and find pilot programmes in rural and urban areas to evaluate the applicability of this model across Wales. We will also examine the success of the similar model used in post-16 education in Denbighshire.

PROPOSAL VI: We will reform the role of governors to ensure that they focus more on strategic oversight. We will also trial catchment area-wide governing bodies to evaluate whether these provide a better model for oversight and scrutiny. We will raise the status of governors by launching a public campaign to recruit more and by improving the training available.

- 6.5. We are concerned that the small size of local education authorities makes it difficult for them to effectively drive up standards. Any model that is created by the Welsh government must, however, maintain a strong level of local accountability for councils and voters. Funding for schools should remain a local council responsibility. We would want to ensure that any model would be held accountable to the individual councils and we would also expect local council education executive members to ensure that they undertook robust scrutiny.
- 6.6. If the Welsh government presses ahead with a plan to regionalise local education authorities or expand the roles of school consortia, then it is unlikely that we would seek to initiate another wholesale reform in such a short period of time. Another disruptive reform would be unlikely to help with our desire to improve standards.
- 6.7. However, we would seek to increase the capacity of these new bodies to drive school improvement in a number of ways. Firstly, we would support them in spreading best practice between the highest performing schools and the lowest performing schools. In the first instance, we would want to see mentoring programmes established with exemplars of best practice being twinned with poorer performing schools. These schools should be within the same local authority area where possible, or in neighbouring authorities. Less good schools should be encourage allowing staff and teachers to spend time in the better school examining best practice and emulate these programmes in their school.
- 6.8. Secondly, we would improve the capacity of local education authorities to drive improvements in teaching standards. The national School Standards Unit would work with local education authorities in order to improve teaching standard in regions of Wales. This would involve identifying continuing professional development and sharing techniques to improve teachers' knowledge of new teaching techniques.

PROPOSAL VII: We would ensure that any new model for delivery education services (whether regional consortia or local education authorities) will be accountable to local authorities. In addition, either any new regional arrangements or the existing LEAs would be required to develop mentoring programmes for schools and to work with the School Standards Unit to develop regional approaches to improving teacher performance.

- 6.9. Parents are also entitled to information on the success of their local schools as they, and their children, are entitled to know how well their school is performing. However, we do not believe that crude ranking systems based on

exam results adequately represents the quality of a school. Currently, the two main sources of independent assessment of school quality is through their Estyn assessments., which grade schools into one of a few broad categories such as “excellent,” “good,” “adequate” and so on. In addition, the Welsh Government has devised its school banding system, which awards each school a grade from 1 (being the best) to 5 (being the lowest). It was not intended that the full scores would be available, but in practice these are routinely published under the Freedom of Information Act.

- 6.10. We would retain the current Estyn grading system which is generally easy to understand. However, there have been complaints about the operation of the current school banding system, which can overly-reward schools with high numbers of pupils on free school meals and under-reward high-performing schools which are not able to demonstrate the same level of progress each year.
- 6.11. Our proposed system for individual data monitoring should be incorporated into any banding model so that we can assess schools on how well they are supporting their pupils. Likewise, we should replace the free school meals indicators with an indicator that measures the attainment gap between pupils and free school meals and those who are not. This will require an overhaul of the calculation of how schools are assessed. We will focus it on how well pupils perform compared to expectations as well as attainment.
- 6.12. In addition, these two independent assessment measures should be seen as complementary and we will encourage parents to use both the Estyn reports and banding measures to evaluate their schools. Public bodies should be encouraged to publish both methods of assessment.

PROPOSAL VIII: We will retain the current Estyn assessment regime, but reform the school banding system to ensure that it measures schools performance in regards to pupil performance. We will re-structure the system to demonstrate how well schools are achieving in supporting pupils to meet their own potential, in line with our recommendations on individual pupil monitoring.

- 6.1. In Wales, considerably fewer schools are outside of local authority control than are in England. However, we strongly believe that headteachers and teachers are the best people to decide how to run individual schools. It is the responsibility of teachers to teach, it is the responsibility of government to provide the framework within which this teaching can flourish.

- 6.2. The government should strongly promote best practice between schools. The School Standards Unit has been established by the government in order to ensure that policy is implemented. We will expand its remit to ensure that it can spread best practice throughout Welsh schools.

PROPOSAL IX: Schools will remain in charge of precisely how they focus on improving standards. We will ensure that they are supported with the correct national framework and expand the School Standards Unit in order to promote a wide-range of successful techniques.

7. Teaching quality

- 7.1. Good teachers are essential to good schools. At the moment while our results are slipping, we need to be supporting good teachers more – giving them the chance to provide our children with the best education possible. We will invest properly to offer new training and development opportunities to teachers, driving up standards and challenging our teachers deliver for our children.
- 7.2. We will establish a programme for continuing professional development, to increase the professional development available for teachers. Our new programme will be run on a national basis, in the same way as teaching terms and conditions are at present. We want professional development to be an on-going process. Running it on a national basis, will overcome equality of access issues and ensure that unions are able to input into what training is appropriate. We estimate that such a programme would cost £10m per annum.
- 7.3. Flexibility over the scheme will also allow us to update training processes more quickly and to introduce schemes such as Teach Next as is being done in England if they are considered appropriate. We will also ensure that this new programme provides behaviour management advice.
- 7.4. We will place change the arrangements for Newly-Qualified Teachers so that their first year as an NQT is a trial year. They would continue to act as a teacher during this year and at the end of the year, if they had demonstrated continued aptitude then they would become a full teacher. However, their training period could also be extended by an additional year. Behaviour management modules would become an important part of initial teacher training.
- 7.5. We will also consider, given the current arrangements for teachers' terms and conditions, to make it easier to incentivise the best teachers to teach in

schools where high-quality leadership is needed and to provide head teachers with support in tackling underperformance.

PROPOSAL X: We will overhaul the quality of teaching quality by setting up a new scheme to deliver cutting-edge training on a national basis. In addition we will make the completion of initial teacher training contingent on a year teaching in schools. Finally we will examine making teachers' terms and conditions more flexible to encourage the best teachers to work in the most demanding schools and to tackle poor performance.

