

Pwyllgor Menter a Dysgu
Enterprise and Learning Committee
Bae Caerdydd / Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd / Cardiff CF99 1NA

Leighton Andrews AM
Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong
Learning
Welsh Assembly Government

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Dear Leighton

The Transformation Agenda for Post-16 Education

As you know, the Enterprise and Learning Committee has been considering the Welsh Government's Transformation Agenda for post-16 education. We have been particularly interested to find out what progress has been made across Wales to integrate the work of schools, further education institutions and other providers and the effect that this is having on learners and staff.

We appreciate that these are very early days in the implementation of the Transformation Agenda, but we were keen to canvass the views of a range of stakeholders, including CollegesWales, the Welsh Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Education in Wales, the teaching unions and the then Deputy Minister for Skills, John Griffiths AM. We also held a formal meeting in Barry to take evidence from head teachers and students of two secondary schools and the Principal of Barry College to find out how the new arrangements were panning out.

Since the situation is still so fluid, we are not at this stage producing a report of our inquiry. Yet a number of issues have emerged from our scrutiny, which we would like to bring to the attention of you and your Government colleagues, and on which we would welcome your views.

We therefore set out below a number of points that we hope you will be able to address in taking the Transformation Agenda forward. It is our intention to make this letter public, and also to publish your response.

Issues for the Welsh Assembly Government

It is fair to say that there appeared to be broad consensus among witnesses in welcoming and supporting the aims and aspirations of the Transformation Agenda and the principle of collaboration between learning providers. We did, however, hear some concerns about implementation and delivery, which we would like you to consider.

Learning Partnerships

We heard that relationships between colleges, local authorities and schools to develop the Transformation Agenda are inconsistent across Wales, but there appeared to us to be a marked difference between the further education and schools sectors.

There was, among the schools sector, a degree of dissatisfaction at the amount and timeliness of consultation that had taken place over the Government's transformation policy, and as a result some resentment has built up in some areas. We also heard that consultation over proposals at a local level between local authorities, schools, governors and teachers has been poor in some places.

There appeared to be a general feeling that the pace of change within the education sector over the last ten years has been so fast that it has been difficult to achieve tangible results before consecutive strategies have been adequately aligned and made compatible with one another (e.g. The Learning Country, 14-19 Learning Pathways, Welsh Baccalaureate, Schools Effectiveness Framework, Skills that Work for Wales, Transferring Education and Training Provision in Wales, Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure, 21st Century Schools, and the Welsh Medium Education Strategy).

- 1. Although we appreciate that the Welsh Assembly Government does not play the lead role in defining relationships between partners in individual local education authorities, we would like to know what influence you could bring to bear on achieving better buy-in between all those involved in the transformation process, including the teaching professionals? As noted in the Ministerial foreword of *Y Siwrnai*, better progress has been made in some local authorities than in others. Is the Welsh Government able to encourage progress in those areas where transformation is happening at a slower pace?**

The issue of how collaboration could be achieved across local authority borders was also raised.

- 2. We would welcome any further thoughts you may have had since your appearance before the Committee on 29 April, on cross-border delivery of the Transformation Agenda.**

Work Based Learning

We heard that links between further education and employers need to be tailored to individual circumstances, but that the 14-19 Learning Pathways have helped considerably in this regard.

You will be aware that the Wales Audit Office's report, *'Follow-up report on Work Based Learning'* published last October concluded that the Welsh Government has not applied important wider lessons from earlier problems in Work Based Learning across all of its departments.

- 3. We believe that learning partnerships may need to do more work to engage with employers and promote the benefits of Work Based Learning, and we would welcome your views on how the Welsh Assembly Government could play a role in expediting this process.**
- 4. We would also like assurances from you that organisational changes in the Welsh Government will enable different departments to share information more widely and that you share with us your response to the recommendations in the Wales Audit Office follow-up report on Work Based Learning.**

Since we finished taking evidence on this inquiry, the Petitions Committee has made us aware of a petition submitted by Action for Children that calls for improvements in Work Based Learning provision so that it better meets the needs of vulnerable young people. The Petitions Committee has asked us to raise this issue with you and it seemed to us that the most effective way we could do that is to ask you for a response in your reply to this letter.

- 5. Could you outline the support that is currently offered to young people who are living independently or are homeless for them to be able to make informed choices about the training and learning options available to them, and what evidence is there that this support is working effectively across the whole of Wales?**

Additional Learning Needs

We appreciate that the task and finish group is currently examining the issues affecting students with additional learning needs, and we look forward to its findings. We are also aware that funding for this important area has increased, although we are keen to have a better understanding of what benefits are being secured as a result. The Committee was interested in the suggestion made by one of our witnesses that the funding of students with ALN should follow the individual throughout their education, as opposed to there being a centralised allocation.

- 6. How will you ensure that students with additional learning needs will benefit fully from the opportunities presented by the Transformation Agenda? We would also like to know what specific provision is being made to address the needs of other vulnerable young people, such as those leaving care.**

Funding

Funding of the Transformation Agenda was an issue of some concern, and for a variety of reasons. Concerns were expressed about the sustainability of funding in the longer-term when specific grants, for example those for 14-19 Learning Networks, come to an end. We also heard questions regarding the cost-effectiveness of collaboration when it can incur additional expense, for example increased transport costs for pupils and staff having to travel between sites (and the added supervision involved), or specialist equipment for certain vocational courses. The effect of funding reductions on joint in-service training between teachers and lecturers was also raised as an issue.

- 7. What are your medium and long-term funding commitments for the Transformation Agenda and how can the Welsh Assembly Government better focus its funding on encouraging and supporting partnerships?**

Sector Skills Councils

Although some Sector Skills Councils are functioning well and there has been positive engagement within 14-19 Learning Networks including contributions to the development of curriculum relevant to their sector, we heard that the picture is patchy across Wales. This may be because of lack of resources or geographical challenges.

- 8. Could you outline how you propose addressing capacity and performance issues in some sector skills councils, and**

especially on how smaller businesses and employers can be engaged in the Transformation Agenda?

Welsh-medium Provision

We heard that local authorities that have sparse or isolated populations have experienced additional challenges with the provision of Welsh-medium education, and have found it especially difficult to respond to the Transformation Agenda. Indeed, Jane Hutt AM, the previous Minister, recognised that some local authorities, particularly in rural areas, would have difficulty in meeting the requirement to further develop Welsh-medium provision in the context of the Welsh-medium Education Strategy and the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure.

We anticipate that the three Welsh-medium and Bilingual Education Forums will have a key role to play in this area, although there was some concern from witnesses that the forums should not increase management and organisation costs to the detriment of teaching and learning or duplicate the work of existing committees and networks.

9. What plans do you have to ensure that pupils in Welsh-medium education do not have to travel further or have less choice than pupils in the English-medium sector?

We also heard that in expanding the choice of vocational courses, the Transformation Agenda was creating challenges for schools and colleges to provide those courses in the Welsh language.

10. How will you ensure that the necessary trained and qualified teaching staff are in place to provide the number and range of vocational courses required by statute through the medium of Welsh?

School Sixth Forms

We received some anecdotal evidence that the Transformation Agenda may have a negative effect on school sixth forms, and there were accusations of the Welsh Government subtly pushing a tertiary approach.

There was also concern expressed about the risk of teacher redundancies as a result of structural changes to sixth forms, the possible loss of experienced teachers from schools, low morale among teaching staff and the impact this could have on standards within schools.

- 11. What role does the Welsh Assembly Government have in incorporating workforce planning into the Transformation Agenda and in consulting the teaching professionals, and what would be your response to the suggestion that all transformation plans should contain an impact assessment on the school and/or college workforce?**

We also heard some concerns raised about further education lecturers having to adjust to teaching younger students, and how that transitional training could be financed.

- 12. While we realise that some progress is being made to train or retrain further education lecturers to teach school-age pupils, how will this be achieved across the board, and will there be dedicated funding available for this purpose?**

Learning Coaches

Although the principle of learning coaches was welcomed, it was suggested by some witnesses that a better use of time and money would have been to have had an agreement about pupils' rights to advice and then measure a school's performance in meeting that right.

The Committee also received evidence that the original concept of the Learning Coach as one-to-one sessions tailored to the needs of young people most in need of support had been diluted during the implementation process. The reasons cited were a lack of sustainable funding, the difficulties of recruiting Learning Coaches – particularly Welsh speaking Learning Coaches – and the existence in many schools of established pastoral support and mentoring arrangements.

- 13. Could you respond to the concern that funding additional posts such as learning coaches should add value and not detract from the standards of teaching in secondary schools, and could you clarify whether the Welsh Assembly Government is still committed to promoting and supporting Learning Coaches in schools or whether this has become a more generic role that you expect to be undertaken by both teaching and non-teaching staff?**

Learner preferences

Throughout our inquiry, there was widespread support for a greater focus on the individual learner, on raising standards, on widening participation and improving employability – as opposed to focusing on

educational structures and processes. Yet the evidence we received suggested that more needed to be done at all levels (parents, teachers, careers advisers) to promote parity of esteem between academic and vocational education.

14. In transforming post-16 education, what store do you place on student choice, in addition to the statutory entitlements of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure? What account is taken of learners' views, and those of their parents or carers, not just about choice of courses, but also about the type of institution they want to learn in, and how can there be more parity between the value placed on academic and vocational education?

Finally, there were many issues to emerge from the evidence surrounding disaffected young people. You will be aware that our next inquiry will be to examine the effectiveness of strategies and provision for those young people not in education, employment or training, and we look forward to a scrutiny session with you on those issues on 24 June.

In the meantime, the Committee looks forward to your views and comments on the 14 points raised above, and we would like to thank you for your continued assistance in this inquiry.

Yours sincerely



Gareth Jones AM
Committee Chair