

# **Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC) - Evidence to the Enterprise and Learning Committee on implementing the recommendations of the former Committee on School Funding's *Report on School Funding Arrangements in Wales* (June 2006)**

## **Foreword**

It appears that the Assembly has failed to act successfully on a number of recommendations in the original report, as a lack of transparency continues to be a problem.

It may be worth noting the comments made by the *School Teachers' Review Body* in Part One of its 17<sup>th</sup> Report on the nature of the Assembly Government's evidence to the body (as well as that of the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), in England:

- 1.14 The most important issue relates to affordability matters. The affordability of our recommendations is an entirely proper consideration and in the course of our work on this review we put considerable effort into making clear what information we required to be able to pursue this consideration in a thorough, evidence-based way. But for the period for which our recommendations will apply, neither the Department (DCSF) nor the Welsh Assembly Government provided us with information on critical areas such as the levels of revenue funding for schools or anticipated cost pressures. Transparency requires more than Government assertions on affordability: timely, relevant and sufficiently detailed information must be available so all participants in the process can consider, probe and challenge.
- 1.15 The Department and the Welsh Assembly Government have explained that the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) was not finalised until the end of our process. We note this, but must observe that it was foreseeable when the timeline for our report was set . . .

**1. The funding process** – do you feel you understand the processes involved in how schools are funded?

- a) What information would you find useful to help you understand the process – and why?
- b) If you have any views on the legislative framework governing the funding of schools in Wales, please include in your response

1.1 The funding process is unclear and we feel certain that the majority of people do not understand the processes of school funding. At the moment, the fact is that there are 22 different funding processes because of the existence of 22 Local Authorities. There are occasions on which a central department of the LEA claws money back from schools to pay for services, e.g. legal services, ITC etc. Last year, this cost £4 million in one Authority.

There is not even one common way of reporting on the issues of school funding. It appears that the Section 52 Statements remain inconsistent throughout Wales.

1.2 No steps have been taken towards introducing the minimum core entitlement for every pupil. UCAC does not believe that per capita funding is adequate. Major educational developments such as the Foundation Phase, 14-19 Learning Pathways, require investments that take account of issues such as the need for higher staffing levels, new facilities / buildings etc.

1.3 There is no transparency in the process, and we still have a long way to go. It is still possible for the Assembly and the LAs to blame each other for the funding problems – the funding fog contributes to this. There is a need for transparency at every level, e.g. teachers and unions should be able to see how much money was available, where it came from and where it was spent. Transparency ensures accountability.

1.4 Extra sources of funding complicate issues further and make transparency even more difficult.

1.5 It would be useful if a guidance document were available for stakeholders, including details of every funding source available to schools and Local Education Authorities, and details of the process of decision-making on funding, how to apply for / receive funding. The booklet should contain details of the Legislative Framework which drives the process.

- 2. Access to information**, including the provision of information on the web – do you feel you have ready access to the information you would like on how your school, and other schools, are funded?
- (a) What information would you like – and in what form – and why?
  - (b) The Assembly Government is developing a school funding section on the main Assembly Government website, including a dedicated e-mail address for enquiries, to provide accessible information on school funding.
    - (i) What information would you like to see on the dedicated area of the website?
    - (ii) How would you like to be kept up-to-date with current information?

2.1 There is a need for better access to information, e.g. information about special grants on the web. Currently, relevant information has to be searched for. Governors currently seem uncertain as to what money (funding sources) is available, or what the criteria are in order to access it.

2.2 It is difficult to find relevant information on the Assembly's website – the section on education funding only mentions student funding. We discovered other information about funding by accident whilst searching for other things!

2.3 UCAC telephoned the Assembly's Publications Department to ask for documents containing information about school funding, with the explanation

that we required information about funding methods and sources of funding for schools. The only document found was the Report on School Funding Arrangements in Wales (June 2006)! We also contacted the Assembly's Statistical Directorate Department and it was suggested that we should have discussions with the Capital Funding and School Buildings Department and the Revenue Funding and Health and Safety Department. These departments told UCAC that there were no information documents available, but that the Assembly was working on preparing some generic information for the website which would be suitable for those who had no information at all on schools funding – but that it was not ready yet. It was noted that details of post-16 grants are available on the website. We were told that the details of every LEA should be looked at in order to find information about education funding and were also told to look at the minutes of the School Funding Forum meetings, as decisions regarding education funding are taken locally, not centrally. It was noted that the Local Government Revenue Settlement would provide an estimate of how much funding every county had received for all their services but not for education specifically.

In fact, it proved very difficult and it took quite some time to find non-specific information. Therefore, it is very difficult to find specific, useful information, either by phone or on the web.

2.4 Every school / LEA / stakeholder should receive a hard copy of a list which includes every funding source available to them and how to access the money. The communication should include details of how to find relevant information / forms etc. on the web. We can only be certain that everybody receives / has access to the same information by sending hard copies as well as posting information on the web.

3. **Additional funding** – where additional funding is made available, perhaps through a grant from the Assembly Government e.g. money for the free breakfast initiative or RAISE funding; do you receive useful information at the appropriate time? How could the flow of information be improved?

3.1 Again, if the details of every grant were available at the beginning of the school year in a comprehensive booklet, everyone would receive the information on time and at the same time. The details of EVERY grant should be noted, including the closing date, all necessary forms (or details of how to access the forms), relevant contact names, etc...

3.2 The timing of the information is not the only problem. Grants are available for post-16 courses as well as the above and the bidding culture and the idea of having to apply for grants for extra funding makes it more difficult to ensure transparency. This also adds to the workload – plans must be submitted as part of the bid. UCAC believes that short term grants are not sufficient to ensure development and planning for the future. We need more long term investment to ensure that schools are able to establish and develop plans

such as the Breakfast Initiative, Primary / Secondary transition, 14-19 Learning Pathways courses, etc. With regard to post -16 grants, it must be ensured that institutions receive information in plenty of time to make arrangements for the following academic year.

3.3 We also need to ask how much of the education funding is now used (or wasted) on processing and auditing bids and deciding who will receive the money?

3.4 If the funding process included considering curricular needs, e.g. adult:child ratio in the Foundation Phase; the need for higher staffing levels in order to achieve the 14-19 Learning Pathways vision, free time for teachers to jointly moderate KS2 / KS3, which all incur extra costs, the funding formula would be much fairer for every school, and there would be much less need for extra grants.

3.5 We must keep in mind, also, that although the number of children who have free school meals is an indicator of poverty, this is not the only such indicator – there is no recognition, currently, for children whose parents receive Working Tax Credit, which is also an indicator of poverty and disadvantage.

3.6 Because of the current formula, pupils from poor backgrounds who attend schools where there are fewer pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. some of our Welsh medium schools) cannot access RAISE funding; their needs are ignored.

4. **Investment in school buildings**– do you think information on school building investment at the local level is clear?

(a) How could information on the source and amount of funding on capital programmes (specifically buildings) be clearer?

4.1 More clarity is sometimes needed. Modernisation Schemes often mention closing / merging / building schools, but no mention is made of how to fund these initiatives. It should be a requirement to note the sources and the sums available for such programmes when possible plans for changes to buildings are announced.

4.2 Schools should not have to put money aside from their capital funds in order to fund building programmes. This is one reason why some schools' reserves seem high because they have put funds to one side in order to pay for improvements to buildings or even a building programme. UCAC has been given to understand that there are some Authorities who have put money aside for buildings, but haven't used it.

4.3 UCAC is opposed to using more PFI funding to build schools. The system can often lead to high costs for the school, with money being redirected away from pupils' education. We should not forget that these private companies

exist to make profits – that is their main aim. The lack of flexibility in some agreements has led to disadvantages to some schools in the past.

5. **School budget fora** – do you think these are operating effectively?  
What outcomes would you like to see from the Welsh Assembly Government review of school budget fora?

5.1 UCAC asks the questions, “Do they meet in every Authority? What is their purpose? Is it to rubber stamp decisions?”

There are some positive examples, but not everyone understands how they work. They do not have decision-making powers in Wales, and there is a danger that they become a talking shop. It depends entirely, therefore, on the calibre of the personnel and the ethos of the forum.

5.2 There is no necessity to include Teaching Unions on the funding fora – Teaching Unions’ membership should be compulsory.

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