

## GUEST COLUMN – March 2024

### Real policies to solve real problems Keith Grainger

Recently schools received detailed guidance from the Department for Education on banning the use of mobile phones in school. A 'non-policy for a non-problem' was the response of one teaching union.

I have spent time with colleagues mulling over the new guidance on phones and the finer details of implementation. The use of mobile phones in schools has been much debated and researched. Some advocate a ban, pointing to the reduction in distraction and disruption (they are banned from the kitchen table in our home for similar reasons) and the knock-on benefits to student achievement.

Yet I also value the positive use of mobile phones. As an educational tool in school, pupils have used their phone for research purposes, to access educational apps, and to engage with our behaviour and achievement on-line platform. When permitted, phone use has enriched many lessons.

Young people enjoy using their phones and use has provided a positive and constructive sense of connection. During the pandemic, for many it was the only way of connecting. However, rather than educating on responsible use of phones, students will now be separated from their devices.

We have worried about the unintended consequences of a ban and whether more problems may arise as a result, but this has dissipated as other concerns have overtaken. Our local MP recently visited and asked about the issues facing the school. In response, phones never got a thought, let alone a mention. There are far bigger challenges and, at the moment, opportunities are harder to see.

**First**, there is the growing challenge and cost of special education needs. Few, if any, local authorities are untouched by financial pressures: growing deficits in education budgets due to spending of high needs block funding are tipping things over the edge. Cumulative deficits are being rolled over into each new financial year and, in many cases, projected deficits just a few years ahead are astonishing.

Local Authorities are being invited (if one can refer to it as an invitation) by the DfE to submit 'break even' plans under a 'safety valve' agreement to demonstrate the ability to fund a proportion of the accumulated deficit - significantly more than the one-off grant funding that the DfE will provide as a result.

There may be some merit in these plans if they can begin to help mainstream schools better meet local needs. Many plans feature new specialist provision, including in schools, supported by capital place plans, to help grow the range and quality of specialist provision at a local level, thus reducing demand for more expensive out-of-borough placements and/or in independent non-maintained specialist settings.

Adequate funding would help schools to provide the highest quality teaching to all pupils and become beacons of best SEND practice – the preferred choice of local families – growing local expertise and capacity, and saving out-of-area placement and transport costs.

The reality is that, in nearly all cases, school budgets are being ‘top sliced’ to fund the rest of the accumulated deficit that the DfE grant will not cover, and a range of services are being cut further to help local authorities ‘break even’. There does not appear to be any alternative. It will undoubtedly stretch school budgets further and place increasing pressure on services for young people.

The fact that several councils are in this situation is telling - funding is inadequate and this is a nationwide issue. Whoever can convince me that they have the answer to addressing this problem would get my vote.

**Second**, there is a pressing need to tackle the teacher recruitment and retention crisis. Pupil numbers are projected to rise, but job applications for teaching posts are falling. Fewer are entering and staying in the profession for various reasons. Coupled with finely trimmed budgets year-on-year, this makes for a deadly combination.

Schools are struggling to appoint people to join their bare-bones body of staff. Schools want to provide the best possible teacher training and support to those aspiring to join and those trying to get on in the profession. Creative approaches to developing and deploying the workforce are needed so that schools can begin to compete seriously with the more flexible attractions on offer in the wider labour market post-pandemic. First, you need a workforce.

*We need some real policies to solve some real problems.*

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