

Director's Conferences February 2004.
Themes from the floor

1 Seizing the Moment – how brave will we be?

There is quiet confidence that the education agenda is being promoted by individuals in various sectors (e.g. DfES) rather than organisations per se. It is a big agenda which requires big solutions and we have an opportunity to seize the moment and create a vision for Devon on the back of this change in national context.

Schools are positive about the increased responsiveness of the DfES over the last year and the feeling is that good, firmly underpinned, big ideas would be positively received and could influence government thinking.

But how brave is Devon prepared to be, how far will it go and how confident are we that change is supported from the top?

Delivering to targets is still very much on the agenda but the government are beginning to realise that the anticipated step change will not be achieved through 'more of the same'. They are receptive to innovation and keen to promote 'new localism'.

If we are going to be brave we must have a good, sound rationale and game-plan, be able to demonstrate capacity, stick together and prove the case. We need to choose the fronts on which we fight and any views or innovations put forward must be secure so that we win the argument and don't damage the education of individuals. The outcome will be improved learning for our children.

For example: KS1 SATS are stressful and competitive – we could suggest a pilot based on an Academic Council where the effects of dropping them are monitored over several years. Consideration could be given to the number of terms and length of the school day. Core education should start at 4 in Devon. Whatever we do we must future proof schools for every eventuality.

There is a perception of coasting schools and a coasting LEA in Devon so we need distinctiveness – a dynamic vision for a dynamic workforce with an acceptance that this will take time to implement.

2 Going Beyond Current Measures of Pupil Performance

There is nothing to reward overall pupil progress – our efforts are concentrated on that which is easily measurable. This is the easy option and there is a broader agenda than simply concentrating on the milestones.

There is a push on academic values with little value given to pupils with practical Skills. We should emphasise skills pupils have when they leave school rather than pressurising them into purely academic achievement and concentrate on preparation of the pupil for their contribution to society. We need to have the debate on wider, not just academic, intelligence. No Devon pupil should leave school not knowing what they are good at. Despite schools being under pressure to deliver national strategies (literature and numeracy) a lot of schools have achieved a broad and balanced curriculum. We need scope to build in factors to statistics of performance other than the required numbers.

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3 The Tensions Between Raising Standards and Inclusion

How do we solve the tensions between raising standards and inclusion? Our definitions in documents have been too narrow. Inclusion is of tremendous benefit to the individual but staff are criticised when standards are not reached if it skews SATS results.

The most vulnerable 40% of pupils are not performing as well because of a decade plus of political interference in education and we need to address the bigger picture before looking inwardly at ourselves.

We tend to have a 'one size fits all' approach to the 40% poorest performers which doesn't work and education alone will not make a difference to improving their lot. The key must be that young people are equipped for life and given the confidence to move beyond the 'safety barriers.' Benchmarks are there right from the start – the 40% are in a group which is told constantly that it has failed. We must value the progress of all children.

We must not dilute our efforts on gifted and talented pupils however outcomes must be for all young people – not just raising standards for the majority

4 Type of LEA and its Relationship with Schools

The vision is about a cultural change across the whole education community rather than simply the LEA or schools improving. Achieving the vision will come about through building trust, training and development and for this to happen, the schools/LEA relationship has to fundamentally change. 'Are we about lighting lamps or filling pots?'

The LEA should be inspirational to keep innovative teachers in the system as the field will become competitive. It should also be prepared to take risks, especially around the 40% poorest performers, encourage schools and stand up and be counted, especially with OfSTED and the DfES.

There hasn't been a degree of trust between schools and the LEA in the past – we have tended to focus on resources –and the element of trust has been lost, particularly where schools have been underperforming.

The LEA needs to be supportive and a 'critical friend' – standing alongside schools when they are both successful and not successful.

We must create the right atmosphere between the LEA and schools.

There should be fewer rebuttals and a move back into a genuine partnership with a collegiate approach. There is great strain across the County in managing contraction which the LEA has to help schools manage through.

We need a firm knowledge base of what is happening at the front line.

The trick is to enable managers of schools to do what is right for their schools and work in a way which helps teachers do their jobs.

We also need a feeling of hope in the County before people aspire to learn and the LEA must demonstrate leadership in any structural change

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5 Our Workforce

'No change' is not an option therefore workforce/recruitment is seen as a strategic issue.

We need to attract people to Devon to work in Education. Headship and deputy jobs are not generally attractive to teachers as they are not seen as a job necessarily connected to learning – more of a business manager's job. National College research suggests that there are not enough people who want to become Heads/Leaders so we need to develop future leaders from within our existing resource.

Teacher turnover is low in Devon but progress is slow – this should be the reverse and we need to look internally for the reasons.

Teachers feel that they are bogged down with the paperwork when they should be in the classroom inspiring children. Workforce remodelling is seen as a marvellous idea but one that cannot be afforded. Remodelling should include time out for teachers to learn as they are models of learning as much as teaching.

6 Structure

The biggest challenge is to determine the structure Devon needs to celebrate excellence which is going on now.

Cultural change is difficult and any structure put in place for the vision should give a clear message of our intentions.

The quality of early year's education is key and the feeling is that we have got it wrong.

Current moves to provide 0-14, 0-16 etc. institutions may be difficult to achieve across the board because of our current make-up.

The increase in young people staying on in formal education should be a key message for changes in the KS4 curriculum and assistance should be given by the LEA in the 14-19 continuums. Outcomes are important re the 14-19 agenda and the government sees room for improvement strategically to see the whole system of tertiary education work. We have lost sight of this.

7 Learning how to and doing things better

The national curriculum is too restrictive and we are still working to a 19 century curriculum in the 21 century. Young teachers, very much the mechanics of the current system and excellent technicians, need confidence to have the independence to be innovative and freedom to think.

A lot of experienced teachers were trained to be creative/innovative and we should capture this experience and use it to our advantage.

The government seems frightened to empower schools to liberate – we must liberate schools to bring in creative thinking

As educators, we should all encourage innovation. Innovation involves risk and we must build into the vision how we will deal with failure. We must also underpin innovation and be able to demonstrate a firm foundation.

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We should promote supporting learning in communities and widen children's horizons allowing them to choose. Education should be something pupils want to do rather than something that is done to them. Children need to be able to take risks and be confident enough to fail – schools don't usually model this ethos positively.

Advisers need to broaden their horizons rather than concentrate on literacy, numeracy and leadership. Devon needs a primary strategy and a secondary strategy.

The LEA is talking to Exeter University about a partnership approach to a formal research project which will align forward planning and involve teachers.

We need to include enthusiasm, enjoyment, motivation, hope, wanting to learn and the development of basic communication skills for pupils in our aspirations.

8 Academic Councils/Clusters

We need to change the name of Academic Councils and think afresh. They need to be empowered and supported more to drive the agenda forward and the LEA must support the change.

We should play to Devon's strengths. The primary and secondary sectors are working well together but there is scope for more good practice and further areas of working at cluster level, e.g. work with early year providers, post 16 opportunities, which should not be top down where secondary schools influence.

Academic Councils could be the horizontal network for special schools.

There is a huge amount of goodwill amongst Heads of special schools to deliver changes to SEN and to help colleagues in mainstream.

There is a feeling that we are 'all in it together' but Academic councils are not the only network – others exist and also need support.

9 Work with Parents

'There are no problem children – only problem parents' we must seek to support and to maintain the dialogue particularly with regard to the 40% under achievers, and work should start, pre-natal, through other agencies. We can't change the world ourselves, we need to get parents involved and get their views on the sort of education system they need.

A lot of work would be needed to educate parents if we move away from league tables etc. as they are currently a powerful influence on the perception of performance.

Parents could work with Academic Councils rather than at individual school level.

Pupil behaviour takes up a lot of resource. The County council needs to take responsibility on what it tells parents – it's not just an LEA/schools issue.

10 How we Consult and Communicate

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Consultation and Communication are big issues and, if done in a business-like way, will empower people.
Consultation with parents and young people is already underway.
Teachers are going to help to make the vision work and so need to be engaged in the thinking along with parents and young people. The vision will not work if it is seen to be 'owned' by management.

11 Extended Schools

Extended schools should be central to our vision. They afford real opportunities to be creative and work constructively with other agencies e.g. social services, health, and current links with such agencies are already showing benefits.
Areas of creativity would be at school/groups of schools level rather than at LEA level and would incorporate thinking on adult learners.
We need to look holistically at children across the range of phases and pilots are the way forward rather than 'one size fits all'

12 The Impact of Socio-Economic and Demographic Factors

Devon is a low wage-high employment economy. Its GDP is only 77% of the national average but the retirement age profile has an impact. This is a complex picture which tends to dampen aspiration and which requires a Devon rather than LEA strategy to take on the socio-economic issues.
Rural deprivation is an important issue and the current system is skewed against rural areas. The government has a real lack of recognition about youngsters and their experiences which are often as bad as those in the most deprived areas.
Young people in Devon have generally always had to move out but the difference now perhaps is the pace of change. There are limited opportunities for unskilled work. We cannot divorce education from society – 'the ills of one influence the other'. Education is a powerful influence but only one part of a system and cannot resolve all of society's problems.
Equally of concern is rural depopulation. We have 123 schools with less than 100 on the role creating a huge management cost and a recruitment issue. This is a key practical issue which the vision must address. If we take away the school from the community the social aspects suffer.
A possible solution to problems of rurality could be federation with support from the LEA to find a local solution. This would help small schools but would need pilots and willing hands as it can't be easily driven from the centre.