



NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS HEADQUARTERS

Hamilton House Mabledon Place London WC1H 9BD
Telephone 020 7388 6191 Fax 020 7387 8458
www.teachers.org.uk

General Secretary Christine Blower

Charlie Taylor
Expert Adviser on Behaviour
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

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Dear Mr Taylor

I was extremely interested to read your recent report about alternative provision.

In relation to pupil referral units, I was relieved to find that your report identified and recognised that *'staff in PRUs have a level of expertise and understanding of pupils with behavioural difficulties that is valued by local schools'* (para 29). I was pleased also that your report acknowledges that the children and young people in PRUs are vulnerable and have complex needs. We all agree that such children deserve excellent provision and excellent teaching.

It was important for you to record that a greater proportion of PRUs are rated good or outstanding than mainstream schools. We believe that Ministers need to acknowledge this. Inspection evidence pays testimony to many hours of exceptional dedication and commitment from teachers in PRUs. Despite unacceptable premises/buildings, a lack of information from mainstream school colleagues about transferred pupils, and the emotional challenge of disruptive behaviour, PRU teachers are a dedicated cohort of teachers. They provide the continuity and emotional support which is lacking in pupils' family lives, even to the extent of spending their own money to purchase clothing for children who do not have sufficient clothes. Ofsted does not capture the entirety and breadth of the contribution made by these expert teachers.

I think it is right that you raise questions about why two thirds of pupils in AP and PRUs are boys. The Children's Commissioner, in her *'They never give up on you'* report, has rightly set out a challenge to the profession to engage with a debate about pupil exclusion, race and gender. We believe the new equality duty holds the potential to encourage schools to think about how and what young children learn about masculinity, femininity and stereotypes about gender and race. A whole school approach to challenging stereotypes is needed.

I welcome also your focus on ensuring that teachers in PRUs are provided with adequate information. You are right that it is essential that there is an accurate assessment of children's needs to ensure that the right provision is put in place. Teachers in PRUs identify lack of information transfer as a significant barrier. The emphasis on early intervention throughout your report is useful.

I was disappointed, however, to find in your report that you urged the Government to disregard the outcomes of the pilot schemes in relation to excluded pupils and to move immediately to making significant systemic changes about funding and responsibility.

I believe this is misguided. It is surely important to allow the pilots to explore the opportunities and risks presented by delegating funding for excluded pupils. It is also essential to reflect accurately what is learned. You quote in your report the example of Cambridgeshire. This is an example also quoted by both Nick Gibb and Michael Gove and in DFE publications recently. We do not believe what has happened in Cambridgeshire allows these conclusions to be drawn. Intelligence from the ground leads me to make this assertion.

I do not agree with your conclusion that PRUs do not pay sufficient attention to improving academic attainment (para10) and that behaviour is improved '*at the expense of academic rigour*'. I contend that teachers in these settings apply their professional judgement to each individual child investing expert differentiation and advanced teaching skill in working out the best way to enable them to access learning and make progress. Your report does not prioritise emphasis on teacher's professional judgements and respect for teacher expertise and knowledge about how to enable pupils to progress. I believe this is a mistake.

The NUT's National Executive met this week and, among other issues, considered your report. They rejected wholesale your suggestion that pupil referral units should be removed from local authority council. You say that you have come across in your evidence gathering '*many PRUs who have expressed interest in operating independently from their local authority*'. I would like to challenge you on this because the evidence we are receiving from teachers in PRUs is exactly the opposite.

We are being contacted by many PRUs who are extremely anxious and distressed by your proposals. Comments which we have received about your report include:-

'I have to say it all looks rather bleak and does not take into account the LAs that have got existing strong provision models'

'There is a huge issue around staff conditions changing and how the PRU will attract staff in the future when it is already very difficult. I can appreciate that there may appear to be more freedom to innovate but PRUs can already do this'

'If LAs act as 'commissioners' they would lose the 'authority' to place pupils and AP academies could presumably refuse admission of very difficult pupils ...so would the LA have to set up its own alternative PRU to educate the academy rejects?? Would schools commission places directly with the AP academy. This contradicts Fair Access and may lead to a reduction in permanent exclusions but AP academies would be more inclined to permanently exclude themselves...then what do the LA do with their permanent exclusions pupils?'

'We consider the PRU provision in the whole of the SEN provision across the LA as part of the continuum for pupils with additional needs...this feels like the AP academy would create an 'us and them' situation and make cooperation and collaborative working really difficult.

'At the moment I line manage all the services and see the threads between the different elements of support and to some extent I have a bit of control over the movement of pupils. I think this would be lost if our PRUs break away! I also have great plans for the future of the PRU here which would almost certainly not happen if they were to become a AP academy'

Sustainable and secure PRU provision is essential. You rightly recognise in your report that providing an element of core funding to support sustainability is essential. Schools will not have the flexibility to use PRUs responsively as you suggest, if PRUs are not sustainable.

We reject the suggestion in your recommendations that it is for some reason necessary to remove PRUs from LA control. The evidence in your own report does not support this recommendation and you do not build a convincing argument about why such a recommendation is included in your report. When asked in an NUT survey about the Labour Governments 'Back on Track' White Paper, 92% of PRUs teachers said that PRUs should be part of local authority provision. PRU teachers are incredulous that removal from local authority oversight has even been suggested. To suggest such an approach shows a lack of understanding about the role of pupil referral units, and about what will best safeguard the interests of pupils in PRUs.

I enclose with this letter a copy of the NUT response to the Government's consultation about PRU Academies which concluded on 20 March 2012 for your information.

You are due to write to Michael Gove again in June and the Education Minister has invited you to continue your Review.

I would like to invite you to meet with a group of PRU teachers during the summer term in order to discuss some of the issues which you might want to consider next as your review progresses.



CHRISTINE BLOWER
General Secretary