

Thursday, 9th March 2017

Sarah Newton MP
18 Lemon Street
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By Email

Dear Mrs Newton

Adequate and sustainable school funding

Along with school leaders from every special, primary and secondary school in West Sussex, East Sussex, Essex and Cornwall, I'm contacting you again about the significant school funding issues that are gripping our schools.

In spite of a detailed and factual campaign - over a sustained period of time - we are no closer to being provided with any meaningful proposals or solutions to our current and future school funding crisis.

We acknowledge too that you have completed considerable "work behind the scenes" on our behalf. The undisputed facts, however, remain and are as follows:

- Schools in your constituencies are making far reaching cuts to services that are already stretched to breaking point. These include reducing staffing levels, increasing class sizes and making profound reductions to children's pastoral and mental health services.
- The lowest funded schools are not receiving any emergency funding for the financial year 2017/18
- The new funding formula is not new at all – it is based entirely upon the current discredited funding arrangements that we already endure
- The new funding formula only allows any school to increase its budget by 5.5%, at the same time unfunded cost pressures are rising by 8-10%
- It should also be noted that most schools in England will not benefit from a new funding formula arrangement. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that, in real terms, per pupil funding will decrease by 6.5% by 2019.

Decisions being made by Headteachers are no longer being driven solely by what is best for students and their families. The key feature of our strategic work is frequently underscored by a sense of "damage limitation". To make matters worse, we are also confronted by a chronic shortage of teachers in virtually every subject area.

As responsible professionals we all recognise that we are in challenging financial times and that schools must live within reasonable means. Difficult financial circumstances should not, however, be used as an excuse to short change our most important stakeholders - the children in our schools.

It is also vitally important to be transparent with parents and families and make it clear just how bad matters are.

It is entirely irresponsible, therefore, for the Department for Education (DfE) to suggest that schools in your constituencies can find further “efficiencies” when they have been low funded for such a long time. It is also misleading for the DfE to continue to state that more is being spent on education when in fact real terms cuts are occurring. Equally, it is a matter of vital public interest to highlight the fact that many spending priorities made by the DfE do not stand up to reasonable scrutiny. We refer to the following examples:

- The loss of £384 million that was originally earmarked for a now aborted mass academisation programme.
- £150 million earmarked for the expansion of grammar schools over the next 3 years
- Huge investment in Free Schools where there is no “basic need” and no consistent evidence as to their impact and value for money

Here, we point you directly to the acquisition of land and school sites that the DfE pursues at exorbitant cost – 4 recent land purchases cost £120m – and the independent National Audit Office which states that **‘the primary factor in decision-making has been opening (Free) schools at pace, rather than maximizing value for money.’ (NAO February 27 – 2017)**

On a daily basis school leaders have to explain and justify the decisions that we make. And quite right too. We also have to respond to legitimate questions when they are raised by students or their families.

Recently, school leaders in West Sussex posed some important questions. We asked our local MPs why schools have not been provided with emergency funding? What services should we cut? And whether they support the introduction of new grammar schools and Free schools where there is no basic need when we face chronic funding shortages? We are yet to receive an adequate response.

It is now important to understand that school leaders from Penzance to Bognor Regis to Eastbourne and onto Colchester are joining together and are united by a common purpose; we all want adequate funding for every school in the counties of Cornwall, East Sussex, Essex and West Sussex. We are certain that this view is echoed right across the country.

We have no issue with a new formula that provides additional support for schools with the highest level of need or that face circumstances such as sparsity or high living costs. All schools must, however, be given enough money to fund adequate levels of staffing, care and essential equipment.

Against this background school leaders need their local representatives to stand alongside them and make it clear to Government that current school funding proposals are unacceptable. We urge you, therefore, to:

- Ensure that you only vote in support of a new National Funding Formula that ensures minimum adequate funding for every school.

- Confirm that a new National Funding Formula must not be considered in isolation from unfunded cost burdens such as increased pension costs, national insurance, inflation and reasonable wage costs.
- Ensure that any spending initiatives by the DfE are both credible and provide best value for money.

We are, of course, raising the same issues directly with the DfE. We have no doubt, however, that public and joint pressure to ensure the very best for children and their families provides the most effective chance of success in reversing a direction of travel that if left unchecked, will undermine all that is important to our educational provision.

A joint and unequivocal statement from MPs and school leaders would be most desirable. Our children's and our country's future depends upon it.

We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,



James Davidson
Headteacher

On behalf of all schools – West Sussex, East Sussex, Essex and Cornwall



Cornwall
Association of
Secondary
Headteachers

