

Sarah's year: leading their future



Challenging the negative image of vocational courses and finding the funding and physical space to provide them were among the issues raised in a recent talk2learn hotseat discussion about the raising of the education leaving age.

The springboard for the debate was a interview with 'Sarah', a year 6 pupil who will be among the first 16-year-olds affected if the age rises to 18. Nothing less than a complete change of thinking on content and shape of education post-16 is required if the policy is to succeed, according to Deputy Head Helen Stallard.

"Vocational qualifications are still seen as inferior and it's that attitude which needs to change. There are still ghosts of 'You head for grammar school and academic subjects or do homecraft/woodwork' but children's choices are not always dictated by ability," she said.

"The current policy of placing greater emphasis on learning to learn skills and sharing the learning journey is certainly a move in the right direction. But how do we change society's/employers' attitudes?"

Lorraine Irving, an admin/finance officer in early years in Newcastle, also stressed that children who took the 'vocational' option were often classed as 'second-class citizens'.

"If the government is to achieve its aim and equip children with the skills to take them forward, a successful marketing campaign needs to be put in place to *remove the stigma and convince*

children that the extra two years spent in education will provide something for all – not just academia."

Others were concerned about more practical implications of the policy. Karen Sowten, an assistant bursar in Kent, described how her semi-rural secondary school was already 'bulging at the seams'.

"Vocational courses are a great idea, though they do need a lot of space and a lot of funding.

But introducing them is a must. Where would we be without our plumbers, carpenters, builders etc.?"

Andrea Thompson, a bursar in a small rural secondary school in Cumbria, was concerned about the future for some children in rural areas. Vocational qualifications require a higher level of funding not just because of capital equipment and building needs but also because of the smaller teacher-pupil ratios, she said.

"I do hope the government will properly recognise this. Funding for so many new initiatives eventually gets 'integrated' into the main delegated funding and this does not help a school with small pupil numbers to continue such programmes.

"Additional cost pressures in rural schools include transport costs to other providers of specialised vocational subjects such as engineering. This also adds to timetabling pressure as time for travel must be allowed. *It constricts a timetable already constrained by small numbers of teaching groups and leads to extra costs.*"

But new thinking needs to come from others, besides the government, said Keith Rendell, from a technology college in Shropshire. He suggested closer links with business could lighten the load when it came to costly specialist buildings and equipment.

"Perhaps there is also the opportunity to remodel the apprenticeship programmes so that the majority of the skills development is achieved in the workplace, thus reducing the financial burden on education."

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