

Company of Educators

Education Committee

Discussion Evening, 23 September 2015

'A World-Class Teaching Force. Discuss'

Chris Waterman

Chris Waterman led the first of the Company's Discussion Evenings for 2015 and dealt with an issue critical to the success and achievement of schools and colleges, that of teacher shortage. He characterised the current situation as a 'perfect storm'. Teachers were under ever closer scrutiny yet there were serious shortages. Given that the economy was said to be improving generally, there were increasing opportunities for graduates. Teachers could also work abroad where British schools had established schools abroad that offered a UK-style education – and much better pay and conditions. The collection and interrogation of data loomed large in schools and there was pressure for results to improve year-on-year. Creativity by teachers and pupils had little importance (and was not measured in performance tables) despite employers rating soft skills as being very valuable.

There were those in Government and elsewhere who argued that there was no shortage of teachers and Chris called for parents and the general public to be told of the reality for schools. Teachers and governors should be positive in explaining the situation and proposing ways in which the shortage could be addressed. International comparisons of pupil performance were useful tools but we should be wary of adopting uncritically models of teaching and learning from overseas. The cultural and socio-economic contexts were very important. Chris described the TeachNext¹ scheme with which he had been involved in developing. This enabled mid-career professionals to be seconded from their employers to undertake a conversion course that would equip them to become qualified teachers and work in schools to see if this was a role for them. There was also a need to incentivise teachers who were no longer actively working in schools (the so-called PIT – pool of inactive teachers) so that they moved back into teaching. The extent of the problem was illustrated by the fact that schools need 30,000 new teachers while there were continuing severe shortages in some subjects, e.g. physics.

To assist with the immediate shortage, Chris was launching TeachNext conversion courses in January 2016. Newly qualified teachers still seeking jobs could be converted to maths or computer coding teachers after completing an intensive eight-week course.

What was urgently needed was a clear and comprehensive plan for ensuring a constant supply of well-qualified and committed teachers. The modern concept of teacher professionalism should empower teachers to be confident in what they were doing and engage the support of parents and the general public. The classroom needed to be re-engineered to make it suitable for a 21st century education. The format of most classrooms would be familiar to children who were at school 100 years ago. The very best needed to be attracted in to teaching - and that did not mean solely those who had first-class or 2:1 degrees. There were other characteristics of an effective teacher that were just as important. Any strategic plan for developing a world-class teaching force must not focus solely on recruiting teachers but also on retaining them by providing a wide range of professional development opportunities. The range of entry routes to teaching should encompass those who wanted to teach before perhaps moving to another profession (e.g. Teach First), those who wanted to explore mid-

¹ www.Teachnext.net

career change (e.g. TeachNext), those returning to teaching (TeachAgain?) and those for whom teaching might be the final post in a working life (e.g. those who have retired early).

In summary, Chris argued for the need for a clear plan to address teacher supply and the need for there to be pride in teaching as a profession by teachers themselves as well as by Government and the public. Key to it all was remembering that the whole purpose was for the benefit of children and young people.

A wide-ranging discussion then followed. A member of the audience wondered whether one way of dealing with teachers for shortage subjects was to pay them more. There were bursaries for some shortage subjects. Where schools could not afford extra pay for these subjects it made the shortage more acute for these schools which cannot compete with those financially better-off schools. Technology could be used to support teachers, for example a lead teacher working with a whole year group. There was a need to explore different ways of 'doing school' and there was some very interesting work being developed in 'virtual schools'.

There was agreement that an overarching plan was needed but a member pointed out that developing such a plan could be problematic as there was no unified view or approach. Some argue that the market should be allowed to deliver education as this would provide a range of choices for parents. Another audience member stressed that of itself the market will not deliver education because it has to be managed strategically. A former headteacher noted that while English, maths and science were designated as core subjects they had also become shortage subjects.

It could be argued that some politicians regarded school education as a form of childcare which would enable more parents to be economically active. Pre-school education was often viewed in this light and a member pointed out that in Finland, one of the nations whose education system was lauded by UK governments, pre-school/early years education had parity of esteem with primary and secondary education and this was reflected in teachers' salaries.

A headteacher reiterated the need for schools to develop creativity across the curriculum. It was frequently missing from schools' provision and ought to be an entitlement for every student. Teachers, governors and parents have all allowed the media to portray schools in a very negative light with very few occasions where schools' achievements have been celebrated. This led another member of the audience to comment that it was too easy for teachers to become disillusioned and cynical without the right sort of support from their colleagues and outside agencies. Such support was vital for addressing the problem of retention and for restoring a sense of pride in teaching as a profession. It would be interesting to see if the proposed College of Teaching would be able to rectify this and, in any event, this would take time. The trust of central government in teachers was vital in promoting teachers' professional confidence. The notion of a 'whole education' was often discussed but we needed to define and agree what it meant by the term. However, there were some signs that the government was starting to listen to headteachers.

Chris Waterman summed up the evening's discussion and stated that he was an optimist and looked for positive signs. He argued that schools should move away from seeing themselves as victims and should promote and celebrate achievements. To achieve this people across the sector would need to stand up and make their views count.

Chris was thanked by Martin Gaskell (Upper Warden and chair of the Education Committee) for a wide-ranging discussion which had covered very important issues for the future of the teaching profession and for education in the UK.

Chris Waterman is the chair of SATTAG (Supply and Training of Teachers Advisory Group) and he established TeachNext to increase the supply of high-quality teachers for schools in England. He began his own teaching career in 1967 and has always maintained a keen interest in teaching. He is also Executive Director of Investors for Families, a quality mark for schools for schools and other settings.

Chris is a Parliamentary researcher, focusing on the work of the DfE and education legislation. He is the Associate Editor of Education Journal and Children's Services Weekly.