

The value of support staff

Jon Richards speaks up for teaching assistants

THE LAST SECRETARY of state for education to publicly acknowledge the value of teaching assistants in ensuring teachers can teach, improving pupil outcomes and providing vital pastoral support, was **Michael Gove**.

More recent public statements have shown that the government is interested in teachers, senior leaders and, occasionally, governors/trustees. Over the past year or so we have started to see mentions of support staff in official guidance. Sadly, however, new guidance sees them only as costs and burdens on schools.

Misleading statement

In May the government launched School Resource Management: top 10 planning checks for governors. Unfortunately, this guidance includes a misleading statement about teaching assistants (TAs). It cited the highly respected Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit, which is a guide to current education research, particularly in schools – however the DfE guide said that TAs are “high cost and have a low impact on pupils”.

This is a very narrow interpretation of EEF’s evidence, without any of the context or detail given by the toolkit or EEF’s detailed guide Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants. EEF is keen to stop the simplistic use of its toolkit and interpretation of complex evidence around TAs, which has led to statements like these.

Unison complained to the DfE, pointing out that in the TES (6 July) Professor Steve Higgs, the academic

who set up the EEF toolkit, said that the section on TAs is one of the two main areas where EEF’s evidence is misinterpreted. He points out that TAs have a range of roles that are “absolutely necessary”.

Jonathan Sharples, another senior researcher at EEF, wrote a blog in 2016 on the results of six TA-led projects. Commenting on the outcomes he said: “Having worked in communicating the findings from research for over 10 years, this is by far the most consistent, positive set of results I have seen for real-world randomised controlled trials.” Since then, two more projects have delivered similar positive results.

Download the latest DfE guidance at www.gov.uk

Well-trained TAs can have a significant impact on pupil outcomes

Improved outcomes

What the evidence shows is that it is *how* TAs are used that is crucial. Well-trained TAs working on specific targeted areas can have a significant impact on pupil outcomes, as well as providing pastoral support to pupils and taking the pressure off teachers.

After our complaint, the DfE amended its advice to governors/trustees – though many people may still be using the old version. The DfE has since issued further guidance, Supporting Excellent School Resource Management, which includes a small positive section on the use of TAs and other ideas on supporting teaching

STARS IN OUR SCHOOLS

Our annual national day is an opportunity to shine a light on support staff, who make up half the schools’ workforce, yet are often hidden behind the scenes. This year’s event is on 23 November, and we’d love your school to get involved. In previous years, schools have held special assemblies, coffee mornings and sports afternoons, with students creating films, cards and dance routines. There are more ideas and resources at www.starsinourschools.uk

FURTHER RESOURCES

To support EEF’s findings, Unison, working with other organisations, has produced a range of resources. We launched the Professional Standards for Teaching Assistants and, with the National Education Trust, wrote a career framework and CPD guide for TAs. We have also recently issued guidance on cover supervision and lesson observation. The jewel in the crown is our Skills for Schools website, an online guide to careers, training and development for all support staff in schools.

staff and workload. However, this is all after the first section, which focuses on increased spending, particularly on support staff, and encourages schools to consider why this is.

Governing boards are having to make invidious decisions as a result of funding constraints. At Unison we just ask that decisions are rounded, not knee-jerk, and that support staff are not seen as an easy target. ●

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