

Education Committee inquiry into attracting, training and retaining the best teachers

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A Introduction

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 15000 members of the leadership teams of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. This places the association in a unique position to see this initiative from the viewpoint of the leaders of both secondary schools and colleges.
- 2 ASCL agrees strongly with the premise of the inquiry, and the white paper *The Importance of Teaching* (2010), that “the most important factor in determining the effectiveness of a school system is the quality of its teachers“(paragraph 2.1). School and college leaders also recognize the point made in paragraph 2.3 of the white paper, that the quality of new entrants to the teaching profession has become significantly stronger in recent years, and that the average degree class of those entrants is higher than it was a decade ago, and is now above the average of all graduates. In significant areas of work where there have been improvements in the quality of education provided in our maintained schools over the past decade, this has been possible because of the quality of those recruited into teaching during that period.

B Identifying the sorts of applicants who become the most effective teachers, and how to attract the applicants with the greatest potential

- 3 ASCL agrees with the stance given significant emphasis both in the white paper and in the direction of government policy on the importance of attracting graduates with strong academic backgrounds into teaching, and would like to see further strategies for interesting greater numbers of top performing graduates from Russell Group universities in a career in teaching.

- 4 However, this approach should not be emphasized to the exclusion of all others. A strong academic background is one of a number of essential prerequisites for a successful and effective teacher. Weight must also be given to factors such as aptitude for communication, personal resilience in the face of obstacles and setbacks, emotional stability, ability to empathize with young people, ability to think creatively and innovatively, a strong public service commitment, a willingness to serve in challenging contexts to make a difference to young people and communities, and an interest in the development of children and adolescents. Not all of these qualities are evidenced either by degree class or by academic background more widely, and some cannot be evidenced by traditional academic assessment at all. Moreover, while we are interested in international comparators, and keen to learn from them, we reject simplistic importing of individual policies or practices – divorced from their cultural and historical context, they are rarely likely to produce the same effect as in their country of origin.
- 5 The white paper raises the possibility of greater use of aptitude and personality tests to complement the academic gateway through which the government will require aspirant teachers to pass. In principle, such tests may provide further useful information in helping to select the teachers with greatest potential to make a difference, provided, once again, that they are not regarded as infallible, or as a panacea. On the issue of the basic skills tests, we believe that the aim should be for these to become redundant. If all new entrants to teaching are to be good graduates, we would want to move to a position of being able to trust universities to produce such graduates with a sufficiently strong grasp of basic numeracy, literacy and ICT to undertake core functions associated with work as a teacher. The continued need for these basic tests into the long term would indicate a weakness in our university sector. If in the medium term some further screening for basic skills is deemed indispensable, it would be better to have it incorporated into a general aptitude test.
- 6 Alongside academic qualifications and aptitude tests, another very important factor in attracting potentially the strongest graduates into teaching is concerned with the messages which are projected about the profession, its demands, challenges, and rewards. These messages are projected in many ways, often subtle and subliminal. Clearly, targeted advertising campaigns have a role to play, but the political and professional leadership of education service are also very influential in shaping public views. Enthusiastic and aspirational graduates are more likely to be attracted by a working environment which is dynamic, well resourced, ambitious and full of opportunity, than by a system which is continually being characterised as complacent, or ineffective, or scarred by poor behaviour, or where there is a public perception that teachers have to struggle to do their job in the face of stringent downward pressure on resources. System leaders, and political leaders, have an important responsibility here.
- 7 Although it is essential first and foremost to project teaching as a career, even for some a vocation, which offers an opportunity to make a difference to the lives of young people and communities, it is also important to consider conditions of service. The increase in the quality of graduates attracted by and recruited into teaching in the past decade has coincided with significant improvements in teachers' pay and conditions, and the professionalism of their working environment. For example, the workforce agreements which enabled teachers to focus the majority of their time and professional expertise on the

core job of teaching effectively have played an important role. Pay levels which were more favourably comparable with other professions to which high quality graduates are attracted have also helped, and relative job security and respectable pensions are also important. ASCL is fearful that perceived or actual erosion of these benefits of a career in teaching will jeopardise some or much of the progress which was made over the past decade in recruiting high quality graduates, and may neutralize the government's efforts to improve further the quality of graduates attracted into teaching.

C Routes into teaching and types of training

- 8 The education white paper puts forward the view (for example in paragraph 2.21) that insufficient weight is given to 'on the job' experience in teacher training. Whilst that is an oft-repeated view we are somewhat puzzled by it. The post-graduate certificate of education (PGCE) course requires trainees to spend much of their time on long placements, and while the length of direct experience is a little less than those trainees on graduate teacher programme (GTP) courses, it is not markedly so.
- 9 There is room for university-run postgraduate diploma courses, such as the PGCE, alongside courses which are almost entirely school or college based, such as the GTP. There is recent independent evaluation of PGCE courses which indicates that the majority of this provision is of very high quality. In some cases there may be further room for improvement in the quality of support and mentoring for trainees on placement, but it would be a mistake to take university education departments out of the picture. Indeed, PGCE trainees who are inadequately supported by a school are more likely to be able to effect improvement because of the monitoring and advocacy role of the university education department. GTP trainees with inadequate support can be completely isolated, and there is less external verification of the quality of what they receive. A way to effect improvement here may be better training and support for those in schools responsible for mentoring trainees.
- 10 We are concerned that a greater emphasis on 'on the job' training may have the perverse effect of reducing the academic depth and rigour of teacher training. Alongside subject knowledge, there is an important corpus of theoretical understanding about pedagogy, adolescent development, increasingly about the working of the brain during the developmental phase, and about the legal and social framework of schools and colleges. Often, in-school mentors are ill-prepared to deliver this, tending, understandably, to focus on classroom skills or craft. While high skill or craft levels are an important aspect of teaching, they need to be underpinned by a depth of understanding, and trainees need to be in command of a body of knowledge about teaching to be able to realize their future potential as teachers. We are concerned that an exclusive emphasis on the 'on the job' approach will not address whatever deficits there may be in this area, but exacerbate them further. A better approach would be to commit resources to making PGCE training better still, and, once again, equip schools engaged in GTP and similar programmes with more effective training and support.

- 11 Finally, in this area, it is important to note that current 'on the job' training tend to attract graduates who want or need to receive a modest salary during their training year. It is important that this provision is retained, as there are many potentially strong recruits who would not be able to afford to be without income for a year whilst undertaking, for example, a PGCE. The often more mature or experienced graduates who undertake GTP courses have much to offer the teaching profession, and may would be lost to it if there were no way of them receiving a basic salary during their training year.
- 12 With regard to training or teaching schools, ASCL supports the resourcing of schools to lead professional development as an important way of reinforcing teachers' professionalism and professional autonomy. However, there is likely to be a serious issue of capacity, as well as the possible erosion of the important role of university education departments referred to above. It is not clear that the training schools which are currently being designated, excellent as they are, will have either the material or personnel resources to undertake the very significant lead role being assigned to them. It will be necessary for very many other schools, as now, to continue to be involved in teacher training. Too narrow focus on training schools may be to the detriment of investment in the wide range of training partners, including schools not designated training schools, or not eligible to cross the too narrow Ofsted based criteria for such designation. Moreover, on this last issue, in the secondary phase, we are concerned that outstanding departments within otherwise less highly rated schools will be marginalized by the existence of training schools, which, despite their Ofsted designation, may not be outstanding in every subject area. This creates a risk of a loss to the quality of initial teacher training in any given locality.
- 13 It is important to maintain as wide a range of entry routes as possible, and schemes such as Teach First have been highly effective in a limited number of cases. Likewise GTP programmes as mentioned above and school centred initial teacher training schemes (SCITTs). There is scope to expand such provision, though care must be taken to scale them up in a way that retains the qualities that have made them work.
- 14 ASCL supports the government intention of making teaching a masters degree level profession. There should be an expectation that teachers will normally embark on a master degree course three to five years after embarking on a career in teaching. This should not be an absolute requirement, but it should be expected that further promotion after say eight years of teaching will be hampered by not having such a degree. In some cases PGCE courses carry masters level credits, which helps to make them more rigorous and give them academic status as well as providing an incentive for teachers to continue with a masters degree within a reasonable period of qualifying. It is also a way to use the academic autonomy of universities to protect teacher training from narrow, shallow or short-term interference.

D Assessing and rewarding good teachers, the draft revised standards and professional development

- 15 The effective assessment or appraisal of teachers can play an important part in the development of the effectiveness of the individual teacher, the institution and the education system. Such assessment needs to reflect the complex and multi-faceted nature of the role. A holistic or global appraisal of teachers which is formative in character but which is also rigorous in its demands is needed. Simplistic or atomized individual targets are too narrow and immediately set up perverse incentives, as does an approach to appraisal based solely on examination achievements. Effectiveness in the classroom is of course central, but that is also a complex activity, and cannot be fairly assessed either through output data or by small numbers of snapshot lesson observations. A much wider range of factors needs to be considered, over a period of time, than has been the case in recent years. Alongside the more obvious areas such as lesson quality and examination outcomes, which must play a role, others factors might include contribution to team work, pastoral work with students, how effective a role model a teacher is, strength of interpersonal relationships, how effectively the teacher encourages high aspiration, contribution to extracurricular activity, and contribution to other dimensions of education such as social development, citizenship, and spiritual and moral growth.
- 16 There is a need to reform the standards for teachers, but ASCL is concerned by some aspects of the new draft standards, and has commented elsewhere on these. In this context, one of the principal shortcomings of the draft is the absence of any inbuilt progression in the standards. The depth and complexity of a teacher's responsibilities means that inevitably, with good professional support, teachers grow professionally over a period of years. It would be best to have a document or a set of standards which enabled new teachers to see just how far their professional growth could go by setting out a map of teacher development which is progressive. There is a danger in a document that specifies only the minimum: it may have the perverse effect of lowering teacher aspiration, ambition or vision. The tone of some parts of the proposed standards is also rather patronizing, which will not appeal to aspirational high-calibre graduates.
- 17 It is important that there be a culture of professional development that is used both to enable teachers to grow and develop, and also reward them for doing so. Opportunities to take more responsibility for the leadership and development of learning, and importantly for the mentoring of others and for contributing to a strong professional learning culture are ways to continue to enable effective teachers to grow. It is of course essential that schools and colleges are sufficiently well resourced to be able to reward and retain effective teachers by remunerating them well, and it is essential that pay differentials are sufficient to be motivational to teachers who are ready for and seeking promotion.

E Final remarks

- 18 ASCL supports the continued existence of a national pay structure for schoolteachers, and is concerned about the possibility of its loss as the school system becomes more diverse and schools more autonomous. A national pay framework is one way to help prevent a descent into aggressive market place competition to attract the best teachers, likely to be to the detriment of weaker schools and their pupils.
- 19 Recruiting teachers to the most challenging schools, and retaining them there, is a complex challenge in itself. There is no simple strategy for achieving this. Those things that make for a rewarding place to work need to be present to an even greater extent in challenging schools to enable them to retain the best teachers. This includes strong professional support and mentoring, clear sighted and ambitious leadership, high aspirations, a sense of being valued and appreciated both by their own leadership and more widely by political and other leaders, good pay, interesting and rewarding professional development, effective and formative appraisal. All of this requires a clear vision, and, crucially, sufficient funding levels. ASCL is very concerned about current downward pressure on funding and the extent to which it will impact on these vulnerable and often very resource and funding-hungry schools.
- 20 Much of the above refers to the system in maintained schools, but the teaching profession is of course wider, and teachers move in both directions between state and independent schools and between schools and colleges. The somewhat different circumstances and experiences in these contexts can improve the performance of all where there is such 'cross-fertilisation'. They also enable individual teachers more often to find the post in which they are most comfortable and in which they can be most effective. It is therefore important that the teaching profession as a whole is considered and that there should be as little impediment to such movement as possible. ASCL therefore welcomes the changes currently being enacted that will allow a more ready movement between the further education college and school sectors by recognising the former's qualified teacher learning and skills status (QTLS) as broadly equivalent to the latter's qualified teacher status (QTS). Sixth form colleges sit between these two sectors and have teachers qualified in both ways, and see significant movement to and from both of these sectors. Likewise, there is scope to better align and recognise the training of teachers in state and independent schools, and in higher education.
- 21 ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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11 October 2011