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**Promoting  
Liberal Democrat  
values in education**

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involved in education**

**Developing  
Liberal Democrat  
perspectives on education**

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# **Introduction by Our Chairman**

## **Liberal Democrat Education Policy Development and the role of LDEA**

There has been concern within the party that we are not generally giving education policy enough priority. We in the LDEA are working on that.

Early in February, jointly with the Lib Dem LGA group, we held a conference entitled 'Education for real life.' It focussed particularly on Schools as Exam Factories (led by Alex Kenny of the NUT), Wellbeing in Schools (led by Sarah Griffiths of Dulwich College), Character Education (led by Tom Harrison of Birmingham University) and Vocational Education for Life (led by Baroness Margaret Sharp). You can read more about the conference elsewhere in this booklet, but one of the outcomes will be an autumn policy motion for a change in nature and emphasis of our state education system.

It is high time that the unnecessary stresses are taken out of it (for teachers and pupils), that help for the disadvantaged, creativity, flexibility and practical approaches to learning are set equally alongside basic academic learning of Maths, English and IT. The curriculum should be broad enough to allow for individual differences and be seen as helping to develop the whole person for a free and fair society.

I meet occasionally with John Pugh, our spokesperson in the House of Commons and he has produced a paper outlining where we are post-coalition and looking forward with what he calls "Total Education".

Meanwhile the battle goes on against aspects of the Conservative agenda and in the absence of much from Labour. Mike Storey, our spokesperson in the House of Lords and his colleagues have recently tried to amend the Education & Adoption Bill. This Government is pushing further than Labour the highly centralised policy agenda in the mistaken belief that academies, Free Schools and tough narrowly-focussed inspections will do the trick. At the same time, it is allowing highly devolved, fragmented delivery with insufficient local democratic accountability and lack of support for teachers and parents.

We are liaising with our Parliamentarians to deal with this, but I am also concerned about our own policy development. The party's policy-making process is under review and even with limited resources, there remains a lack of coordination; the recent arbitrary initiative by Nick Clegg is an example of this. We need a coherent strategy in which all interested groups can communicate and assist each other across the party; simultaneously we need the right balance between coordination and freedom of initiative. I am pleased to say that this need for a party overview on Education policy -making was helped by the presence at our LDEA conference of the party President, Sal Brinton.

We also need to work with people outside the party. That is why I involved someone from the NUT and from Birmingham University as leaders at our recent conference. We hope to continue to work with them and others.

We are now establishing a policy-making group within LDEA, which will be formally constituted at our AGM in York. If you can help in any way, please get in touch.

**Nigel Jones**  
**Chair, Lib Dem Education Association**

# Education for Real Life: Themes from the Lib Dem Children & Young People Conference February 2016

## Janet Grauberg

Twenty LDEA members, Parliamentarians and Councillors met in February 2016 for a 24- hour conference on the theme of “Education for Real Life”. We heard from external speakers and from our own Lib Dem Lords team and pulled together the threads by planning a motion to the Autumn Federal Conference in Brighton.

### *Contributions from External Speakers*

Alex Kenny, Chair of the Education and Equalities Committee of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), started the discussion by talking through the main points of the NUT’s 2015 research report “Exam Factories”.  
<https://www.teachers.org.uk/files/exam-factories.pdf>.

His central thesis was that the culture of repeated, high-stakes tests, was leading to a lot of stress in the system. Parents were stressed about the challenges of getting their children into the right school, and in some places of school place shortage, any school. Teachers were stressed because they bore the brunt of the measurement culture – entering data on every child after every lesson. Most important of all, children were stressed because of the pressure to succeed in everything at every stage.

The system was being reduced to numbers – children were “4B”; teachers were “good” and everyone was pretending that learning took place in a linear progression. Moreover this approach was not addressing the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their well-off peers, and, in the worst cases, was threatening inclusion strategies as schools tried to minimize the number of children in each year group who would be below average in the tests.

Alex concluded by arguing that a better approach would be to trust teachers as professionals, and to encourage schools to collaborate with each other to improve.

In the discussion that followed the following points were made:

- In many schools there were also extra tests, for example in Year 7 tests were held because the schools did not trust the results of the Year 6 exams in Primary Schools.
- There was a risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater – monitoring and reviewing performance data was vital to know how individual children were doing and to be able to intervene to support them. Smart use of data was well supported by the evidence, for example by the Education Endowment Fund’s work on the use of the Pupil Premium.
- There was also a danger that, without performance data, schools that were “coasting” or where performance was in decline, would be under the radar.
- On the other hand, there was increasing anecdotal information about schools trying to massage the figures – for example a rise in children being informally excluded through parents being asked to “home school” their children in GCSE years so that they didn’t appear on the school’s statistics.

Sarah Griffiths, Head of Wellbeing at Dulwich College, was the next external speaker. She started a discussion on the stresses faced by young people at present: cyber-bulling, body image, testing, concern about jobs, ADHD, parental stresses, pressure to conform, scared of aspiration, pornography, obesity, radicalization etc, etc.

She went on to describe the journey that Dulwich College, an independent boys school in south London had been on, in moving from “wellbeing” being part of the PSHE curriculum to an ethos underpinning the whole school. The approach encompassed four themes:

- Emotional, Mental and Spiritual Health
- Living in Community
- Preparation for the Future
- Healthy eating and healthy living.

The programmes associated with these themes were an integral part of the education curriculum, and also wider, for example informing the approach to parents’ evenings and community service in the school. The benefit of the approach was seen in a comprehensive approach to the issues facing young people – not just “universal” and “broadbrush” teaching such as whole-class

PSHE, nor just focusing on critical safeguarding or disciplinary issues, but covering a range of issues such as citizenship, resilience and relationships in a way that could be relevant to all pupils. It was also benefiting staff – as the school was paying more attention to their wellbeing, and staff were being allowed and encouraged to think about how they behaved as role models.

The final external speaker was Dr Tom Harrison, Director of Education at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, Birmingham University, who spoke about the work that the Jubilee Centre was doing on “Educating for Character”. Using the acronym, “EPACT”, he spoke about:

- E for “Eudaimonia” or “flourishing” – the objective of education, according to Aristotle, being to support individual and societal flourishing
- P for “Phronesis” or “practical wisdom” – an approach which encouraged critical reflection, encouraging the right responses, and understanding that every situation is different and complex
- A for “Arete” or virtue. These could be further broken down into moral virtues, intellectual virtues (such as curiosity and independent learning), civic virtues, performance virtues (such as grit, resilience, teamwork, communication).
- C for “Caught” – that in a school setting many of these virtues were demonstrated implicitly– role modeling by staff of the behaviours, and in the culture and ethos of the school
- T for “Taught” – but that also it was possible to teach relevant skills, such as thinking tools, the importance of language of context etc. These could either be taught directly or through the curriculum.

Questions that the Centre was working on included: the link between character education and attainment; the link with “British Values”; the role of DfE and Ofsted; and whether there was a proven education model. The Education Endowment Fund had included some projects in their current round of research, which would take many of these questions forward.

John Pugh MP, the Liberal Democrat House of Commons Education Spokesperson joined Sarah and Tom for a panel discussion after the presentations. John made the point that the Liberal Democrats had an opportunity to lead the debate on this set of issues as the Conservatives were taking too narrow an approach and Labour were simply not engaging on policy issues at present.

During the discussion the following key points were made:

- There was a lot of discussion about “resilience” but the link with the other virtues made it purposeful – criminals could be resilient but that was presumably not to be encouraged
- The issue of the link between wellbeing, character and attainment was critical. Nick Gibb (the Minister for Education) was setting a trap for us that would allow him to paint the Lib Dems as against “standards”. However, every parent would argue that it was important for their child to be happy at school, and many would also argue that self-confidence and teamwork – the skills that the best public schools produced in their pupils – were as important as A\*s in GCSE or A-level. These messages could also help in challenging the prevailing narrative of a narrowing curriculum and increasing tests.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage had much in common with a wellbeing or character education – with a focus on social, emotional and physical development as well as formal learning. There might be learning for the UK context from this.
- The discussion raised important questions about the role of Governors, and Councillors, for example those on Scrutiny Committees about the questions that they should be asking of heads and schools.
- A wider view of education would encompass a role for parents as part of the education – rather than the “rescue” model which had underpinned recent thinking.
- The Conservative approach made much of comparisons with Singapore and Japan, but this didn’t necessarily cover the full picture – for example Singapore’s curriculum included character and resilience, and Japan was currently reviewing its approach in the light of increasing youth suicide rates.

### ***Topical Discussion***

The Conference also included an opportunity for Baroness Sal Brinton and Baroness Margaret Sharp to update on current issues in the Lords, and for Cllr Peter Downes to update on school funding. Key concerns included:

- The decreasing role of Local Authorities and the inexorable drive to Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Some MATs were positive and supportive, but the point was that the quality of support for schools, particularly primary schools, was variable, and there was no accountability route if a school was not performing well.

- The decreasing role of parents and other interest groups. The recent announcement by Nicky Morgan (the Secretary of State for Education) banning interest groups from responding to school consultations was the last in a long line of measures to reduce the role of members of the public in school organisation.
- Experience showed that, in an environment where there was incoherence and confusion, the most vulnerable suffered – from poor access to school places, from informal and formal exclusion, from poor teaching and much more.
- The current financial system was wasteful, with much being spent on the extra costs of setting up academies. The Conservatives promise to make progress on a National Funding Formula was very welcome, but there was concern that making substantial changes at a time of static funding would mean significant numbers of losers.
- There was little evidence that the Government were addressing the growing shortage of school places (nearly 800,000 more children in the system by 2020), nor the growing shortage of school teachers.
- There was little attention being paid to the prospects for the 55% of young people who did not follow the A-levels/University route. Apprenticeships appeared to be the only game in town but the majority were going to those already in work, not those leaving education at 16 or 18. There was much more thinking needed about the role of FE, as a ladder to University, as an education provider for vocational skills, and as a provider of education for those who wanted to retrain mid-career.

### ***Emerging Themes and Policy Suggestions***

At the end of the 24 hours, delegates were asked to propose themes which might underpin future Liberal Democrat policy, and to suggest individual specific policies which might be adopted for the 2020 manifesto. The full list is below, but there was a general view that the theme of “wellbeing” for both children and teachers would be a good core message, around which other themes and policies could be organised. It was felt that this could be a distinctive Liberal Democrat position.

### ***Emerging Themes***

- Future-focused, informed by the technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the skills required
- According equal value and esteem to vocational as well as academic education
- Tackling inequality and the attainment gap, including through family learning
- Trusting teachers as professionals, and investing in their future development
- Championing entrepreneurship and individual motivation
- Well-funded and equitably funded schools
- Sufficient school places
- A coherent system with clear local democratic oversight
- A system focused on supporting education for life not just for tests and targets
- A focus on wellbeing for staff and pupils – recognizing that stressed children will not learn as well.

### ***Policy Suggestions***

- A later school-starting age and a well-funded early years stage focused on child development
- Local Authorities to have powers to intervene in failing academies
- Local Authorities to be able to open new schools
- Face to face careers advice at key points
- Investment in lifelong learning so people can retrain
- Restore investment in creative education – arts and music
- Reform GCSE examinations in the light of raising the school leaving age
- Reframe/abolish league tables so that data, measurement and assessment is focused on ensuring every child is learning, especially in numeracy and literacy, rather than for external accountability.

### ***Next Steps: Action by governors, Councillors, and campaigners, and a Motion to Autumn Conference***

Three actions were agreed from the discussion

1) Those LDEA members and others who were school governors, or Councillors, could start asking their own schools about how they were addressing the issue of wellbeing in the school, and whether they had a coherent programme that went beyond PSHE lessons and teaching “Fundamental British Values”.

Other programmes such as UNICEF’s “Rights Respecting Schools” were also approaches that could be promoted.

2) There were good campaigning themes emerging on

- lack of accountability in the system – especially as demonstrated by Regional Schools Commissioners
- the increasing testing infrastructure and the pressure it was putting on children
- the need for a wider curriculum, including creative and vocational subjects.

3) A motion should be put to Autumn Conference, laying out a broad brush approach to future Liberal Democrat policy. This should

a) note the state of the system (unhappy children, prevalence of mental health problems, international changes in education systems, teachers leaving)

b) note the increasing interest in a wider view of education, wellbeing and character education

c) note the need for Lib Dem policy to illustrate core Liberal Democrat values, to be distinctive (compared to the other parties’ positions) and to resonate with parents, teachers and young people. Lib Dem policy also needed to be focused (ie it didn’t have to cover every specific), and realistic in terms of getting from here to there.

d) propose that future Liberal Democrat policy should be based on “Education for the Whole Child”, encompassing social and personal development, encouraging community and civic values, should have an objective to narrow the attainment gap, and have a wide view of education, including vocational and lifelong learning, rather than a narrow academic focus.

e) call on the Federal Executive to commission a Policy Working Group to consider the themes and draw up key policies.

This approach will be discussed further at the LDEA AGM on Friday March 11<sup>th</sup> in York. Comments on the discussion and the proposed motion are very welcome and should be sent to Janet Grauberg, LDEA Secretary on [j.grauberg@googlemail.com](mailto:j.grauberg@googlemail.com).

*Janet Grauberg is the Secretary of the Liberal Democrat Education Association. A former Lead Member for Children and Young People, and a former adviser to Lib Dem Education Minister Sarah Teather, she currently works for a children’s social care charity in London.*

# Becoming the Party for Education, Again

## Cllr Helen Flynn

One of the benefits of being the editor of the LDEA booklet is that I can read all the contributions in full as I am editing them for publication. This time in particular, it has given me a strong sense of what we as Liberals believe are the most important priorities for us a party. Though Janet Grauberg has given us an excellent write-up of what issues were raised and what policy suggestions were made at our February conference, it is very clear from the other contributions to the booklet that there is unanimity around the following issues:

1. Greater professionalization for teachers
2. A greater emphasis on the whole child, in particular, wellbeing
3. Reform needed to ensure that our young people are not over-tested and over-examined, but sit for a variety of qualifications—relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century-- at the right time

This looks like the Finnish model to me—a model that has been existence now for well over 30 years and has proved its worth time and time again, both in international leagues and in producing fulfilled individuals.

So we can go away and put forward policies and exhort the FPC to commission a working group, etc, etc, but here's the rub. How on earth are we going to have any impact on voters with any of it? After all, unless we are in a position to make our policies a reality, then having detailed policy is surely not a priority.

What we can agree is our broad strategy for campaigning priorities and messaging—focussing very much on what will chime with voters.

And we have a history of doing just this that paid off not long ago. Anyone remember the penny on income tax campaign that marked us out as the party for education? Its success was its simplicity. You could communicate it

with very few words and people immediately got it—they knew that we cared, there was an innate sense of that in the message.

So I have been thinking, how can we reach out to voters again—to prove we are the party for education—and to have an emotional appeal, so important these days in politics?

Let's face it, it won't be about greater professionalisation for teachers—or be the granular business of reforming examinations. But there is something in the wellbeing agenda that we may be able to use in our campaigning.

You may remember in the General Election campaign last year the success of the mental health campaign, that we Lib Dems originated and owned. There is no doubt that our young people are under the cosh in a way that no younger generation has been before, not just because of a highly prescriptive education system, but also because of the internet's pull, especially when it comes to social media, the expectations that come with it and its stripping of privacy. And that is being reflected in the number of young people with mental health issues—some of them very serious—in our country.

There is significant evidence from those countries vaunted by the Tories as having the kind of education we would want to emulate—and I am thinking of places such as Singapore and South Korea—that the incidence of suicide amongst young people is relatively high.

To me producing strong and simple message about the importance of an education system that looks at the whole child, and can thereby address and alleviate mental health issues, would have strong resonance with parents, ie a lot of the voters out there. I am not saying that this is going to be easy, but I think it is important.

So if anyone out there has some good quantitative and qualitative evidence about the rising incidence of mental health issues amongst our young people, please send it to me at [helenflynn@me.com](mailto:helenflynn@me.com).

It's a good place to start in developing a message that voters will get and will put us firmly back in pole position as the party that cares about education.

*Helen Flynn is a Harrogate Borough Councillor and is Chair of Governors at a primary school in Harrogate. She is one of the Vice Chairs of the Lib Dem Education Association.*

# Being a Student in the Twenty-first Century: Is ‘Students as Consumers’ All it Really is?

## Sal Jarvis

What does it mean to be a Higher Education student in the twenty first century? The image in popular culture of serious twenty year olds engaged in earnest philosophical discussions with their tutors seems a far cry from reality today, as students juggle jobs and other responsibilities with study; worry about fees and keep a close eye on ‘employability’ statistics to make sure they are getting value for money from their course.

The nature of being a student in higher education has been much discussed, not only by academics such as Professor Ron Barnett (author of ‘A Will to learn: being a student in an age of uncertainty’) but also in popular media and on the webpages and strategic documents of universities. This interest is driven on by the expansion of higher education and the introduction of student fees to fund this. Increasingly, what it means to be a higher education student in the twenty-first century seems to be as a customer or consumer who exercises choice through spending power.

This view is one that has, to some extent, been encouraged by successive UK governments, including the one in which Liberal Democrats had influence: look, for example, at the Browne review of 2010. League tables of universities, based on ‘student satisfaction measures’ and increased student choice through a range of public and private ‘providers’ supports this mode of student engagement. UK Coalition Government ministers Vince Cable and David Willets, in the forward to the White Paper ‘Students at the heart of the system’, underlined this perspective, stating:

‘...we will empower prospective students by ensuring much better information on different courses. We will deliver a new focus on student charters, student feedback and graduate outcomes. We will oversee a new regulatory framework with the Higher Education Funding Council for England taking on a major new role as a consumer champion.’

But is this consumer conception of students appropriate? While, on the one hand the idea of individual choice that shapes what higher education providers offer seems beguiling, on the other hand this conception feels rather limiting. Students' experiences are reduced to a single dimension; that of a consumer transaction. What's more, this conception seems to suggest that all students want (and need) the same things out of their higher education, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or life goals. In reality of course, there are many different students whose different contexts may shape their experiences in different ways at different moments.

Higher Education, despite the student fees, is something we all pay for out of our taxes. Our governments rely on universities to provide the expertise needed for an unknown future. If the 'consumer' conception impacts on the day to day practices of lecturers, such language could lead to teaching that follows the students' perceptions of what they might like. Driven by a consumer culture which prioritises short term gratification of wants, will students demand the 'easier' courses and fail to develop the resilience and determination needed to persist with hard tasks and cope with failure? Will valuable, but less popular courses fall by the wayside? Some courses – for example medical ethics courses, are notoriously unpopular with students. Are we really saying, as a society, that we don't care if our doctors have completed a medical ethics course?

As Liberal Democrats we need to engage in the debate about the purpose of Higher Education and to challenge the uncritical adoption of a view of students as one dimensional consumers of Higher Education. Alternative conceptions, more in tune with a Liberal Democrat vision of individual and community empowerment through liberation from ignorance, are available. How about a vision of students as partners in their own development, or even as producers of knowledge themselves within a university community of knowledge production? Such a vision could become reality and, as Liberal Democrats, we should be the ones to drive it forward.

*Sal Jarvis is Dean of the School of Education in a post-1992 (new) university and a Liberal Democrat Councillor. She is an executive member of the Lib Dem Education Association.*

# The stress of watching the education system fall apart!

## Cllr Peter Downes

The last few years have seen a fundamental change in the way state education is organised, coordinated and overseen. The person mainly responsible for this is clearly Mr Gove who was explicitly determined to liberate schools from the dead hand of Local Authority (LA) control. It is strange that nobody told him that, since the 1988 Education Act, LAs had not really ‘controlled’ schools in any intrusive sense. Anyway, that is probably what he did not want to hear. This article looks at how the education system has fragmented since 2010 and how different participants in the education system are affected.

Although Mr Gove is the chief architect of the current chaos, it could be argued that the process had started earlier with the Labour Government’s decision to set up academies in areas of greatest need and to involve business sponsorship in order to give those schools serving deprived communities the extra funding they would need to give their pupils a good chance of success. When the business funding did not materialise in the hoped-for quantities, the Government had to step in and directly fund these academies.

In early 2016 we find ourselves with a range of schools, particularly in the secondary sector. Some are stand-alone academies, some are in local informal umbrella groups, some are in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), often quite small, and others are in larger academy chains, often with no geographical proximity. A few are still under LA ‘control’.

The majority of primary schools are still maintained by the LA and are reasonably happy with that and have no strong wish to get involved in the complexities of changing status. However, the Prime Minister’s aspiration to turn all schools into academies hangs over them. They are beginning to wonder if they should voluntarily form themselves into local MATs before they are directed to do so, anxious that they do not wish to end up as small units in larger and more remote chains.

Another important factor in the mix is the impending growth in pupil numbers over the next decade, putting pressure first on Early Years providers, then

primaries and by 2025 the secondary sector. The complicating factors are that LAs cannot open new schools, academies control their own admissions (though some do follow established LA procedures), academies can extend their age-range and space for building new schools is in short supply. All this cries out for an overarching policy and a coordinating body so as to avoid wasteful duplication and expensive procedures.

How is the academisation process affecting the various interested parties?

**Governors** are notionally given more power and yet disempowered if they are part of a larger chain. Indeed one large chain has recently abolished the local governing body and replaced it with an advisory panel.

**Teachers** are already so overloaded with changes to the curriculum, the examinations system that many have not much time or mental energy available to worry about the wider system of which they are a part. They tell me they just want to keep their heads down, teach well, not upset the Head, avoid a bad inspection and hold on to their job if they can. Now that they are outside the national pay scale structure, some are beginning to notice that pay advancement is more precarious and as academies run short of money over the next few years, this is likely to increase dissatisfaction.

As for **support staff**, this has been a growth area over the last five years as academies have had to take on more people to carry out the tasks previously done by the LA. As funding pressures increase, they too will be vulnerable to redundancy.

For **Heads and senior leaders**, the picture is mixed. Clearly they have more responsibility and their personal future is at risk from a bad inspection. This is bringing about a change of leadership style where the Head is inclined to be more directive and assertive. On the positive side of the Heads, there has been a massive improvement in remuneration. Hundreds of secondary Heads now receive salaries well off the top of the national pay scale (which is £107,000 for Heads of the largest schools, £8,000 more if in London) and those who have taken on Executive Head posts are reaching £200k and even £300k for running chains about 20% of the size of a typical former LA.

For **parents**, the stakes are higher than ever before. They are incited to become increasingly exercised about choosing 'the best school' but, not surprisingly, they are tending to concentrate on supporting their own children rather than worrying too much about the system as a whole. Where they are bewildered is

when things go wrong. Some still recall the days when, if there were serious problems in a school which parents could not resolve through the usual in-school channels, they could invoke the support of the LA advisory team, possibly using the local councillor as an intermediary. That no longer works for academies. For a couple of years, they had to direct their complaint to the Secretary of State until he/she realised that dealing with complaints from several thousand schools was beyond the scope of the DfE office team. So the role of the Regional Schools Commissioner was created. Eight of them, each with a team of officers, shuttle energetically across wide regions of the country, using up millions of pounds of public money to carry out a function previously done more efficiently and locally by the LA.

If you overlay on all that the increasing concern about teacher recruitment and retention, uncertainty about school funding, shortage of funds for capital improvements and increasing dissatisfaction with the inspection process, it is not unreasonable to come to the view that, *as a system*, we are in danger of meltdown. That is not to say that thousands of teachers and Heads are not doing a great job day in and day out; nor does it mean that pupils aren't working very hard, nor that administrators are not doing their level best, but, *as a system*, it is falling apart.

You could say that, in structural terms, we are back to where we were in 1890. Schooling was provided by a multiplicity of providers, held loosely together by an inspection system that encouraged teaching to the test so as to get financial rewards.

When systems are chaotic, the strongest survive because they know how to play it to their advantage. Those who suffer are the materially disadvantaged and those coming from homes with low educational aspirations.

The educational attainment gap widens. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the government was so concerned that it had a revolutionary idea – give the responsibility for the oversight and coordination of education to democratically elected County Councils. I wonder how long it will take to re-invent that wheel?

I think that, as Liberal Democrats, we would argue the case for improving teaching in all schools by greater investment in teacher training and professional development, by encouraging greater inter-school collaboration and by giving the inspection regime less of a punitive role and making it more supportive and developmental. As for governance and oversight, we would like

to see local democratic accountability for the primary sector and Regional Boards with wide representation for secondary and FE. Above all, we would want to make the system more cohesive and coherent, toning down the intensely competitive and factional mood and emphasising the importance of creating ‘good local schools for all’.

*Peter Downes is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Cambridgeshire and serves on the Children and Young People’s Committee. Previously he taught languages in a grammar school and then in comprehensive schools. For 21 years he was comprehensive school Head and was President of the Secondary Heads Association (now the Association of School and College Leaders). He serves as a governor at his local primary school and is a vice president of the Lib Dem Education Association.*

# What Price Freedom of Speech?

## Baroness Sue Garden

There have recently been a number of occasions where universities have been confronted with students protesting about allowing certain speakers to address the student population. Both Germaine Greer and David Starkey faced objections to their being invited to speak. They had been asked to talk about inoffensive topics, but they were being rejected on the grounds that they had professed apparently offensive views in different places and on different matters from those of their invitation.

As Liberal Democrats, we can surely agree that there is no right not to be offended. Matters we might find offensive can sometimes serve the useful purpose of making us challenge our assumptions and views, analyse why we find something offensive and sift out what is intrinsically bad from what makes us feel uncomfortable. Universities UK has suggested that by providing an environment for debate, universities create a forum for differing and difficult views to be discussed and challenged. This gives students the opportunity to develop important skills in the analysis and refutation of accepted ideas, positions and modes of behaviour.

If students only ever hear and discuss ideas with which they agree, their education will not have served them well. Indeed it would be a sorry educational experience which never took them out of their comfort zone. One of the examples of freedom of speech in the 1930's was the **The King and Country debate** at the Oxford Union in February 1933.

The motion, *that this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country*, was carried by 275 votes to 153. It is one of the most widely reported and discussed debates at the Oxford Union. There are varying opinions as to how far it influenced Hitler and Mussolini into thinking that the British were pacifists and would present little opposition to potential aggressors. Students, and indeed the outside expert speakers, felt at liberty to express views which in other times, could have been seen as treacherous.

Interestingly, the Cambridge Union had staged a similar pacifist debate in 1927, also carried by 213 votes to 138. For some reason, this went unreported. But it was an indication of two universities who felt unfettered in debating issues

which could well have caused offence, particularly to a nation still full of memories of the First World War.

But that was before the days of instant, widespread communication. E-mail and other forms of social media mean that simple messages can reach a wide audience without reflection, analysis or context. The process that used to go into thinking before writing or transmitting has been abbreviated into a process of communicating without finding out the facts, or considering wider implications. People today are under pressure to respond rapidly, if not instantly, to react on the spot. Under these circumstances, any boundaries for freedom of speech become much more difficult to define.

The Prevent Strategy sets out that ‘Universities and colleges—and, to some extent, university societies and student groups—have a clear and unambiguous role to play in helping to safeguard vulnerable young people from radicalisation and recruitment by terrorist organisations.’ Equality policies also state that ‘homophobic, sexist and racist language will not be tolerated.’

Inevitably, there will be areas of conflict where freedom of expression will appear to be curtailed to take regard of the care of students. It is impossible to legislate for all the occasions when this might arise.

Schools and universities, more than ever, have a requirement to ensure that channels of communication remain open between staff, students, and outside organisations. This will require an additional skill set for today’s teachers and academics, brought about by new technologies and forms of communication.

The UK has a great tradition of being a tolerant society. If we want to live in an open society, we need our liberal values to ensure that tolerance does not mean indifference, but leads to greater understanding within our multi-cultural nation and which draws strengths rather than conflict, from its differences. Freedom of speech is too precious to lose.

*Sue Garden is the Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Higher Education and Skills. She is a member of the Lib Dem Education Association.*

# Let's be Bold with Early Years Policy

## Val Melnyczuk

I don't know about you, but I'm heartily sick of politicians saying that they care about young children and that if 'we get it right' there then all will be well, early intervention matters and so on and so on. This is true, but they don't do the right things, make the right policy or listen to professionals who know about young children's learning and development, let alone listen to young children themselves.

As far as I can ascertain, party policy is for the school starting age to be 6 years of age. Someone, somewhere in the party advocated this and the party agreed, so let's draw people's attention to this and flag it up as part of Education Policy for Early Years.

This is not a whacky idea from sandal wearing liberals, this is sound policy based on much evidence – and it has been agreed policy should be evidence-based. (As a start see link to 'The Conversation' below)

As a practitioner I was delighted when Birth to Three Matters was introduced in 2003 because for the first time it acknowledged that babies begin learning from birth, not when they begin school. It gave practitioners a guide as to what they might expect children to do as they develop and grow. But as ever the politicians got involved and these guidelines became expectations and then targets. Although a 'play-based curriculum' was the intention for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2008, 2012, 2014) this has again been hijacked by politicians and developmental 'norms' turned into targets for the under-fives. The Profile for the end of reception year (when some children are not yet 5) was meant to be a record of where a child was developmentally and was not a gauge of what a child might achieve in Key 1 SATS or beyond. The Baseline Assessment (although not compulsory) is a measure for school progress and nothing to do with helping a young child to settle in to their first weeks at school, the majority being the tender age of four.

Who decided children have to read by the age of 5, write their names by the age of 4, know their 12 x tables by the age of 8? Who decided four was the correct age to start school? Why don't we change this? Other countries where children achieve more highly in comparative international league tables in

later childhood begin school at 7. What do parents think?

‘The Good Childhood 2015’ report recently published by The Children’s Society (with research by Jonathan Bradshaw of the University of York) shows 8 year olds in England are not very happy in comparison with children in 15 other countries (England was 14th). One of the areas identified as causing this relative unhappiness is school, relationships with teachers, their experience at school and how they were achieving in school. These are key themes within the early years – the unique child, positive relationships and an enabling environment. If we could get the early years ‘right’ then maybe we could prevent some of the unhappiness and mental health issues that young people develop. If children have a strong foundation in their first 6 years of life they may build a resilience to cope with later experiences (‘give me a child until they are 7 and I will show you the man’ or woman...).

So I advocate we stop this nonsense now. Let’s put policy where our heads and hearts are and think about children and how they can have the best start in life.

We could...

- Modify the language of early years by suggesting children (who need to) attend kindergartens (rather than nurseries or preschools) dedicated to babies and very young children from birth to 6 years. Reception classes would be redundant.
- Arrange the provision using ‘family groupings’ so older and younger children mingle and learn from each other as in a family setting (as childminders currently do).
- Delete the word ‘curriculum’ and replace it with an environment that offers true opportunities for play, exploration and investigation, without needing a label.
- Make outdoor learning of equal importance to indoor learning, loosely following the Forest School approach.
- Abolish targets, testing and top down directives, and promote careful nurturing, formative assessment based on the professional knowledge and skill of practitioners steeped in early years pedagogy.
- Complete an end of kindergarten profile assessing and celebrating children’s development and learning up to the age of 6 - completed on or very near to their sixth birthday so all children are assessed at the same age.

- Provide a transition year from kindergarten to more formal education as a child reaches 6 years old, beginning school in Year 1 the term after their 6<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- Pedagogues to work in true partnership with parents sharing information and developing mutual respect so the child feels supported at home and in kindergarten.

In the kindergarten phase children's interests would be followed and their needs met with no need for tick lists. Oral language and story-telling would be emphasised, approaching early literacy through the love of stories in books and made up. Promote 'hear a story, tell a story, act a story, write a story' (adults can scribe). Mathematical and scientific development would be supported through exploration, learning by doing, within a language rich environment provided by adults, with an emphasis on thinking and sharing ideas. Children would be encouraged to engage with their learning being physical as necessary, moving in order to learn, with time to get into their flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004)

For this to be achieved a very well qualified, respectably paid work force with deep knowledge and understanding of early years pedagogy, not 'teacher' trained, would be required.

We are confused. On the one hand we say children are growing up too fast, only interested in 'screens', on the other we stop children from playing and being children. Let's be bold in our ambition and campaign to raise the school starting age to at least 6, and encourage our children to learn in the way they know best, through exploration and play. What adults have to do is engage with children's learning, talk to them, answer their questions, feed their brains with interesting and relevant suggestions to extend their thinking and their play and let formal education start when they are more able to cope physically, emotionally and cognitively. What politicians need to do is allow this to happen. Maybe then we would have fewer unhappy children on our hands and at last top a league table or two.

Further reading:

<http://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-at-what-age-are-children-ready-for-school-29005>  
<http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/TheGoodChildhoodReport2015.pdf>  
<http://academic.regis.edu/ed205/Creator%20of%20the%20Flow%20Theory%20112408.pdf>

*Val Melnyczuk is an early years professional and an executive member of the Lib Dem Education Association.*

# Of Fish and Monkeys

## Karen Wilkinson

*“...the first thing is that not all things that young people learn, and not all the improvement that they make, comes from the school and I think some people would be surprised at how little difference schools make. It’s not that they don’t make a difference, but we tend to attribute all of the learning gain to school whereas when studies have really attempted to assess that, they’ve discovered that the schools make a small difference but not that much...”*

Stephen Gorrard, Professor of Education, Durham University, Radio 4 “More or Less” on 5<sup>th</sup> Feb 2016.

The programme seeks to “explain - and sometimes debunk – the numbers and statistics used in political debate the news and everyday life”. In this case, the subject was the Government’s use of statistics in the term time attendance debate, which fell squarely into the “debunked” category.

As we start the process of determining our policies for 2020, we need to see our schools in perspective. The world is a fast changing, increasingly complex place with new challenges, threats and opportunities. Discussion of how we equip our successors to deal with the implications is too important to be left to the Department for Education or even the education profession. It is all of our concern because how adaptable, collaborative, creative, wise and clear sighted our young people are will determine our ability to survive the huge challenges ahead.

We need to avoid compartmentalised thinking on resolving the issues we find within the system – not least because, arguably they have been caused by compartmentalised thinking. Again, I offer the term time attendance regulations as a prime example, with the Department for Education not bothering to undertake an impact assessment because they had absolutely no idea that the ban would impact on a wide range of family issues, workers, employers and tourism reliant areas. We need to think deeply about what we are trying to achieve, the issues we have and endeavour to treat the causes, not the symptoms, where possible.

We need, in my view, to start thinking about an education *service*, which provides what individuals and society need for the future, rather than this return to a top-down system. In there, I'd like to see us pay attention to the young people, possibly now parents, who were failed by their schooling and understand how to bring them back to it because if they have never experienced value or joy from formal education, how can we expect them to want to put their own children through the same ordeal? I'd like to explore what partnerships could be developed to really take advantage of the scope for 21<sup>st</sup> century individualised learning which the internet allows.

We also need to understand how to deal with the “hour glass” jobs market which stymies social mobility and tackle the threat to lifelong learning when access to evening classes and other FE is being seriously eroded.

The list could go on but from my reading of the evidence, it seems that there are two key drivers to attainment at school: parents (their involvement and social capital) and the quality of teaching. If we are to drive up standards, these are the areas we should be concentrating on. Get these right and everything else will flow from them.

In 2011, Dr Janet Goodall of Bath University wrote a review of best practice in parental engagement for the Department of Education which can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-best-practice-in-parental-engagement>. In a new paper, (possibly still not published but which I have read and discussed with her), she reviews over 40 papers on the subject of parents in education and comes to the conclusion that we need to build a new model of the school, parent, child relationship.

She makes it very clear that “involvement” is a very different from “communication with” or even “engagement”. It requires a new way of thinking for many schools - though there are examples of trail blazers already - and certainly by government. It will require a new compact with parents, one which is a two-way dialogue and not merely the obligatory “school-home” contract.

Much of my other reading recently has been of Hansard reports on the Education and Adoption Bill from which it is clear that the government regards parents as peripheral to their children's education and believes systems (academies/RSCs) and league tables will drive improvement.

While they have good intentions (“social justice”) they do seem to be hell bent on alienating both parents and teachers and if it is correct that these are the two cornerstones of attainment, it is hard to see how they will achieve anything meaningful in the long term. From the NUT to Peter Little (former Head of Eton College), and a wide range of people in between there are grave misgivings about the negative effects of the current system on the mental health of pupils and on their intellectual development.

On a personal level I have experienced a huge loss of faith in the education system to which I am exposing my children and I know from speaking to parents, educators and pupils that I am not the only one. I am strongly in favour of developing policies which give parents and teachers the time, resources and training to together to work with government support but minimal intervention.

I’ll end with two more quotes. The first from a great Headteacher of an SEN school in Yorkshire “*We have a saying in my school – one size fits one.*” The second you will no doubt already know, possibly erroneously attributed to Einstein: “*Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.*” It gives me the opportunity to leave you with the question – is our education system currently being designed by monkeys?

*Karen Wilkinson is an executive member of the Lib Dem Education Association.*

# Wellbeing: We Need to Make it More than a Buzzword

## Lee Dargue

The stigma surrounding mental health in Britain is noticeably reducing. People are talking more and more about their experiences. Of course, services and funding have to follow, and we see this is a constant fight. However, the reduction of stigma is a key issue to any improvement in social attitudes (and the resulting change in Government policy on the subject).

The mental health of children and teenagers is of particular importance. This is partly because the sheer amount of physical and mental changes during the formative years of your life clearly need support. It's also the case that there is a wealth of evidence that difficulties, or even traumas early in life, can have significant impact on the quality of your life as an adult. Conversely, the earlier and more effectively we can help support people through such difficulties at a young age, the less likely they can be to develop mental or physical ill health in their adult years.

This has been recognised in many schools already. In my home town of Birmingham there are some great examples of PHSE being used to open the debate around mental and physical developmental questions teenagers have. An LDEA member and Head of Wellbeing in an independent school in London, has been developing some excellent tools to assist with Wellbeing. Perhaps more importantly, she has helped move Wellbeing away from simply looking at one aspect of mental health, such as depression, and away from just considering eating more fruit to help tackle obesity.

Considering a person holistically comes up often in the many conferences and educational seminars I've gone to. However, often it's just a phrase that is used, then applauded, then forgotten about when it comes to practicing this in some classrooms and schools, colleges and universities. Phillida Salmon said that students come into the classroom with their "own worlds". This is something that, as teachers, we have to consider all the time.

Children and teenagers have to handle relationships with friends and potential partners. Negotiate relationships with parents. To come to terms with, and explore, their sexual development. To do things on time. To do them properly. To consider eating habits, fashion, hairstyles and even consider which social apps to use! Whilst all of this is going on, we, as a society and some educationalists, lose sight of all of these issues, and expect them to shut up, sit down and learn. Then take 2 years to cram information and regurgitate them in a centuries-old style of written exam, often leaning towards memory-retention skills than reasoning and critical thinking. Oh, whilst also dealing with their sick aunt, cat that got run over this morning and the fact that they have no money left to go out with their friends on the weekend.

Dealing with all of that, at once, is stressful for many, but we must always remember that doing it all at 19, or 16, or 13, can be incredibly more stressful. I've often observed how adults seem to chastise children for acting like children and not understanding the world around them (how could they yet?) but at the same time assume they can think and reason like an adult. As adults, and especially as teachers, we have a duty to try and 'think like a child' in terms of considering their needs. Their needs are many and varied, and cover mental and physical aspects.

Wellbeing is now being considered in schools, colleges and universities, as well as workplaces as a must-have rather than a nice-to-have. Once we see Wellbeing as an obvious requirement to supporting students, it should help those students have a higher quality experience in education, as well as supporting the needs of teachers and staff with their needs too.

*Lee is a qualified teacher and is Chair of the Lib Dem Mental Health Association. He is an executive member of the Lib Dem Education Association.*

# More Tory Education Dogma: All Schools to be Academies

## Cara Jenkinson

David Cameron has said he will turn every school into an academy by 2020, making “local authorities running schools a thing of the past”.

There are now around 5,000 academy schools, around 25% of the total number of maintained schools, and around half of all secondary schools. The majority of these are ‘converter’ schools – ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ maintained schools that have converted to academies, with the rest belonging to academy chains. There is little evidence to suggest that academy conversion has improved schools performance, and serious concerns have been raised around two of the biggest chains E-ACT, and AET. In January Ofsted judged that AET’s performance in the secondary sector was “mediocre” and that children from poor backgrounds “faired particularly badly”. In February, Ofsted judged E-ACT which runs 23 schools, as “not good enough”.

Perhaps this is one reason why the government would now prefer schools to become academies by joining local schools in a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) rather than join an academy chain. The idea is that trusts of 8-10 schools, both primary and secondary, will be set up under the direction of a single “Chief Executive”. All academies will be overseen by unelected regional schools commissioners.

I have many concerns about these plans:

- 1) There is no local accountability – decisions taken by regional schools commissioners risk being ‘opaque and undemocratic’ according to a recent report from the House of Commons Education Committee
- 2) The boards of trustees of MATs are expected to be small – it is quite possible that some smaller schools within the trust may have no representation on the board

- 3) Each MAT will have centralised functions such as finance, HR and school improvement. In effect they will be ‘mini-local authorities’ but without the same economies of scale
- 4) The role of CEO is very different from that of headteacher. How many Heads will be willing or able to step up to the plate?

Once again Conservative dogma overrides what is in the best interest of schools. All schools MUST become academies – in fact one of the Key Performance Indicators for regional school commissioners is the percentage of schools that are academies or free schools within their areas. Russell Hobby of the NAHT has strongly criticised this metric saying that “academisation is a means to an end, not an end in itself”.

By fixating on school structure, the government risks giving insufficient attention to other pressing issues – such as the need to address teacher shortages, the wide regional variation in the quality of our schools and post-16 provision.

*Cara Jenkinson is a member of the executive committee of the Lib Dem Education Association.*

# **School Governors play a crucial role, we must not let the academies agenda diminish it!**

## **Mathew Hulbert**

I'm proud to be a school governor at an LEA-maintained primary school in Leicestershire. It is one of the best, most challenging and most rewarding roles I have.

There can be fewer greater responsibilities than helping to ensure children and young people get the best possible education and start in life. We school governors have a significant and increasingly important role in ensuring the quality of teaching in our schools is good.

This was confirmed to me recently when I attended some governor training, provided by Ofsted, on what's now expected of governors by inspectors and the new inspection regime. We do so by ensuring we have access to all relevant data, scrutinise it diligently and then ask challenging questions of the Headteacher and other senior staff.

There are other facets to governors' work too, including specific areas, such as Pupil Premium money and its effect, on the 'British Values' agenda, and on anti-bullying measures. Indeed, I am my school's anti-bullying lead governor.

So, I hope we can all agree, governors have a vital role to play in schools.

Therefore it's increasingly alarming that the role of school governors is coming under threat by the Tories' academies agenda. I'm hearing of increasing concerns by governors at schools which have become academies and are now part of Multi Academy Trusts (MATs.) Anecdotal as it may be, I hear that governing bodies in MATs feel that they are increasingly powerless in enabling change, because all the main decisions are decided by the MAT Board of Trustees.

I hear concerns that 'local governors,' as they are referred to in MATs, can often feel that they're left with very little to actually do, because though they can still look at data and so on, all of the real strategic decisions are now taken at a level above them. Indeed, at least one MAT apparently feels that governors are not needed at all, if recent press reports are to be believed.

This adds to already present concerns, that I and I know many other people also have, in regards to the apparent lack of a credible and locally democratically accountable 'Middle Tier'. LEAs weren't perfect, of course not, but at least they were accountable via democratically elected local Councillors.

I know we now have 'Regional Commissioners' who, with their Boards, are supposed to do the same job, but I have very severe concerns. Primarily, where is that vitally important local democratic accountability?

To borrow from the late Tony Benn, we must always ask the following of those in authority: what power have you got?; where did you get it from?; in whose interests do you exercise it?; to whom are you accountable?; and how can we get rid of you?

I think we need to reflect on those questions and ask ourselves and the Department for Education whether we can really answer them, to our satisfaction, of regional commissioners, their boards and, indeed, of MAT Boards?

Of course, where school governors are shown to be failing, action needs to be taken to remove them from the role. But, I'd still prefer genuinely local school governing bodies, answerable to a democratically accountable Local Education Authority, to the present hodge podge of different levels of, I'd argue, largely unaccountable quangos.

Somehow, I don't expect the Tories to speak out on this matter.

We Lib Dems must continue to do so!

*Mathew Hulbert is a member of the LDEA Executive, Secretary of its Policy Committee and a governor at a primary school in Leicestershire.*

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