

Productivity in education

Teachers want a pay rise. Schools lobby for larger budgets. Ministers have now had a second go at producing their Fairer Funding formula. This combines a higher total with a different distribution, as under the current one some schools receive small amounts and some receive up to twice as much as the lowest funded schools on a per pupil basis. I have supported both the move to spend more, and the demands to have a fairer distribution. I want schools in Wokingham to have enough teachers to do a good job and for the teachers to be paid properly as professionals.

We need also to ask how can the budgets be spent better. The Conservative government has granted many schools more independence of action. Each school has a Governing body bringing together local people with suitable skills to lead and to debate and guide the school management's use of the budget. Head teachers go on courses in school leadership, and most schools employ some combination of managers, executive secretaries, accountants and bursars depending on their size and the complexity of their tasks.

I am often told that productivity does not apply to schools. The argument runs that the main cost is that of teachers salaries, and the main aim of a better education requires increasing the number of teachers in relation to the number of pupils. Smaller class size is the holy grail of improvement programmes.

I of course agree that a school needs to have enough teachers so there can be sufficient one to one supervision of pupils as required, so that the marking work rate is realistic and so class activities can be managed successfully. That leaves many other options for improving how things are done in a school without needing more staff or additional budget.

It is not true that all classes should be small. If a class takes the form of a lecture or explanation by the teacher, it is a good idea for more pupils to see and hear an inspiring performance. If the teacher is teaching sport then they will need a group of 22 to have one of our popular competitive games on the playing fields. Class size should be related to the methods of teaching and the needs of the pupils. As someone who goes into local schools when invited to talk to pupils about the UK constitution or some other general topic I usually speak to a large group of pupils which makes sense as I can only do it once, as do other external lecturers.

More interesting is the question of what use if any should a school make of digital and recorded materials which allow star teachers or others with a good message to appear in many classrooms at the same time. What is the role of electronic learning programmes, which now figure so prominently in professional development and training when people leave school?

The main areas for raising productivity lie outside teaching. Like any other organisation there are smarter and less smart ways of organising building maintenance, cleaning, administration, procurement, use of supplies and the

rest. Like every modern organisation schools assisted by their Governors need to work away at improvements in all these areas.