

Good schools rely on excellent specialist advice



LES WALTON
COLUMNIST



► Ed Balls during his time as Schools Secretary

EDUCATION advisers play a critical part within the education system.

Over the years, they have been deployed using a variety of role descriptions, such as: School Improvement Partners, National Challenge Advisers and National Leaders in Education. There are numerous specialist advisers, covering different types of schools, subject specialisms and governance, change management, finance and people development.

An education adviser can work in a number of ways with schools. Primarily, they support the school's ability to plan, review and implement strategies.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Local Authorities employed a significant number of advisers, particularly 'subject advisers'. They were mainly former Heads of Department, who took a different career path from that of a Deputy Headteacher or Headteacher and chose to work for the Local Authority.

Headteachers were also allocated a 'school adviser', who was specifically linked with the school and usually met with the Headteacher.

As a history teacher, I valued the opportunity to talk to the local authority adviser, primarily using them as a sounding board.

It was very straightforward in the 1970s and 1980s. Subject advisers would bring the latest thinking and subject specific requirements. The best ones were clearly those who had a love and enthusiasm for their chosen subject.

Advisers would also run training programmes, primarily focusing on the knowledge and skills that subject departments required.

Schools were also visited by 'officers of the authority'. One such visit was made by Dr De'ath (a great name), who was concerned about the exclusion of one boy. The boy had been excluded for bringing a certain object into school.

When the officer arrived at the school, the reason for the exclusion was explained. 'Boys will be boys,' he said. My headteacher at the time asked him to put his hand in a shoe box, which was full of cotton wool. After a great deal of hesitation, he put his hand in the cotton wool and

pulled out an enormous plastic condom, which the boy had been waving around the classroom. 'You're on Candid Camera,' whispered my Head, adding 'boys will be boys.' Needless to say, the headteacher won the argument.

When I became Director, the Local Authority increasingly incorporated headteachers to work as advisers. I subsequently introduced the model to Bradford. We called them School Improvement Partners (SIPs). The DfE then considered spreading the model across the whole of the UK and asked Newcastle Local Authority and Northern Education to lead one of the national pilots. The model that we proposed in our pilot required the adviser to be 'relatively independent' of the Local Authority and the school, challenging and supporting both in turn.

I remember attending a meeting at the DfE when Sir John Dunford vigorously argued for the independence of the SIP from Local Authorities, whilst the representative from the Local Authorities promoted the idea that they would work directly to the Local Authority. In the end, the Government decided that the SIPs would be funded by the DfE and commissioned by the Local Authorities. Even so, some Local Authorities supported the idea of the relative autonomy of the SIP and supported the 'Newcastle model'. Even though the 2004 DfE guidelines clearly stated the SIP was required to 'respect the autonomy of the school', most SIPs nationally were seen as officers of the Local Authority.

In 2006, the National College for School Leadership started to identify serving headteachers, 'who had achieved excellent results in their schools'. They were to be called National Leaders in Education. This was clearly a step towards maintaining advisory independence from the Local Authorities. Of course, this model was funded by national government and could not be seen as truly independent.

In 2008, the Secretary of State, Ed Balls, launched the £400m National Challenge programme, which was to target the 638 lowest performing schools. At the same time, 70 schools would become academies by September 2010. The central govern-

ment control over school advisers was being strengthened.

National Challenge Advisers, a key part of the National Challenge programme, were then appointed to work with the targeted schools.

In 2010, the Coalition Government announced that the statutory requirement for local authorities to appoint a SIP was to be removed and the funding withdrawn. At the same time, the Department for Education closed down the National Challenge Programme.

Today, there are still significant numbers of education advisers who work for National and Local Government, Multi-Academy Trusts and individual schools. The traditional 'supply chain' of school advisers, which was previously provided by National and Local Government, has now virtually disappeared as a result of the removal of national strategies and the reduction in Local Authority capacity.

Schools continue to receive advice from the Office of the Schools Commissioner or the Local Authority or from advisers they commission themselves. These advisers do not have to conform to national standards for Education Advisers working within schools. There is no national quality assurance accreditation of advisers beyond the work of Ofsted.

In 2017, the Institute of Education Advisers (IoEA) will be launched. The concept has received a great deal of support nationally. The IoEA is inspired by the simple belief that those who advise, either on behalf of National and Local Government, Trusts, Federations or individual schools, should be accredited, developed and trained with the same rigour as our schools' leaders and inspectors. Essentially, the IoEA establishes national quality standards, which will be independent of government, for education specialists who support and challenge schools.

I sincerely hope the Institute will be successful. If we are to develop a self-managing schooling system, then the advice schools receive must be independent and primarily serve the needs of the children and the school.

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