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Welcome

Sue Williamson,
Chief Executive, SSAT

Last month's general election and its resulting hung parliament provided some focus on education, particularly on the state of school budgets, but in my opinion not enough. Headteachers and governing boards have had to make very difficult decisions about staffing. I am a chair of governors – we have balanced the books, by seeking funding from local business and paring the staffing to the bone. But there is no contingency funding. The three-year forecast is a nightmare.

At SSAT we're looking for ways that we can help schools to generate income and savings, and we will be writing to you as soon as we have finalised agreements. Do look at our publication, *Triumph in Adversity*: it was sent to every member school and has some excellent ideas for generating income and making savings.

There are also serious concerns about workload. This has not been addressed at all in the general election debates, but I can see more work being dumped on schools without much thought on the implications for workload. On 30 June 2017 we held a conference, *Reducing Workload, Creating Time* which provided practical solutions and ideas for reducing workload. We will be circulating the outcome to members. We are losing too many good people from the profession, who are simply worn out, and fed up by the lack of recognition.

I am constantly amazed by the quality of the teaching workforce. As a judge for the Teaching Awards – Lifetime Achievement Award – I have visited five schools to hear about the work of the nominees. It has been a wonderful experience to meet the five teachers who are as passionate about their work now as they were on the day they started. The motivation for them all is the young people they teach. Hearing the evidence from children is an emotional experience – teachers make lives. Parents tell us that teachers give them the support they need to support their child. The new government needs to recognise the contributions of the profession and praise their achievements.

We have held three Educational Outcomes Awards events, which have enabled us to recognise schools' successes. It has been a pleasure to present the certificates to representatives of the schools, who are keen to say that it is a team effort. I would like to thank you for all the hard work you do with the young people in your care. We know it's not just about providing high quality teaching in the classroom – it's taking the time to listen to students, organise activities and trips... and doing your utmost to ensure that every child has the opportunities they need to succeed. It is also about developing the next generation of leaders.

Recently we also held the first event for the 125 teachers in our SSAT Leadership Legacy Project. It was an inspirational day. I am confident that we had 125 future headteachers in the room. We are already considering how we can extend this programme in the next academic year.

Have a great summer holiday – we look forward to working with you next year. ◼

The future of education policy: analysing post-election language

Tom Middlehurst,
SSAT

Tom Middlehurst sorts the meaningful statements from the blather

Following the election result in June and the subsequent minority government, what can we expect from Sanctuary Buildings over the coming months? The mainstream press has been quick to point out that many of the Tory educational manifesto pledges were dropped from the Queen's Speech – noticeably new grammar schools and scrapping infant free school meals for wealthier families – but arguably it's not quite so simple.

In the main body of the Queen's Speech, only two sentences were afforded to education – highlighting three policy areas – 'good schools' for every child, 'fairer funding' for schools, and a 'major reform of technical education'.

So what can we tell about what was in the speech, and moreover, what wasn't?

Good schools – free schools

The government have reiterated their aim of opening new schools in order to create more school places, through the free school programme. Toby Young, chief executive of the New Schools Network, which advocates the development of free schools, has upped the target of new schools from 500 to 750 by 2020. And the prime minister, weak though her position may be, has been championing the concept of free schools since as early as 2001, when she was shadow education secretary.

More school places are needed, but whether opening new schools is the most efficient way of creating more system capacity is debatable. The principle of MATs with good and outstanding schools opening new schools is likely to be continued by this government.

… and grammars

So what of the future of new grammars? On the one hand, they were noticeably absent in the Queen's Speech. Even with DUP support (Northern Ireland is fully selective), enough Tory MPs have publicly spoken out against grammars (including ex-SoS Nicky Morgan) that the government would struggle to get legislation through the Commons.

Yet in the policy document that accompanies the Queen's Speech and gives more detail about the policies, the language is interesting – and familiar. When talking about good school places for all, the document describes a 'great meritocracy' in which 'everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow'. This is the language of the previous green paper, *Schools that work for everyone* – and does not feel like a departure from the ambition for increased selection. Indeed, the green paper talks about new 'centres of excellence' within MATs, which – although not operating exactly as grammars do – could bring in new grammar-style schools without primary legislation.

A report released in June by social research institute NatCen showed that just over half (53%) of the public support the expansion of grammars. Therefore a policy that would not require legislation to get through a (tricky) parliament, but that is supported by most of the electorate, would be an attractive proposition for the government.

The reaction from MATs has been mixed; with some already trialling centres of excellence, some coming out firmly against the ideas, and others in a Cold War situation of not acting first, but feeling pressured to if one opens in their area. So the future of increased

selection may lie less in the hands of policymakers, and more in the hands of those leading the academy system.

Funding

It has been widely acknowledged that the joint campaign for sufficient school funding – started in West Sussex and supported by (among others) SSAT, the Heads' Roundtable and the unions – has been a great success in raising public awareness and making school budget cuts a key issue in the election. Tory campaigners reported difficult questions on the doorsteps about education spending, with the party line of 'more money than ever before' unconvincing in areas where teaching assistants have lost their jobs, parents are increasingly asked for contributions, and schools are threatening one-day closures.

There is therefore a widespread belief that the government will increase school spending. However, again the language used in the policy document is telling: 'since 2010 the schools budget has been protected in real terms. This government has committed to increase the school budget further.' There is no concession that flat cash per pupil has meant real term cuts.

So what does the government's 'commitment' mean in reality? The Tory manifesto pledged £4bn to schools – but it remains unclear where this will come from and where it will be allocated. Under a new funding formula, this will likely be used to cushion schools losing out, meaning that no school will actually lose cash – but it is unlikely to plug the gaps already there or meet future costs. By some estimates, with costs continuing to rise, this would lead to cuts in real terms of 3% between 2017 and 2022.

And what of fairer funding? The government are committed to introducing the new formula, but with the election delaying the response to the consultation; it remains to be seen how this will look. While there is much to celebrate about the success of the campaigns so far, we must not allow complacency, or for discussions of 'fairer' funding to replace a focus on *sufficient* funding for all.

Technical education

With schools policy relatively light in the policy document, the largest sector for reform is likely to be the skills and technical sector. The government will be keen to look at the most successful UTCs and encourage more schools to work in partnership to raise the status and profile of technical education. We will also have implementation of the Sainsbury Review and the introduction of T-levels.

Any technical education reform should be linked to a new industrial strategy, with courses that meet the requirements of local and national employment opportunities.

However, as the government is also championing the Ebacc for all (although not as a formal target), a cohesive approach to technical education may prove difficult. The impact of Ebacc subject entries will gradually begin to affect A-level and T-level choices. If performance measures discourage secondary schools from offering a range of technical GCSEs, how can we increase their take-up post-16? As with grammar schools, the government will need to think through how these two different focuses work.

A period of calm and stability?

As we have often pointed out at SSAT, just last academic year the then secretary of state Nicky Morgan promised headteachers 'a period of calm and stability' in educational policy. I think we can all agree this hasn't happened… but might the absence of new education legislation actually bring in this period now?

So much about the future remains uncertain. But right now, we have: a government which can't bring about legislation that doesn't attract a broad majority; no primary legislation on education for two years; an education secretary who was largely welcomed back by the profession for her focus on school improvement; and an inspectorate keen to dispel myths about inspection, thereby empowering school leaders to make autonomous decisions aimed at improving their schools and the education system.

The time has never been better for the profession itself to really lead the direction of travel, to have its demands met by central government, and to make the school-led system a reality. ■

Tom Middlehurst is head of policy and public affairs at SSAT. He regularly gives policy updates in person to groups of headteachers, governors, senior and middle leaders. To book, please email Tom on tom.middlehurst@ssatuk.co.uk.

Tom also facilitates various SSAT member headteacher, principal and senior leaders' collaborative email forums. To sign yourself and your staff up the forums, please email your SSAT relationship manager or RMTeam@ssatuk.co.uk.

How 'the geek' helps us build wellbeing and autonomy

Sarah Ledger,
Acklam Grange School

Sarah Ledger, Assistant Head-teacher, Teaching and Learning, Acklam Grange School, Middlesbrough, explains the approach that improved quality – and retention – through staff autonomy

On a recent Thursday evening I was shopping and bumped into a colleague and her son. I was introduced to the boy as 'this is Sarah, mam's friend from work' and within seconds of this introduction the child turned to me and said: 'We've just been out for tea. I've finished my SATs today and mam won teacher of the week. Did you know that?' The answer was that of course I knew. We discussed the winner in SLT and in fact I had nominated the colleague. What she had won was our 'Geek of the week' which is a weekly trophy that SLT present to any member of staff for something we or a fellow colleague believes deserves recognition and celebration.

The thing is, not until my colleague and her son had pointed it out to me had I realised how significant this is for our staff. I then began to reflect upon this and other things which we're trying to do and began to umbrella all of it under the buzz phrase 'recruitment and retention'. What are we doing to retain great staff?
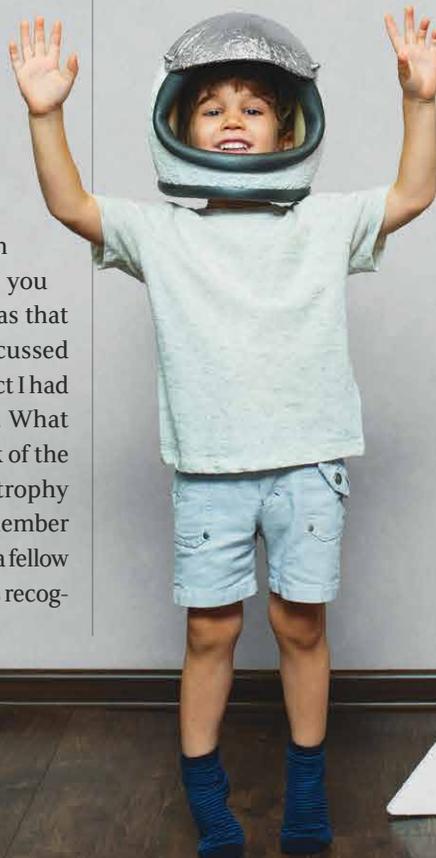
'The geek', as we like to call the trophy, was introduced by our deputy head a few years back and it's presented every Thursday in whole-staff briefing. He is handed over and then the recipient spends the week dressing him up to reflect them, their subject, their hobbies or just to generally have some fun. The thing about it though is that choosing the recipient is often the longest agenda item at SLT the evening before! We discuss the nominations at length and take a real pleasure in digging into the brilliance of our staff and deciding who should win. This highlights an interesting development: it is getting more and more difficult to choose because our staff are getting stronger and stronger.

We take a real pleasure in digging into the brilliance of our staff and deciding who should win 'Geek of the week'

One of my personal objectives in the development of teaching staff is to lessen 'teacher variability'. Now, this isn't about watering down creativity, or a whole school didactic approach to teaching and learning, far from it! It's ensuring that the overall quality of all teachers is of the highest standard possible, so every child is guaranteed a quality education regardless of whose classroom they're in.

So how do we do that? Apart from 'the geek', how are we focusing on quality while also ensuring we retain and recruit strong staff without squeezing the creativity out of them?

How we aim to retain staff through personal and professional development
Our development programme, called AGS Inspire, is the engine that drives all staff development. It is run every Tuesday between 3.15-4.00pm and 4.00-5.00pm, offering teaching and other staff a variety of voluntary development opportunities. The SLT T&L team publish the calendar, and staff simply sign up to what they feel they would like to develop, gaining credit points for their appraisal as they go.

The programme for AGS Inspire tends to follow national, school and personal development priorities. The personal development priorities strand is the trickiest to design, but arguably the most important. The calendar is closely linked to the whole school quality assurance cycle, meaning that teachers' individual development points are reviewed and then a package is offered to support these developments. Teachers partake in various sessions and then their progress is reflected upon via the next QA cycle.

A recent development, in terms of staff retention, has been our coaching programme, which again is aligned to the QA cycle. Most colleagues who have signed up for coaching have done so voluntarily; staff have seen the benefits of these structures and have requested them.

Keeping T&L at the heart of everything
The essential faculty and year team meetings, also mapped out on the QA calendar, have a key T&L focus which the faculties themselves decide upon. The school priorities are presented, but the faculty leader has full autonomy in the content, delivery and makeup of those Monday sessions with only one specification – information giving is at an absolute minimum; everything where possible should be given out beforehand, to allow for pre-reading and thought; T&L investigation is the one priority. Frequently therefore our Monday faculty meetings are filled with questions based on the pre-reading or TLR postholders delivering on such topics as spaced repetition and interleaving in English while lead practitioners might address vocabulary developments in maths.

To ensure quality, the middle leader and SLT link person discuss the content and delivery calendar, ensuring that TLR postholders, lead practitioners and 'AGS shining and rising stars' are actively involved in the planning and delivery of each session. So while SLT have taken a step back to develop middle leader autonomy, the next step is to begin ensuring personal development, accountability and autonomy of the next layer of leadership.

Personal development is not just about the development of our teacher pedagogy and approach; also our understanding and mindfulness of ourselves and our own health and wellbeing. The idea, appeal and importance of 'clinical supervision' was something new to me before joining Acklam Grange (which shows the rarity of this approach to personal development as this is my fifth school). Recently, our headteacher and HR department have introduced 'clinical supervision' for staff, giving opportunity to spend vital time focusing on our own needs and talking through how to fulfil them. I had my first session recently: from a leadership point of view it energised me, and has since made me more productive.

Accountability, quality assurance – and *autonomy*

At a recent meeting I attended, a speaker cited a study showing autonomy as the number one reason why people stay in any organisation. This makes sense, doesn't it? All human beings want to feel in control of their own destiny, and any educated being has the need to be listened to, and to see that their desires and opinions are catered for. But this clearly isn't happening in some schools. Whether it be the accountability processes, uncertain expectations, ever-changing curricula or an authoritarian approach to school leadership… teachers, in some institutions, are clearly feeling they lack autonomy. So, what are we doing at AGS to try and combat this?

One of the struggles of an accountability environment is how best to balance the need to ensure quality and lessen teacher and leadership variability while also ensuring the wellbeing, health and autonomy of all staff within a school. Successful and empowering accountability structures ultimately lead to the job getting done – everyone knows what's expected of them and how to get there safely and securely. However, accountability (or rather, the way it is implemented) often has a bad reputation for stifling creativity and limiting productivity; it can be the biggest sticking point in staff recruitment and retention. (Ask yourself this: would you like to stay in your school with the current accountability structures in place?)

We began to develop and promote middle leader autonomy primarily through the quality assurance of teaching and learning. When driving a school from 'requires improvement' to 'good' (which is the journey we have travelled) it makes sense for the SLT team to keep a firm hold of quality assurance. While we were on this journey, SLT undertook all faculty observations and gathered every book and scheme of learning for close scrutiny.

The process at this stage of our development had to be thus. But while it ensured rigour and purpose, and lessened variability, the one thing it neglected was middle leader autonomy and development. If the middle leader is the engine room of the school – the production force that turns SLT policy into practice – then to be successful they must be equipped and healthy enough to achieve, and feel valued. Therefore, once we had received the seal of 'good' from our inspector friends, the first area we chose to develop in order to enhance the health of our middle leader engine room was the quality assurance of teaching and learning.

our faculties? How do we make an action plan a live document focused on individual development areas?

How might we further improve staff wellbeing?

I think my next step is to listen to and evaluate the views of all the staff at school, ensuring every colleague is heard with a view of creating personal development profiles which align T&L developments and appraisals in a more fluid form. We have created a culture in school where staff are open and I think feel comfortable to speak openly, but this is something I certainly need to develop. How can I evaluate the quality of the school's provision if I haven't evaluated the ideas, needs and passions of my colleagues?

We must create schools that nurture and progress everyone within them, while also ensuring the best academic outcomes. During an AGS Inspire session months ago

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I'm sure our QA of T&L is a very similar process to those in countless other schools around the country. But one notable difference is perhaps that we aligned the development of the new system to a middle leadership development programme. This ensured that the middle leaders not only had a say in the process, but could sign up to a programme dedicated to developing successful QA processes. Examples included: how to ensure the curriculum we envisage as leaders is happening within the classrooms? How do we lessen teacher variability across

I was asked what my moral purpose is. I know a lot of educational theory but my response without thinking was "To make sure our great teachers don't want to leave; and to stop children sticking chips up their noses!"

If we recruit, invest, train and retain great teachers, fewer and fewer children will find themselves sticking chips up their noses. And more and more will flourish, making sure towns like Middlesbrough prosper. ■