

## **Open Letter to the Secretary of State for Education**

Dear Secretary of State,

You called for early debate on what we should expect of young people at sixteen.

I want you to put research before debate. Well-founded expectations help us to understand progression but debating them over a short time-scale will create more noise than wisdom.

We need good information. After Kenneth Baker's closure of the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) the expectations set for young people came from: arbitrary decisions by your predecessors about where to place benchmarks; misunderstood comparisons with other countries; and from the strange belief that all schools, teachers and children can be above average. Multiple changes to the ways in which levels of performance are described only make things worse; and reducing the amount of coursework diminishes the education of young people and narrows the base upon which performance is measured.

Improvement has been connected to a league table approach so that schools going up are facilitated by schools slipping down after a 'bad' year. It is better to give young people a fair opportunity to fulfil their potential; and to do that we need properly researched and fairly applied criteria plus a less judgmental and more supportive Ofsted.

I ask you to take time over this and to make it a non party political affair; involve the universities that are engaged in the education of teachers; tap into the expertise and energies of people who have been working collaboratively on Diplomas for example; and, crucially, include teachers, children and parents. You would be giving a huge boost to the CPD and professional lives of teachers. You already have the best programme of accredited CPD for teachers in the World in postgraduate professional development (PPD) in which there are thousands of teachers doing professionally useful work at masters and doctoral levels. The money disbursed by the TDA for PPD comes from grants voluntarily transferred some time ago by universities. It would cost nothing to get them and their tutors researching for you under existing funding arrangements. Afterwards start debating. Please don't go for a quick fix or set aside the potential of skilful, dedicated professionals or accept without question the assertions of certain would-be gurus trying to influence you.

It is encouraging that you see a need to replace ill-founded expectations with well-founded ones. This is a prerequisite for providing an educational entitlement for all young people. It would also reduce the emotional price paid by young people who are pressured to achieve scores so that schools can pass inspection. With less fast and more slow-cooking on this you would go down in history as a secretary of state for education who did something of lasting value.

Best wishes,  
Cliff Jones