

24 February 2015

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**Report of the Independent Chair of the Education Challenge Board,
Frances Done**

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr B Cassidy – Portfolio Holder: Children's Services

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to update members on the work and progress of the Education Challenge Board which was established in November 2014. The Board has met on two occasions (November 2014 and January 2015) and will continue to meet every two months.

The Board will monitor progress and provide challenge for Walsall's School Improvement Strategy and associated improvement plan by:

- Providing constructive challenge to those responsible both for delivering improved outcomes in schools and those providing support to schools' improvement.
- Monitoring the raising of standards at all key stages across all schools and academies.
- Monitoring the proportion of schools judged good and better as well as those requiring improvement.
- Evaluating the impact of improved leadership and management.
- Evaluating the impact of the Council's School Improvement function.
- Monitoring and evaluating the progress of the post Ofsted actions to ensure they are contributing to the strategic aims of the overall school improvement strategy.

The report outlines progress on two key areas:

1. Current performance of schools and the LA as measured against the action plan and scorecard.
2. Progress in implementing the action plan focussing on two key strands of data and performance of schools (Priority 3) and ensuring strong leadership in all Walsall schools (Priority 1).

Priorities 2, 4, 5 and 6 will be reported on at the next two meetings.

The report highlights progress being made on priorities 1 and 3 giving examples of how internal and external expertise is being used to work with schools to help drive up standards and improve outcomes.

Reason for scrutiny:

The Ofsted inspection report relating to local authority school improvement services published in June 2014 found that the local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement were ineffective.

Recommendations:

To note progress to date.

Background papers:

Reference to the School Improvement Strategy Action Plan and Scorecard.

Resource and legal considerations:

None

Citizen impact:

None

Environmental impact:

None

Performance management:

None

Equality Implications:

None

Consultation:

None

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1. Background and current position

1.1 The Ofsted inspection report relating to local authority school improvement services published in June 2014 found that the local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement were ineffective.

1.2 In response to Ofsted's finding the Children and Young People's Partnership has approved a School Improvement Strategy and a related Action Plan. One of the commitments in the Plan was the establishment of an Education Challenge Board with an independent chair which will monitor progress in and provide challenge for Walsall's Strategy for supporting School Improvement and its associated improvement plan. This will be achieved by:

- Providing constructive challenge to those responsible both for delivering improved outcomes in schools and those providing support to schools' improvement.
- Monitoring the raising of standards at all key stages across all schools and academies.
- Monitoring the proportion of schools judged good and better as well as those requiring improvement.
- Evaluating the impact of improved leadership and management.
- Evaluating the impact of the Council's School Improvement function.
- Monitoring and evaluating the progress of the post Ofsted actions to ensure they are contributing to the strategic aims of the overall school improvement strategy.

In addition the Board will:

- Examine the progress being made in enabling schools to play a full role as the key universal service in the wider partnership for children.
- Review the quality and impact of services available to support and challenge schools and other settings.
- Evaluate the impact of sector led improvement and research in practice on school improvement.

The Board will report to the Walsall Children and Young People's Partnership.

1.3 The Board held its first meeting on the 5th November 2014 and will meet every two months. The initial membership of the Board comprises representatives of the Headteacher and Governor School Improvement Working Group; Nursery, Secondary, Primary and Special School Headteachers; and two governors of Walsall schools in addition to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director, Access and Achievement.

At its second meeting on the 28th January the Board agreed to seek three further independent members, from academia, business and the public sector. These members will provide additional challenge in relation to the authority's improvement progress.

- 1.4 The Scrutiny and Performance Panel received an update on school improvement from the Director of Children's Services on the 13th January 2015 which outlined the key system and protocol changes that had been introduced in response to the Ofsted report, a summary of the 2014 school performance data at that date, and outlined the extensive activity that was underway to deliver the Action Plan.
- 1.5 The Education Challenge Board has already focussed on two key areas, summarised in the report below namely;
- current performance of schools
 - progress in implementing the Action Plan

2. Current Performance

- 2.1 On the 28th January the Board carefully reviewed the latest available performance data in relation to Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS); Key Stages 1, 2, 4 and 5; and Ofsted school inspection results. In relation to EYFS, KS1 and KS2 standards have been maintained or mostly improved compared to the previous year, but at the same time national results have also improved, sometimes at a greater rate than Walsall. The challenge for Walsall, which the Action Plan is designed to address, is to increase the pace of improvement so that it outperforms the national rate of improvement, and thus narrows the gap to national performance.
- 2.2 The Board is conscious that, whilst the local authority's task is couched in these terms, the fundamental task is about ensuring that every single child in Walsall is given the best possible chance of success through the provision of excellent education at all levels.
- 2.3 The validated KS4 and KS5 results were not available by the 28th January and they will be closely reviewed at the next Board meeting.
- 2.4 Ofsted judgements on school inspections (at 16th January 2015) compared to the previous year have seen an improving trend. In December 2013 65.5% of Walsall schools were good or outstanding. The position at 16th January shows 71.2% good or better.
- 2.5 The Board also considered a very detailed report '*Narrowing the Gap*' which analysed the performance of pupils claiming Free School Meals and subject to SEN statements respectively, and by ethnicity and compared it to pupils without the particular characteristic. Whilst the report demonstrated some progress in narrowing the performance gap, particularly in relation to EYFS children on Free School Meals, it also pointed to continuing concern in relation to the relative performance of white pupils in Walsall.
- 2.6 The Board is particularly interested in the potential impact on narrowing the gap in attainment of less advantaged pupils of the Pupil Premium. It will be considering this further at its next meeting including whether the quality of support and guidance to schools about 'what works' is good and widely available to those schools where most effort is needed to apply the premium for the benefit of the most disadvantaged children. The Board emphasised the need for schools

to be able to demonstrate the **impact** of their work in allocating the Pupil Premium on improving children's performance and narrowing the performance gap.

2.7 A key element of the local authority's ability to undertake regular assessment of individual school's performance and to challenge inadequate performance in good time is the ability to obtain up to date and credible performance data from schools on a 'real time' basis throughout the year. The Board was pleased to hear that a comprehensive exercise to obtain such data from schools at EYFS stage and all key stages has commenced with the first data returns due by the end of January 2015. The Board will be reviewing a report on this 'Data Dashboard' information at its next meeting.

2.8 It is clear that through the establishment of clear protocols, and the rigorous review of individual school's progress on a regular basis the leadership of the Children's Services Directorate now has a firm grip on identifying what needs to be done in relation to both challenging and supporting individual schools which are either failing to improve at the required rate or potentially heading into that category. The future availability of the 'Data Dashboard' information about each individual school's performance will enhance the capacity to do this on a timely basis.

3. Monitoring progress on the School Improvement Strategy Action Plan

3.1 The Board is focussing on the achievement of critical activity to support significant improvement in the performance of Walsall schools. The Action Plan focuses on six priority areas;

1. Ensure strong leadership in all Walsall schools.
2. Ensure the Local Authority improvement strategy is fit for purpose.
3. Ensure the Local Authority maintains an accurate and comprehensive knowledge of the performance of all schools.
4. Ensure a robust and unambiguous approach to school categorisation, intervention and support.
5. Ensure high quality school improvement across all sectors.
6. Ensure effective school to school support across the Local Authority.

3.2 The Board has decided to focus on two priority areas at each meeting and on the 28th January it covered Priorities 1 and 3. Examples of the key issues on which the Board challenged those charged with leading the relevant elements of the Action Plan were:

- the delay in finalising the School Leadership Strategy. The Board was reassured by the commitment that this will be produced (following extensive consultation) by mid February and disseminated widely;
- progress on the commitment to fill all governor vacancies with well qualified people by July 2015, and to ensure that **all** new governors are suitably trained and inducted from the outset;
- whether the local authority was committed to ensuring that the School Improvement team has sufficient resources (in relation to the number of posts and the quality of staff) needed to support schools with credibility and pace.

The Portfolio holder, Cllr Cassidy, assured the Board that the Council was committed to providing the resources required even in the current challenging financial environment. The Board will receive a report on the changes taking place to ensure that Walsall has a fit for purpose School Improvement Service at its next meeting.

- 3.3 A key factor which will affect the success of the School Improvement Strategy is the quality of leadership in both schools and the local authority. From the local authority perspective this means that the quality of leadership, focus and pace demonstrated by the Director of Children's Services and his team, working with headteachers and governors across Walsall, needs to be of a very high standard. In order to be able to gauge the impact of and the credibility of the local authority's activity I have met, separately, with all the headteachers and governor members of the Education Challenge Board in order to understand their perspective. This has also given me the opportunity to judge more widely views on the extent of school leadership 'buy in' of and commitment to the improvement process which is crucial for success. By the time of the Scrutiny and Performance Panel meeting I will have met with a further group of leading headteachers and governors to continue this process which I am finding very useful.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 There is a great deal of goodwill towards the local authority amongst headteachers and governors and a real willingness to work with the local authority to drive improvement and challenge complacency across Walsall schools. This is not surprising to the extent that all involved are passionate about the importance of doing better by Walsall children. However the local authority's track record prior to the inspection in supporting and challenging schools has left it with quite a lot to prove that it will be a good leader of school improvement in close partnership with its schools. This is the task that the School Improvement Strategy and Action Plan are designed to address and there is no doubt that the leadership of the Children's Services directorate is focussed on driving forward the improvement plans at pace but in a collaborative fashion with all key players.
- 4.2 A very high priority for the Directorate in next two months is to ensure that the restructuring of the School Improvement Team results in a high quality service which supports the needs of schools. It is also crucial that the team develops the infrastructure and arrangements needed to make a reality of the council's desire to enable effective school to school support and sharing of good practice in all aspects of the curriculum and school leadership.
- 4.3 The Education Challenge Board will continue to monitor progress and provide the challenge needed to these crucially important developments for Walsall children.

Frances Done
10th February 2015