

# MEDWAY'S PRIMARY STRATEGY

## DEVELOPING EXCELLENCE, CONFIDENCE AND EQUITY IN SCHOOLS AND LEARNERS

### 1. WHY WE NEED A STRATEGY

Primary schooling is important. It is at primary school that children learn the basic skills which enable them to access the learning offered later in the system. Primary schools can open children's minds to a whole range of learning experiences which will bring them achievement and pleasure throughout their lives – literature, music, art, foreign languages and dance, for example. And they play a huge part in determining children's attitudes to learning and to social relationships, enabling them to become active and effective citizens. The national primary strategy, *Excellence and Enjoyment*, is welcome in its recognition of the importance of a broad curriculum in primary education, and in seeking to broaden the remit of schools through the extended schools programme.

It is well known that there are huge differences in the rate at which children from different social groups learn from the early years to age eleven. And performance in tests at the end of primary school is a strong predictor of performance at GCSE, so those children who fail to make good progress in the primary years are unlikely to make up the lost ground later on.<sup>1</sup> Primary schools can help to overcome early disadvantage by making sure all their children achieve their potential – and the effects of a good primary school carry over into adult life chances through access to college and university.

In Medway, our results at Key Stage 1 (age 7) have remained fairly consistently below the national average. Even more worryingly, the gap between Medway and the rest of the country opens up so that at Key Stage 2 (age 11) the underperformance is more serious. This contrasts with Key Stage 4, where our performance at 5 GCSEs at A\*-C reached the average in 2003 and remained close to it in 2004. Since 2000, the national figure at Key Stage 2 has remained pretty stable – and, although there has been some variation in our results and we got close in 2002, we have never reached it. Although this is a concern from the viewpoint of Medway's standing in the national league tables, it is much more of a worry in relation to children's unfulfilled potential.

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<sup>1</sup> If we measure cognitive achievement at the age of two and track children throughout their education, we find that bright children from affluent families do better by age 11 than low achievers from deprived backgrounds. This is not surprising. However, by age 11, children from affluent families who performed badly at age two are already out-stripping the bright babies born into poor families. And 70% of children who achieve level 4 at age 11 go on to get five GCSEs at A\*-C, compared to 14% of those who achieve level 3 and below. So, by the age of 11, not only have disadvantaged children who were initially high performers already fallen behind their affluent peers – if they have not reached the level 4 standard before they leave primary school, they face a huge mountain to climb if they are to go on to higher education seven years down the line.

This strategy is unashamedly about improving performance in primary schools. Our vision is for schools which offer a broad curriculum and a range of opportunities to children and their families before and after normal school hours. We want our schools to foster creativity across all areas of learning and to promote healthy lifestyles and active citizenship. But an improvement in standards at Key Stages 1 and 2 is essential, and we welcome developments in other respects only as long as head teachers, governors and children retain their focus on standards, and a determination to improve them.

This strategy aims to bring all available resources to bear on preparing children for primary education in early years settings and on improving performance in primary schools. We have already consulted heads on its principles, and this document fills in the detail and is more precise about what we will do. Please read it, reflect on it and, above all, work with us to implement it.

## **2. UNIVERSAL SERVICES**

### **2.1 The Advisory Service**

The Department for Education and Skills' Code of Practice on Local Education Authority (LEA) School Relations requires that LEAs intervene in schools in inverse proportion to their success. It is indeed sensible to focus resources on the schools that need them most. But focusing all resources on schools where there is cause for concern carries two major risks:

- The LEA will miss those early indications that a school's standards are beginning to slide, and forego the opportunity to give low-key support in getting the school back on course;
- Equally, we will miss the best that our schools have to show us. The LEA's job is not just to help schools in trouble: it is also to know the best practice in our area and to help disseminate it to the majority of our schools which are keen for self improvement and for learning from others.

*For these reasons, Medway will, from September 2004, increase the minimum time allocation from the Advisory Service for all our schools from one day to two.*

At the same time, we will improve our arrangements for data collection and analysis. We need to provide more help to schools in identifying their strengths and their areas for development, as well as our own ability to evaluate the effectiveness of our work to help them improve. The knowledge that this change brings will sharpen our advisory team's ability to support and challenge schools. In particular, we will:

- *Review and improve our systems for the collection and analysis of data at the level of the local education authority (LEA);*

- *Work with schools to ensure that pupil-level data is collated, analysed and used so that we form a common view of the potential of all our children;*
- *Set targets with schools which are ambitious but which are firmly rooted in the achievement data of the cohort of pupils concerned;*
- *Support schools in developing strategies which recognise the potential of all pupils as well as the barriers to their learning, so that we can maximise the first and help to dismantle the second. In particular, we will work with schools to develop and implement strategies to raise the achievement of pupils who are not yet reaching their full potential;*
- *Disseminate good practice from school to school. The primary clusters will be important in this process. We will also work with schools to build learning networks in line with current proposals from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES);*
- *Help governors to hold schools to account for the performance of their pupils by providing them with good, objective information and judgements. Copies of link advisers' notes of visits and the outcomes of the new Standards and Review process (see section 3.2) will be shared with chairs of governors;*
- *Report termly to our own elected members so that they can hold us to account for the performance of our pupils and our schools.*

At the same time, we will work with heads and leadership teams to build leadership capacity. Already, we have a number of outstanding headteachers in Medway primary schools. Ever since Medway became a unitary authority, we have worked across schools to encourage the most successful heads to support the schools which need help. The Primary Leadership Programme (of which more later!) developed this practice in 2003/4 and has expanded in 2004/5. But, currently, our arrangements for the continuing professional development (CPD) of heads and senior staff are not sufficiently coherent. *During the year 2004/5, we will review these arrangements in consultation with heads in order to rationalise and improve them.*

One of the distinguishing features of Medway's education service is its open, professional debate. The forums in which this debate takes place are:

- The Medway Lectures;
- Short Headteacher Conferences;
- Residential Headteacher Conferences (the first such conference for primary heads was held in 2004);

- Formal consultation mechanisms with heads (at primary level, the meetings with the chairs of the primary consortia);
- Activities that have been organised by the Education Action Zone and will be promoted by its successor, the Excellence Cluster;
- The good practice seminars, which have in the last year or so fallen into disuse.

*In 2004/05 we will continue to provide these forums for professional debate and work with heads to reinstate the good practice seminars or establish an alternative way of extending best practice.*

## **2.2 Recruitment and retention of staff**

High quality teaching and non-teaching staff are the key to school improvement. Medway experiences difficulty with recruitment and retention, especially in schools which serve our most disadvantaged catchment areas – though our difficulties are not as great as those in parts of London.

Whilst our recruitment team have been enthusiastic and effective in responding to needs, there has been a weakness in developing a strategic approach to recruitment and retention.

*In 2004/05, we will consult on and implement a recruitment and retention strategy for Medway schools.*

## **2.3 Resources**

Recent central government settlements, both in relation to the education formula funding share and to the standards fund, have been hugely disappointing.

Nevertheless, Medway found additional resources for education in 2003/04, and passported all increases in the education elements of central government funding in 2004/05.

The Council is keen to maintain its existing level of education funding in real terms. However, we are concerned at the steady increase in schools' balances in both the primary and secondary sectors at a time when the Council has reduced funding levels to other services in order to protect education.

At the same time, we are concerned that a number of our schools are experiencing difficulty in managing within their budgets.

We welcome the Government's commitment to providing LEAs with three-year budgets. This will help schools to plan the allocation of resources sensibly and remove the incentive to roll forward budgets from one year to the next in case of an unexpected reduction in funding.

In 2004/05, we will:

- *Challenge schools with unacceptably high levels of balances, starting with those where standards are below the levels expected for similar schools;*
- *Review the local management formula in order to ensure that it delivers resources fairly, taking full account of the needs of schools.*

#### **2.4 Buildings – size, phase, excellence of accommodation.**

Medway Council will continue to invest in the primary school building stock in line with the capital allocations it receives from central government.

Medway has an unusually large number of separate infant and junior schools. We recognise that many such schools offer a high standard of education. However, primary schools have two principal advantages over this separate provision:

- They offer a unified approach to teaching and learning, so that there is no transition which requires children to adapt to a different set of expectations;
- They are generally larger than separate schools. This allows them to employ a larger and better paid leadership team, ensuring that they can recruit the best senior staff and that the team itself is robust, and less vulnerable when an individual team member moves on.

*For these reasons, when the headship of a separate infant or junior school becomes vacant, Medway will consider whether reorganising the school into an all-through primary is in the interests of the pupils. If the Council decides that such a reorganisation is indeed likely to be beneficial, it will consult fully as required by law and take careful account of local views before a decision is made.*

#### **2.5 Workforce Reform**

The reform of the school workforce is closely associated with recruitment and retention. Medway is currently ahead of its targets in terms of involving schools in the process.

*We will continue to support schools in workforce reform and meet government targets in this regard.*

## **2.6 Improving Early Years Provision**

From its beginning in 1998 to date, Medway has worked with the statutory, voluntary and private sector agencies to make provision for children in the early years.

Our progress in providing places has met all government targets and we are particularly proud of our services which support early years providers, as well as the Mulberry Centre which opened in 2004.

Following this period of rapid growth, it is time to take stock of the quality of provision. We have, rightly, encouraged a wide diversity of providers in line with national and local policy. This approach has led to two issues that we now need to address:

- The quality of provision is uneven. Whilst much of it is very good, some settings are accommodated in unsuitable buildings which limit the quality of the children's experience;
- Many of our children miss out on an unbroken Foundation Stage, and instead transfer mid-stage from a setting to a school, where teaching and learning strategies, and the expectations of children, are very different.

We have begun to address this by establishing a principle that schools can, subject to the statutory process, open nursery provision where this can be done without additional cost to the Council. We have also introduced flexibility in the age of admission to school, where it can be shown that schools are ready to admit younger children. These developments have enabled us to take up opportunities presented by schools as a result of their own efforts.

*However, this does not go far enough. We need to develop a strategy to encourage more schools to offer an unbroken Foundation Stage. We will draft and consult on this strategy during the academic year 2004/05.*

## **2.7 Learning Environment and the Children Bill**

The Children Bill will present huge challenges to the structure and operation of LEAs. The integration of services to children will require, at the least, a significant reallocation of responsibilities in Medway Council. At the most, it could involve major changes in the ways in which targeted children's services (for example, social work) interact with universal services (for example, schools).

At this stage, the Bill is still subject to amendment (although its key provisions are unlikely to change) and the Council's response to it is yet to be fully determined.

Similarly, the Government's five year strategy for education proposes some significant developments in primary schools. Some of these are reflected in

this Medway strategy: others, such as Educare, require clarification – especially in relation to funding arrangements – before they can be fully integrated into our planning.

*In the academic year 2004/05, the Council will produce its response to the Bill and consult on it with key stakeholders, including schools.*

## **2.8 Celebrating and disseminating excellence and progress towards it**

Identifying, celebrating and disseminating best practice is a key task of any LEA. In Medway, we do this through the forums for professional debate set out in section 2.1. We also:

- Promote national and local accreditation schemes (such as the Basic Skills Quality Mark, the Medway Inclusive School Quality Mark and early years accreditation);
- Take specific initiatives to identify and spread good practice (such as the recent Basic Skills Agency consultancy to identify ways of raising boys' achievement).

We are also part of the Government's programme to develop extended schools, although there is a need to develop a more strategic approach to this work. A number of Medway schools have developed ways of extending the learning day as part of this extended schools work – for example, by running breakfast clubs which offer learning opportunities to young people.

*In the academic year 2004/05, Medway Council will produce and consult on a strategy for developing extended schools. We will also continue the existing accreditation schemes and implement the findings of the Basic Skills Agency's consultancy on raising boys' achievement.*

## **3. TARGETED ACTIVITIES**

### **3.1 Tackling underperformance**

LEAs should intervene in schools in inverse proportion to success. Where schools are underperforming, we must act decisively by:

- Improving and eliminating weak management and teaching. Heads, school governors and LEAs have a formidable array of powers to deal with apparently intractable problems in failing schools. The vulnerability of our children's futures requires that these powers are used to make clear what specific improvements are required, and by when – and that these requirements are enforced where necessary, through, for example, competency procedures in relation to individual members of staff or removal of delegation if governing bodies fail to take necessary action;
- Work with underperforming schools or staff should not, however, be all doom and gloom. There are pockets of good practice in every school

and in the work of every teacher. Identifying and celebrating this good practice is usually the most effective method of motivating staff to improve;

- Consultants, often advisory staff, and staff from other schools play a key part in removing failure by modelling good practice and giving honest feedback to staff in order to help them to improve;
- Medway already uses additional governors to strengthen governing bodies which need help. They often do an excellent job and we will continue to draw on their expertise;
- Relentless chasing of progress is essential in driving rapid improvement. At the end of 2003, Medway accelerated its programme of monitoring group meetings to check the progress of schools in difficulty. These have been effective in monitoring progress, and will continue.

### **3.2 Identifying schools at risk of underachievement and intervening**

Following extensive consultation with primary and secondary headteachers, a revised Standards and Review (S&R) procedure has been agreed. This categorises schools, on the basis of their self-evaluation as moderated by their Link Adviser, and determines the level of support required. The categorisation will be shared with governors in order to inform their work of holding schools to account.

At the same time, this scrutiny of schools' performance, led by the Link Advisers, will ensure that their knowledge of their schools is exemplary, and will enable them to offer the best possible support and challenge to schools.

*This new S&R procedure will be implemented from October 2004.*

*As well as the S&R process, the LEA will operate a system to identify schools which are at risk of underperformance before problems become entrenched. This system of early alerts will enable advisory staff to pick up changes in schools' performance between the annual S&R categorisations. The early alert procedure will not in itself change the categorisation of the school: but it may lead to an early review of the categorisation and/or an additional support package in the intervening period.*

### **3.3 Supporting satisfactory schools to become good, and the good to become better**

In parallel with the work set out above there is a range of activities which will support all schools to some degree in improving their performance. These include:

- Deployment of consultants to model and develop best practice;

- Working with schools to help them develop a broad curriculum which addresses basic skills through skilful and imaginative presentation of foundation subjects;
- Helping schools to identify and target their underachieving groups. This is a key aspect of developing inclusive practice and applies particularly to raising the achievement of pupils from some minority ethnic groups and those from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Advising and supporting schools in developing the skills of behaviour management;
- Helping schools develop a distinctive ethos so that they can focus on particular areas of specialism.

Most of these activities are well established within the advisory service. However, support for pupils from minority ethnic groups is insufficiently well developed. *Accordingly, proposals for a major restructuring of the existing Medway Language Achievement Service (MLAS) will be considered by Cabinet in late 2004. If agreed, these will pave the way for a new service to work at a more strategic level with schools, supporting their analysis of data, to enable them to target their underachieving groups successfully and developing ways of promoting their achievement.*

There is also a group of activities which can be categorised as developing personalised learning. These include:

- Assessment for learning (AFL). Formative assessment has been a key activity in the Education Action Zone (EAZ.) This will be extended to a broader approach to assessment for learning mediated through the Excellence Cluster and beyond. *We need to spread this good practice more widely through Medway;*
- Listening to the voice of the student. A number of primary (and indeed secondary) schools already involve their pupils in the organisation of the school through school councils. These activities develop responsibility and citizenship skills as well as giving children a feeling of ownership of their education;
- Broadening the curriculum. This is a key aspect of the Primary National Strategy – *Excellence and Enjoyment.*

*We will support schools in widening the curriculum they offer their children, provided that the focus on raising standards in maths, English and science remains undiminished;*

- Even young children can be involved in setting their own learning targets. The process of target setting at the individual and the school level should encourage participation and awareness of progression amongst pupils;

- We will continue to support schools in developing the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in the classroom – buildings, for example, or the use of interactive whiteboard technology;
- We will also continue to develop ICT as an aid to data analysis and target setting;
- Many schools now have a good understanding of learning styles which informs their teaching strategies. *We need to support all schools in this endeavour, through the resources of the educational psychology and learning support services, as well as the advisory service;*
- Recording the support received by pupils at School Action and School Action Plus can be time consuming and bureaucratic. *Provision mapping is a simple but powerful technique for simplifying this process, and we will support its introduction to Medway schools.*