

Conferences

By Geoff Barton

There seems to be some kind of unspoken rota for heckling government ministers.

Last year, members of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) were accused of doing so (though in truth they simply muttered rather too audibly in jaw-dropping disbelief at Ruth Kelly's strictures on parent power). This year it was the Royal College of Nurses who apparently roasted the flu-stricken Patricia Hewitt, herself in need of some serious nursing. Last week, Mick Brookes – new General Secretary of the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) – complained that Ruth Kelly and other Government bigwigs refused to turn up. You can see why.

Such antics provide cheap and lively copy for newspaper pundits. But for those of us who have chosen to work in the public sector, there may be a more dangerous theme lurking beneath the surface of these annual pantomimes. We are paid, after all, from the public purse. Even those who are teaching in the fledgling flagship academies are paid by the

people we see in the cars and buses around us. And there is a real risk that we misjudge the perceptions of these people.

Back in the late 1970s, when he kick-started the process of opening schools up to greater public scrutiny, Prime Minister James Callaghan spoke of schools as a “secret garden”. In his 1976 speech at Ruskin College he spoke of “legitimate public concern” about trendy teaching methods and referred to “unease felt by parents and others about the new informal methods of teaching”. It was the starting-point for a national curriculum, more centralized testing, and even for Ofsted.

Last week’s NAHT proposal to encourage parents to send their children in late for the tests could be a sign of how we have misread that intervening period of public scrutiny and accountability, if we think there’s any turning back to the secret garden days. That may also be the aftermath of the Royal College of Nursing’s spat with the Minister in which delegates mirrored many of the concerns being voiced by teachers.

Cathy Doughty, a senior staff nurse in paediatrics at Brighton and Sussex University Hospital Trust, was vociferous in publicly voicing concerns to the Secretary of State. She told the Observer’s Jo Revell: “We try to do the job we were trained for but are forced to do other jobs to hit other

targets, ticking boxes on their forms, and making these the priority”. You could cut and paste that quote into many of the mouths of delegates at any of this season’s education conferences.

The problem in all of this is that it ignores the views of our customers – the pupils, parents and patients who rely upon us to do a good job. If you’ve waited half the night at some bleak outpost of an accident and emergency unit, or had to endure two uncomfortable days to get an appointment at your local GP surgery, you might actually welcome the fact that targets are being set and monitored to make the experience match our heightened expectations of better service.

Similarly, if you’ve traipsed your way around Stalinist parents’ evenings at a child’s school only to be told, utterly blandly, “If he works harder, he will do better”, then you might welcome an education culture that actually places emphasis on giving parents real data.

Knee-jerk reactions to inspection, testing, and curriculum control play into the hands of our critics. We risk giving the impression that the standards agenda is nothing to do with us. Instead we should be articulating it in our terms. We should show how aspects of the national curriculum demotivate our pupils because of the emphasis on content

rather than the essential skills they needs as twenty-first century citizens.

We should demonstrate – with evidence – how the best teaching is rooted in teacher expertise plus high quality relationships with students, how teachers need time to talk and listen to pupils rather than being the robotic delivery squad of a curriculum that has been prepackaged like pizza at some central warehouse.

We should show how Ofsted’s over-reliance on data - which is too often contradicted by other valid information - can be misleading. And we should argue the case for locally set collaborative targets showing what a group of schools, working together, aim to achieve.

None of these themes are about ducking the standards agenda, which ought to be central to our sense of professional pride, accountability, and desire to do well. Instead, it’s showing how that agenda can be reformulated in the interests of higher achievement for pupils (taking achievement in its broadest sense) and better information for parents. T

In other words, the most vocal and constructive voices in the argument for “higher standards” should be ours – the voice of the teaching profession itself. It’s just the methodology that’s different.

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