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Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 1 April 2016



(Welcome to Policy Eye, a weekly service from Policy Watch offering a regular round up of UK education headlines and stories from over the previous 7 days.)

The week summed up

If the media coverage of the two big teachers' conferences over the Easter weekend is anything to go by, four key issues are at the top of the profession's concerns at the moment: academies; testing; Ofsted; and the Prevent Strategy. We could add a fifth, funding in the shape of the current fair funding consultation but that's almost a given in these austere times.

Nicky Morgan did her best to appease in an address to the NASUWT. '*None of this (increase in standards) would have been possible without your efforts*' she told them, but it's the fall-out from the White Paper and in particular what The Economist called '[the Starbucksification](#)' of the school system that has really got the pulses racing and not just from the usual suspects. Conservativehome for example, described as Britain's '*leading Conservative blog*,' carried an [article this week](#) also arguing that the academisation plan is "*flawed*." As Miranda Green argued in the [FT on Monday](#), once initial concerns subside, it may well be that new locally managed arrangements will emerge which can drive the system forward. Some Authorities are already on the case but for the moment the White Paper appears more of a red rag.

On a more positive note this week, the DfE released the reports from the three teacher-led Groups which were set up last year to look at reducing workload pressures in the areas of marking, planning and resources, and data management. Their recommendations may not be earth shattering but they are sensible and the government would be wise to take heed particularly in the current climate. An example from each makes the point. On marking: it's not helpful for the teacher to be doing more work than their pupils; on planning: don't spend too much time on detailed, individual lesson plans, it's the teaching that counts; and on data management: don't spend hours 'gold plating' or collecting 'just in case' data, especially when more important tasks may await.

Finally, in case you missed any, there was a burst of activity at the end of last week as the government and others raced to get things out before the Easter recess and local election purdah. Here's a reminder.

For schools, there was the government's response to the consultation on the National Reference Test confirming that it will introduce secondary legislation to ensure selected schools participate when the Tests start next March. Also the DfE updated its guidance on the role of RSCs, government and LAs in intervening in underperforming schools. FE received its 2016/17 funding allocations from the Skills Funding Agency with increases for apprenticeships and traineeships. Also in the post was the regular end of term letter from the Minister, an invitation to consult on FE maintenance loans and confirmation of the introduction of a new Immigration Skills Levy. While for HE, the government announced a further fund to increase the number of degree apprenticeships and HEFCE invited bids under a new widening participation fund. They came like buses but details can be found in the links listed below.

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Top headlines this week

- 'Teachers' union calls for ballot on primary test boycott.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'Parents' low expectations condemning toddlers to a life of underachievement.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'Graduate earnings: data by course and university draw closer.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'Teachers call for end to inappropriate post-16 GCSE resits.' ([Friday](#))

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

- The [National Living Wage](#) which was announced by the Chancellor last year and which comes into force today (1 April) for workers aged 25 and over at a rate of £7.20 an hour rising to around £9 by 2020
- The government which has confirmed it intends to introduce a new [Immigration Skills Levy on employers who recruit abroad from April 2017](#) to encourage more employers to recruit and train UK workers
- The government which announced a new 4-year strategy for children in care which will include designated education support as part of its [new Adoption Vision](#)
- Education Secretary Nicky Morgan who has been busy making speeches this week with [one on school reform](#) to the NASUWT and one [on the EU](#) to the Fashion Retail Academy

HE

- The government which announced a [new degree apprenticeship fund](#), a large chunk of which will go to help universities design and deliver relevant programmes
- HEFCE which invited bids under a [new Outreach programme](#) which will focus particularly on Years 9 - 13 in schools and colleges, run for the next three years and help support the government's widening participation objectives
- University Alliance Chief Executive Maddalaine Ansell who wrote a comment piece for the Guardian stressing the importance of [developing employability skills in higher education](#)

FE/Skills

- The FE Minister who sent out his regular [end of term round robin to colleges](#) at the end of last week focusing in particular on area reviews, apprenticeships and local growth developments
- The BIS Dept which has launched its [consultation on the introduction of maintenance loans in FE](#) targeted at 19+ learners taking tech and prof courses at levels 4-6 but excluding apprenticeships
- The Funding Agencies which published the latest guidance for Sixth Form and FE Colleges drawing up [their 2016-18 financial plans](#)



Pearson

- FE Week which published a useful supplement covering the [main speeches and commentaries](#) from its latest Annual Apprenticeship Conference
- Functional Skills for which the initial consultation being hosted by the ETF [closes next Thursday](#)

Schools

- Ofqual which updated its listing of which GCSE, AS and A' level subjects have been [accredited for teaching from Sept 2016](#)
- Leaders of the main political parties in the Local Government Association who published a joint letter in last Sunday's Observer [calling on the government to back down over its forced Academy plans](#)
- The three Teacher Workload Groups each of which has published a set of recommendations for [reducing teacher workloads in the areas of marking, planning and resources, and data management](#) respectively
- The government which issued its response to the recent consultation on the [National Reference Test](#) confirming that it will introduce secondary legislation to ensure selected schools participate when the sampling programme begins next March
- Underperforming and coasting schools for which the [DfE published updated guidance](#) at the end of last week reflecting changes made during the passage of the latest Education Act
- Nicky Morgan who [addressed the NASUWT Conference last weekend](#) and who, while recognizing differences, urged members to work with government on its reforms
- Jonathan Simons, Head of Education at the think tank Policy Exchange, who wrote a couple of blogs outlining [some of the issues around the latest academisation plans](#)
- The New York Times which carried an interesting article on the [development of character or 'grit'](#) among pupils in US schools and argued strongly against imposing measurement of this
- The NUT who have voted to [consider a boycott of this year's primary tests](#) at their annual Conference this week
- Save the Children and the Institute of Child Health at UCL which launched [new research on how toddlers' brains develop](#) to help support a campaign for greater attention to be given to early years learning

Tweet(s) of the week

- *"Education has a serious case of device fetish (Microbit, iPads, mobiles)" @DonaldClark*
- *"Nicky Morgan says academy chains will take over underperforming exclamation marks." @MichaelRosenYes*
- *"No textbooks, no tests, no reports lead to some anxious parents." @rachelmerhebi*
- *"Blue Sky thinking: when you feel happy and the sky feels happy? Kids interpret management speak." @TeachFirst*



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Word or phrase(s) of the week

- *“The Big Mac” minimum wage index.* The FT’s index for comparing minimum wages. Currently a minimum wage worker in the UK would need to work 26 minutes before earning enough to buy a Big Mac, the same as in Germany but longer than in Denmark. The time would reduce as the Minimum Wage takes effect

Quote(s) of the week

- *“I want to be clear, there is no reverse gear when it comes to our education reforms.”* The Education Secretary tells NASUWT members who’s in the driving seat
- *“I expect them to be making ground-breaking proposals and look forward to receiving their report.”* The FE/Skills Minister heightens expectation about the forthcoming Sainsbury review of tech and professional routes for young people
- *“The traditional school sixth form has become a tribal totem for English education.”* The journalist Peter Wilby examines the hold on the English education system maintained by school sixth forms
- *“Resources are like a recipe—a useful base but the flair of the chef is still needed.”* The Teacher Workload Group on resources highlights the important role the teacher plays in knowing how best to use them
- *“Now we can hear a chair drop in a classroom in Australia and discover how the teacher dealt with it. Or even share our experiences.”* Tom Bennett on the how teachers can share and learn online
- *“They can’t be seen to take their eye off the assessment ball.”* The head teacher of Oxford’s Dragon School (which had three of its ex pupils starring in the BBC’s ‘The Night Manager’) on constraints facing head teachers in state schools keen to develop pupils’ wider talents
- *“I don’t want people to think that libraries are over, they will just look different and I think we do accept that.”* A leading librarian responds to a recent BBC survey showing a fall in the number of public libraries still open and of those working in them

Number(s) of the week

- £1000 per employee per year. The potential cost to large employers of recruiting migrant labour in some skill areas under the new Immigration Skills Charge which comes in from April 2017
- £10m. The size of the new fund set up to encourage greater take-up of Degree Apprenticeships
- 32%. How many people, particularly the lower paid, don’t check their payslips according to a survey conducted on the eve of the introduction of the National Living Wage

What to look out for next week

- The think tank Centre Forum due to publish its first Annual Report on Education in England (Monday)
- AELP Spring Conference (Thursday)