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Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 22 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

There've been some notable reports out this week.

They include those on GCSE exam variability, Regional Schools Commissioners, the DfE accounts, the school system, the operation of the apprenticeship levy and the government's devolution policy. There's even, and younger readers should look away now, been a report from an Institute in Australia that suggests 40 year olds should only work three days a week...anymore and fatigue and poor performance sets in, apparently.

But back at base, it's been another one of those difficult weeks for the government. It started under pressure as it faced questions over the availability of primary school places for this September and it ended with the Schools Minister having to pull this year's grammar, spelling and punctuation KSI test in what was described as 'a clearly regrettable incident.' In between all that, the Prime Minister was taken to task over his government's academies policy with a chorus of commentators suggesting that things were unravelling while the publication of the Dept's 2014/15 accounts received what was euphemistically described as 'an adverse opinion' from the government's auditor.

As Donald Rumsfeld once famously remarked; "stuff happens" and there's been no shortage of advice for the government on how to resolve things.

The lightning rod of discontent at present is the academies policy where commentators from Lord Baker to the BBC's Chris Cook have all offered possible modifications. One of the most thoughtful pieces this week came from [Conor Ryan](#), a former government education adviser and current Research Director at the Sutton Trust. He put forward three solutions: allow local authorities to create trusts with local partners to oversee academies; consider some tactical retreats such as over parent governors; and incentivise rather than mandate the transition to academy status.

We shall no doubt hear a lot more about these and other proposals and indeed the Education Secretary adopted a more accommodating tone in her speech to the Academies Show this week. But to finish, a couple of points from some of those other reports. First, on Regional Schools Commissioners, the government offered little perhaps that was new in its response to the Education Committee this week but did again confirm that it's working on further clarification of RSC powers and will publish this 'shortly.' Second, the government's latest update on the apprenticeship levy, which as the CBI indicated raised more questions than answers but is at least evidence of government trying to get information out. And third, for anyone interested in the government's devolution policy, the NAO report is a helpful read.



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Top headlines this week

- 'One in four primary schools is full or over capacity.' ([Monday](#))
- 'Sexual violence in schools probed by MPs.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'After-school club boost for poor pupils.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'Spelling test blunder as DfE publishes forthcoming paper online.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'Minister cancels leaked primary school spelling test.' ([Friday](#))

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

- The Education Secretary who acknowledged that there were still 'concerns' about the government's academies policy when she [spoke at the Academies Show](#) this week but still offered no reverse gear
- The DfE whose [published accounts from 2014/15](#) provoked further 'adverse opinion' from the National Audit Office over exceeded expenditure limits and issues with the way academy accounts were reported
- The Women and Equalities Committee which published the [results of a commissioned survey into the extent of sexualized behaviour in schools](#) prior to announcing a new inquiry into the matter
- The government which responded to the recent Education Committee Inquiry into [the role of Regional Schools Commissioners](#) confirming that further clarifications on roles and responsibilities were on their way
- The House of Lords Science and Technology Committee which published a report following its inquiry into [EU membership and UK science](#) cautiously listing both pros and cons of the current arrangements
- The National Audit Office which published a useful [report on English devolution deals](#) but raising some issues about aims, accountability, the transfer of power to mayors and the impact on some depts
- The Institute of Directors (IoD) which argued in a new [report](#) that the education system needed to focus more on applying rather than constantly testing knowledge if young people were to be properly prepared for a new technological age
- The Chairs of the BIS Committee and the Public Accounts Committee who exchanged sharp letters with the BIS Permanent Secretary over [the dept's proposed move from Sheffield](#) and the lack of clear details
- Jonathan Slater who has been appointed to succeed Chris Wormald as [Permanent Secretary at the DfE](#)
- Liam Maxwell who has been appointed as the government's first [National Technology Adviser](#) with a remit to boost the UK's digital economy and digitalisation of public services

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HE

- The Times Higher which reported on the latest official photo gaffe of Ministerial papers being carried into Downing St which on this occasion appearing to suggest some Ministerial reservations on [the impact of some tuition fees ahead of an expected HE White Paper](#)
- Lady Margaret Hall Oxford which is to launch a new Foundation Year scheme this autumn, intended to provide [supported places for bright but disadvantaged young people](#) who might otherwise not have considered applying
- Wonkhe which looked at some of the key issues and implications arising out of last week's significant [Institute of Fiscal Studies report into graduate earnings](#), in an interview with the report's authors
- [Aditya Chakraborty](#) and [Sarah O'Connor](#) who, as debate following the IFS report rumbled on, wrote interesting pieces in The Guardian and FT on the question of graduate returns and going to uni
- UCAS which shared some of the [most frequently used opening lines by applicants](#) in their personal statements (Hint: 'I'm passionate about' was in there but not top)
- The HE Policy Institute which published a new report on [employer sponsored degrees](#) arguing that they are good value and should be given equal billing with degree apprenticeships
- Universities UK which posted a blog on [how universities should view the impending apprenticeship levy](#) and its impact on degree apprenticeships
- Maria Bouattia who was elected as [National President](#) at this week's NUS National Conference provoking some threats of disaffiliation

FE/Skills

- The government which issued [further guidance on the operation of the apprenticeship levy](#) including how it'll be accessed, paid and the timescale for using up the funds
- The government which issued a further update on [the area review programme](#)
- The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) which published a [commissioned report into HE in FE](#) showing how this form of provision helps support local needs and local learners
- The Education Funding Agency (EFA) which examined data on [programmes of study for 16-19 year olds in 2013/14](#) and reported on the emerging standardization of delivery patterns
- The think tank IPPR and market agency Burning Glass which, with support from JPMorgan, have developed a new, widely regarded jobs tool known as '[where the work is](#)' which can help match employer demand with numbers of learners completing particular programmes of learning

Schools

- The DfE which issued [Memoranda of Understanding](#) with the Catholic and Church of England acknowledging that respective diocese had the final say on their schools converting to academies
- The DfE which has had to abandon this year's [KS1 spelling, punctuation and grammar test](#) after it emerged that it had already been used as a mock paper a few months previously



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- Ofqual which identified entry stability and centre type as potential factors as it published an initial research report in [variability in school-level GCSE results](#)
- The latest [Survey of language teaching in England](#), compiled by the British Council and Education Development Trust, which found continued commitment at primary level but further concerns at secondary and post-16 stages where numbers remain low and exams are seen as a particular barrier
- Education Datalab which published some data on [current school sixth form sizes](#) suggesting that many are running at below the levels of numbers recommended in recent guidelines for academies
- The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) which published its [response to the consultation on a schools' national funding formula](#) broadly agreeing with the principles although calling for a review of PFI contracts
- ASCL which also this week published a [paper offering guidance to Muslim families](#) about how to balance Ramadan with the pressure of exams
- Teach First which highlighted how some of the more disadvantaged parts of the country have some of the [poorest primary provision](#) and that more support was needed in such areas
- UCL's Centre for Longitudinal Studies which published a research study indicating that [out of school activities such as sports and clubs can help raise educational attainment](#) especially in KS2 maths

Tweet(s) of the week

- "Mission statements should be lived not laminated" [@StephenJFarrant](#)
- "@MichaelBarber9: Complacency, caution, anxiety or a combination impedes the pace of change in education" [@JakeCahan](#)
- "No one ever won a prize for the poetry, eloquence or rhetorical force of a consultation response" [@wonkhe](#)
- "Young adults know Justin Bieber's lyrics better than Shakespeare" [@indybooks](#)

Word or phrase(s) of the week

- '**Moore's Law.**' A law developed in the 1970s by Intel co-founder Gordon Moore which states that the processing power of computers will double every 2 years. It was cited in its report on schools this week by the Institute of Directors

Quote(s) of the week

- "**Important issues**" - The Education Secretary acknowledges that the recent White Paper has raised quite a few of these
- "**In conjunction with @tes I recently sat a Maths SAT test. I got 91% apparently. I'm putting in an appeal**" - Lucy Powell, Shadow Education Secretary submits the first exam appeal of the new exam season
- "**This is a blind spot in education policy**" - UCAS Chief Executive Mary Curnock Cook highlights the issue of underachievement of boys in an article in The Times



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- **“Like many good ideas, this one started in a pub”** - Lady Margaret Hall Principal and former Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger on how the College’s new Foundation scheme for disadvantaged students came about
- **“It’s in explorer mode, drawing the map as it goes along”** - The National Audit Office reports on how the government is approaching devolution deals
- **“I was once told by an insurance employee that the company gets its executives to crash a car and then go through the process of making a claim. This way of undergoing customer experience could be applied to education ministers. Before taking office they could spend a month as a teacher and a month as a head, meeting all deadlines and experiencing an Ofsted inspection”** - leading education commentator John Dunford with a novel suggestion
- **“Pupils are still tested on their ability to recall facts and apply standardized methods, two things computers do much better than humans”** - The Institute of Directors seeks to drag parts of the education system into the 21st century
- **“You can’t teach grit. You imbibe it like mother’s milk from your surroundings and from the people going through the same grinding mill of life. And once absorbed, it never goes away”** Mirror journalist Paul Routledge on true grit...Yorkshire style

Number(s) of the week

- 1.7m. The UK unemployment figure for the 3 months up to February 2016 showing a slight increase for the first time since mid-2015
- 10. The number of devolution deals that have been agreed so far
- Nearly 100. How many ‘titan’ or large-scale primary schools there are now, according to the Labour Party (up from 16 in 2010)
- Over 40%. The number of current school sixth forms with student numbers below the current recommended threshold of 200, according to research from education datalab
- 75%. The number of state schools that offer Spanish at KS4 according to the latest Survey of Language Trends
- 28%. The number of young people in a recent survey by the youth organization Fixers, who said they felt ‘emotionally’ safe when in school corridors and common rooms

What to look out for next week

- Education Questions in Parliament (Monday)
- Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into Cities and Local Growth (Monday)
- Education Committee witness session with the Education Secretary (Wednesday)
- National Association of Secondary Moderns Conference (Thursday)