

Recruiting and retaining teachers

Last week I attended a reception with Head teachers and Deputies at Westminster.

One of their issues was difficulty in recruiting and retaining the teaching staff they need for their schools. When I asked why they thought it was sometimes difficult, they gave me a complex answer.

They volunteered that it was not just or even mainly a question of money. They suggested that they wanted teaching to be better thought of, for it to be accepted as a profession.

I explained that all the MPs I listened to on the subject did treat teaching as a profession, and most of us say it is an important and worthwhile occupation. So who exactly is not treating teaching seriously? Why do some teachers feel they are not sufficiently appreciated? Part of the answer according to the teachers seemed to be a new (but I assume limited) cadre of aggressive parents who intervene regularly and challenge the judgements of teachers. For some it is a feeling about social attitudes to school and discipline more widely. All those of us who wish schools well and understand the importance of a good education need to rally behind the many good teachers who seek to uphold good values. There are limits to how much teachers can do to remedy problems at home or to tackle things like obesity. Successful education requires consent and support from parents.

It leads us to ask what is a profession? I think the world has moved on from the rather narrow past when some said there were only two professions, law and medicine. If you look at what set them a bit apart, it was a combination of self regulation, examinations to control entry into the profession and to ensure basic competence and knowledge, sometimes allied to special clothes and positions that generally commanded respect and were different from others. The lawyer in court wears a gown to show his or her academic and legal status. The doctor in hospital may wear a white coat to distinguish himself or herself from others.

There has long been an issue of what distinguishes a profession from a trade or mystery. Many trades also impose requirements to gain knowledge, pass exams, maintain standards and belong to a professional or trade body. Gas heating engineers need substantial knowledge, have substantial safety responsibilities, have to maintain their knowledge as systems and products change and belong to an accreditation body. They are no less professional than lawyers.

Teaching and the clergy are closer to the lawyers in the conventional understanding of professional status. Teachers like lawyers have to attain academic qualifications as well as practical teaching qualifications. They may wear gowns in more traditional schools or on special occasions. They have to maintain standards. The Catholic and Anglican clergy make extensive use of special clothes to single themselves out, and also normally have academic

qualifications.

I would be interested in your thoughts on what more can be done to make people realise teaching is a worthwhile and rewarding career.