

School money and class sizes

All UK parties have been keen to get class sizes down in state schools. Yesterday Labour decided to make an issue of this, forgetting that class sizes have risen quite a lot in Wales where they are in government. I was interested to hear one of their spokesmen defend this by pointing out satisfaction with schools in Wales had gone up at the same time as class sizes. He was then at a loss to answer the obvious sequel – if parents and pupils think things are getting better, why did class size worry him?

I am all in favour of decent funding for schools, and have been asking for more money for Wokingham and West Berkshire schools where budgets are tight. I have been asking both for more in total to schools, and more as a proportion of the budget to areas like Wokingham that have traditionally been given much less than the best funded. I would, however, be interested in your thoughts on class size.

It seems to me there are obvious occasions when individual pupils need individual help. That requires a good staffing ratio., There are also occasions when a good teacher or outside speaker or lecturer has something interesting and important to say when you can open the lesson or lecture up to many more pupils, as many more can benefit from it. Class size is an average figure which can conceal as well as reveal. Some star teachers and star lessons are so good that they are recorded and used in a wide range of ways by many students. On line learning is both one to one and one to many.

The best judge of how many teachers a school needs should be the School Board and management team led by the Head. There need to be sufficient teachers for those things that need teaching in small groups or require individual attention. There can also be other times of day and topics that can be covered in larger groups. In practice schools experiment with smaller and larger groups depending on subject and age range of pupils, and often have more than one adult in the classroom so individual pupils can have individual attention as well as more general group or whole class work proceeding. The number of teachers in a secondary school is also affected by how many subject options the school wishes to offer. The number of subjects varies considerably between schools.