

Special schools benefit from specialist system

Excerpt from The times Educational Supplement, Friday October 24th, 2008

THE HEAD'S VIEW

As head of a specialist technology college, which is also a special school, I am sure that having a curriculum specialism has been a vital ingredient in our success.

A greater focus on the achievement of all our pupils through effectiveness in our teaching has led to 98 per cent of lessons being judged good or better, compared with 60 per cent before we took up our specialism.

So I am delighted the funding for special schools that want to obtain specialist status has changed to make it more attractive. Before September 2008, funding for a special school with specialist special educational needs status was £60,000 in addition to the one-off £100,000 capital grant, regardless of pupil numbers. But those wanting to go down the curriculum route received the capital grant and £645 per key stage 3/4 pupil.

The maths isn't hard to work out, and with many special schools having fewer than 90 KS3/4 students, it is no surprise that of the 188 special schools involved in the specialist programme, 111 have chosen the SEN specialism. Being a specialist school isn't just about the money, but it certainly helps, and it can be the deciding factor when choosing your specialist route.

The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust's special schools steering group, of which I am chair, felt strongly that this anomaly should be corrected. It was felt that special schools should have the same incentive as mainstream schools to take up a specialism. I am pleased to say the Department for Children, Schools and Families has listened and changed the funding formula.

From September this year all specialist special schools with up to 92 KS3/4 students will receive a minimum of £60,000 per year. Schools with more than 92 KS3/4 students will receive the minimum £60,000 plus £645 per student to a maximum of 200 students, and then £645 per student above 240.

Being part of the specialist system has been the most important development for staff and pupils at my school, Fosse Way. Innovative approaches in the specialist subjects of maths, science and technology have cascaded across the school, bringing higher pupil achievement. The extra specialist school funding, which began in September 2005, has enabled us to enhance our collaboration with the local network of mainstream schools, particularly through demonstration technology lessons for partner primaries.

Finally, there is no doubt that specialist school status was a significant factor in Fosse Way being judged outstanding in all categories in its last Ofsted inspection.

David Gregory

Head at Fosse Way School in Bath a mixed special school for 3-19 year olds with a very broad range of abilities.