

Primary schools Speed read

Mid-year primary school reforms reverse election promise

Also in our diary: is head's pay rise a reward for failure?; free school shelves promised sixth form; anger as trust clears woodland to make way for academy

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Changes to 2016 key stage 1 and 2 assessments are now only weeks away. Photograph: Alamy

Have ministers broken a pre-election pledge not to introduce major changes to school curriculums or assessments midway through a school year, as they launch a string of controversial reforms in primary schools? In a paper [pdf] published last February in response to teachers' concerns about their workload, the Department for Education said: "We will ... introduce a commitment not to make substantive changes which will affect pupils during the school year."

Yet recent weeks have seen teachers struggling to keep up with information from the DfE's Standards and Testing Agency about changes, some of them significant, to 2016 key stage 1 and 2 assessments - now only weeks away. Among these are a stipulation that, for the first time, key stage 1 pupils will be tested on their three-times tables; an order that maths equipment that KS1 pupils might use to help them in tests, such as number lines, will be banned; and that teachers have to complete in-school KS2 assessments a month earlier than in previous years.

Last week, the DfE appeared to blame the last government's assessment system for the need to make a string of last-minute changes. Asked to comment, the DfE had not responded by our deadline.

Is executive head's pay rise a reward for failure?

A small academy chain in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, told parents last month it was folding as it "did not have capacity to operate as a multi-academy trust". The news comes after its executive headteacher was awarded an inflation-busting pay rise last academic year.

Richard Chapman of the Sandhill multi-academy trust saw his remuneration increase from £65-£70,000 in 2013-14, when the trust was running two primary schools, to £90-£100,000 in the year to August 2015, during which time it took on one more school but saw another transferred to another chain.

In December, the government's regional schools commissioner for the area said it was winding up the trust, having ruled it did not have the capacity to do the job, a point Sandhill also conceded in a letter to parents. The RSC also found the trust had made a "misleading" statement to a local paper about the administration of its Sats last summer.

The trust said Chapman's 2013-14 pay was based on him having worked for it for only part of that year - nine months - as the trust only came into being in October 2013, with his year-on-year salary rate rising 5%. It added: "Mr Chapman's remuneration is based on pupil numbers. These increased in January 2014 and his last increase to his remuneration was 1 September 2014."

Although Chapman's pay rise sounds impressive, a source who has been following the case closely says the real long-term benefit may have been to his pension. With teachers' pensions until last year being based on final salaries, that increase could be worth more than £1,000 extra every year for life on retirement at 60, we were told. Not a bad outcome after what has been a controversial 12 months.

Free school's sixth form ambitions 'not viable'

A free school that has been beset by controversy since before it opened has told parents it will not be running a sixth form this September, as had been advertised. Parkfield free, in Bournemouth, had planned to run a sixth form, offering the international baccalaureate, since it opened in 2013.

This opening had been delayed as the school struggled to find a site and, last July, its proposed September 2015 move from an office block in the town centre to a former air-training building next to Bournemouth airport was put back a year.

Cash considerations seem to have influenced the sixth form decision. Parkfield told us: "The school had always intended to promote and market the post-16 offer to other students in the community but the unfortunate postponement of the relocation to our permanent site meant that this was extremely difficult. Ultimately the post-16 offer in any school needs to be financially viable and we made the decision that the post-16 provision would not be viable in the short term. We will be revisiting this in the near future."

Anger as trust clears way for academy

Finally, residents of Bromley, south London, are fuming after an academy trust cleared woodland from the proposed site of Beckenham academy, a free school, without having planning permission for the school.

The trust, E21C, says it had the authority to clear the 11-acre site, the purchase of which, in November, was paid for by the government's Education Funding Agency.

This is not the first time the government has bought land and made changes to free school sites in advance of obtaining any planning permission. This is one we'll be watching.

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