

A Private Concern

Following critical media reports about pupil premium money being poured into the private sector, Exam Confidence's **Richard Riddell** sets out the case for the defence...

Earlier this year, an article on the front page of the Guardian revealed that 'state schools [are] paying private tutors thousands for extra help'. It claimed payment was made 'using funding given to schools to support disadvantaged children', with some tutors (ours, in fact) charging £1,400 a day and others being paid at least £1,000 a year. Those numbers don't make an awful lot of sense and when read in full, the rather sensationalist tone at the start of the article seemed increasingly misplaced.

Yes, a good deal of the funding for private involvement in the state sector comes from the pupil premium but the idea that it's then channeled away from those for whom it's intended is, certainly in our experience, nonsense.

Legitimate anxiety?

That one article aside, some concern over this growing public-private partnership is understandable. The consultancy sector remains unregulated and given its rapid growth, the decision-making process of schools looking for support is increasingly complex.

We, for one, are entirely familiar with those concerns. Exam Confidence has, over the last three years, worked with schools across the UK, in both the state and private sector, providing individual tuition, group support and teacher training.

Over that period we've had to address understandable concerns from headteachers, governors and other senior decision makers, all anxious not to upset a balance that suits the expectations of students as well as the needs and sensitivities of teaching staff. Perhaps most fundamental, though, is the question of value. What can an outside provider offer that the permanent staff cannot? And, equally importantly, how can that value be measured?

An answer to the first of those questions will depend on the school concerned, but in our experience, significant value has been added in several ways. Firstly, educational agencies offer support tailored to the specific needs of the school, class or individual concerned. If the immediate issue is impending exams then reputable providers will have scope to offer qualified teachers who work, for a good deal of their time, on exam technique and revision. The best providers will equip their teachers with additional training and insight into exam technique and requirements. If the concern is over motivation and work ethic, or support for SEN students for example, then appropriate individuals should be provided to tackle that exact issue. Additional support is not simply another pair of hands at the whiteboard.

Beyond this, external providers offer a fresh approach. Long-term student teacher relationships can prove hugely positive for learning and development but there may be times when a new angle is just as beneficial. For the majority of schools we work with, we're not looking to put right teaching methods that are wrong. Instead, we're looking to re-excite and energise students with a new approach.

Made to measure

In terms of measuring value, again, one needs to be specific to the school concerned and the solutions provided. Clearly, exam results are the ultimate measure but value can be more





easily marked in some instances than others. A considerable amount of the work we do involves supporting groups that are underperforming with a view to improving on previously attained grades in upcoming exams. Of course, measuring impact here is relatively straightforward. We routinely compare exam results before and after our involvement and we, and the schools concerned, are very happy with the impact demonstrated to date.

Where exam result comparisons are less immediately obvious – for example if a student or group of students require catch-up support at the outset of a new course – then a specific framework for reporting results should be agreed between the school and the provider. There are clearly no fixed rules and schools need to be as clear as possible on their expectations. Providers should be equally keen to agree a structure that sees them demonstrate their value.

Another issue commonly raised regards the status of teachers being supported. The concern is that the maths, English, or science teacher of the group concerned is undermined – effectively declared unable to cope. It's an understandable concern and one we spend a good deal of time working through with our client schools.

Clearly, there's a need for strong, positive communication. In the vast majority of cases, the key message is that providers are working with existing staff and not in place of them. Even the most diligent, high performing teacher will face periods when his or her workload is unmanageable, or when a specific challenge is suitably new to require extra help. Ultimately, the interests of the permanent staff and those contracted on a more short-term basis are entirely aligned. Both parties are concerned for students to achieve the best results possible.

It's worth noting, also, that a significant number of requests for support originate from teachers themselves as opposed to senior decision makers. These teachers don't see the introduction of outside support as damaging to their own status and nor, when the arrangement is communicated correctly, should others.

Whom to trust

Finally, it's worth addressing concerns over legitimacy, credibility, and regulation. The education consultancy sector is growing rapidly but, in its current form, remains young. A number of organisations offer the opportunity for agencies and consultants to demonstrate credibility with certification and quality assurance. Membership of these bodies, and adherence to their codes of practice, though, remains voluntary and while individual teachers may easily demonstrate qualifications, agencies themselves, with no need for regulatory approval, face minimal barriers to entry into the market.

The upshot has been a rapid growth in the supply of tutors, revision course providers and self-professed educational



ABOUT THE EXPERT...

RICHARD RIDDELL IS THE FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR OF EXAM CONFIDENCE, A LEADING PROVIDER OF EDUCATION COURSES, WORKING WITH SCHOOLS AND INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS ACROSS THE UK
EXAMCONFIDENCE.CO.UK

consultants. As with any relatively un-regulated industry, the quality on offer will vary considerably from one provider to the next and schools must invest time in the necessary due diligence to establish the best solution for their requirements. Common-sense procedures, such as asking for references, testimonials, and demonstrations of previous successes should all apply. Schools should also question the experience and qualification of individual teachers, without relying purely on the brand credibility of the agency concerned. Credible providers should be more than happy to provide the information required.

Beyond a demonstration of previous work, providers should show a commitment to developing a long-term working relationship with the school concerned. An issue for any publicly funded institution looking for private support is the risk of a short-term, profit-driven approach on the part of the outside provider. That risk is mitigated if both sides are committed to a long-term partnership where the interests of all are entirely in sync.

A suitable way forward

In the short term, it's highly likely we'll see more articles along the lines of the one from The Guardian mentioned earlier. A degree of healthy cynicism is no bad thing, as schools rightly think very carefully about how they spend their money.

Whilst concerns are understandable, there is clear value, though, in schools having the flexibility to engage high quality resources that tackle specific needs. What's more, if providers can demonstrate a commitment to working in long-term partnership with schools, then those concerns should be addressed.

Whenever we start speaking with schools we're bombarded with a list of very reasonable questions. We're confident, though, that we have the right answers.