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# 1. Executive Summary

1. WESB is deeply concerned that, despite much 'strategy' and the enthusiasm and commitment of the management of basic skills delivery within the Department for Children, Education Lifelong Learning & Skills (DCELLS), insufficient progress is being made. Employers are extremely concerned that a significant proportion of young people still leave 11 years of compulsory education without being able to read and write to the standard required for employment or to undertake simple arithmetical calculations. We are adamant that this cannot continue and that, since present policy is not delivering the necessary outcomes, present policy and policy implementation needs to change.
2. At a strategic level, we are concerned that targets are not specified clearly enough, that too much measurement of progress is of activity and participation and too little measurement is of outcomes, and that the complexity of provision is too great.

## **WESB recommends:**

- That the Assembly maintain its address to basic skills problems on a united, all-age basis, perhaps using a 'basic skills unit' approach to do so, and that it ensure that neither changes in responsibilities or departmental budgets undermine the effectiveness of the all-age approach
- That programme performance indicators and monitoring of indicators should be much more robust and outcome focussed, and should reflect a coherent and readily understood strategy comprising clear goals, priorities, and targets

3. At *adult level*, we believe that more work is needed to ensure that the Employer Pledge delivers what it should and that basic skills needs in the workplace are pursued much more actively within the Workforce Development programme.

## **WESB recommends:**

- That the performance of employers who have committed to the Employer Pledge in delivering basic skills outcomes should be closely monitored
- That the Department for Economy & Transport (DE & T) ensure that all Workforce Development Programme advisors are equipped to raise awareness of the impact of poor basic skills in the workforce and to point companies in the direction of the necessary skills and support to diagnose and counteract basic skills deficiencies

4. In respect of *young people's basic skills* we believe that the need for improvement is so fundamental that the government should define and adopt an extremely challenging target for (virtually) universal basic skills competence amongst school-leavers.

#### **WESB recommends:**

- That the Welsh Assembly Government develop and adopt a target for a universal minimum level of literacy and numeracy for all school leavers (apart from those with a significant and measured degree of learning difficulty), this target to be achieved by a stated date
5. We then propose that there are two main areas in which basic skills strategy can be valuably developed. Firstly, the delivery of basic skills assessment and teaching needs to be highly *personalised* throughout the years in which children and young people are in education. Secondly, the effectiveness of '*the system*' needs to be driven up.
6. In respect of *personalisation* our focus is on recognising, at every stage, children who are beginning to fall behind the standards for their age group and ensuring that corresponding action follows.

#### **WESB recommends:**

- That all children's progress in literacy and numeracy be systematically monitored throughout their school and college careers and should be diagnostically assessed at Key Stages 2, 3, and 4
- That catch-up teaching supported by mentoring be universally available to all children and young people falling below the standard for their age at all stages of their education in primary school, secondary school, and Further Education
- That the basic skills levels of all entrants to Further Education should be assessed soon after entry and action should be taken to counteract any deficiencies

7. *To drive the system to perform better*, we believe that it is necessary to:

- Raise the *status* of basic skills.
- Strengthen the *leadership* of basic skills strategy and delivery.
- Introduce or strengthen mechanisms to ensure that 'the system' at various points is forced to perform to *minimum acceptable standards*.

**8.** We identify a series of reforms each related to one or more of these needs which we believe would be valuable in driving up basic skills standards.

**9.** Firstly, we believe that clear ‘championing’ of basic skills strategy at a high level of the *Welsh Assembly Government* is needed to give basic skills strategy an overall impetus.

**WESB recommends:**

- That Basic Skills strategy should have identified ‘champions’ at ministerial and senior administrative levels – individuals who put their power and influence firmly behind the delivery of basic skills strategy, who send out clear messages to delivery agents, including schools and colleges, that nothing less than excellent practice is acceptable, and who are accountable for the success of the strategy

**10.** At the ‘next level down’ – that of local government – we believe that local authorities should be more strongly encouraged towards best practice in basic skills delivery.

**WESB recommends:**

- That the Welsh Assembly Government establish a minimum standard for Local Authority action to tackle basic skills as a formal ‘Outcome Agreement’ measure

**11.** We are concerned that awards of *quality standards* for basic skills provision in schools may not be as effective in driving up standards as well as they might. We observe that many more institutions have been awarded the Quality Standard than modest overall gains in outcomes appear to justify. We believe that *Estyn gradings* could be adjusted to place higher demands on institutions’ procedures and performance in respect of the basic skills of their pupils and students.

**WESB recommends:**

- That the apparent ‘disconnect’ between rising quality standards and limited improvements in basic skills should be investigated and far more emphasis in assessing quality should be placed on added-value outcomes than on procedures
- That a graded, rather than an absolute ‘yes or no’, Quality Standard should be introduced
- Estyn inspection gradings should be adjusted so that achieving a Grade 1 for Leadership and Management should not be obtainable unless schools have a strong catch-up programme applying to all children below age-group standards for literacy and numeracy and can show a defined minimum level of added-value in English/Welsh and Maths achievement

**12.** Within *schools*, we believe that a range of measures would help drive up the basic skills of school leavers in Wales. These measures concern:

- The training and qualifications of teachers.
- The reporting of school *achievements*.
- The *recognition of achievement by pupils* of minimum standards in literacy, numeracy and Information Technology (IT).
- The *incentivisation* of schools to deliver high added value in respect of their pupils’ basic skills development.

**WESB recommends that:**

- All teachers (but most especially, headteachers) should have a basic skills assessment and teaching qualification as part of their professional accreditation
- All teachers (including headteachers) in secondary, as well as primary school, should take responsibility for identifying and working to eliminate basic skills deficiencies
- A minimum of one ‘inset day’ per year dedicated to basic skills be made mandatory for every school teacher in Wales
- Schools should be permitted to report their achievement in respect of ‘5 grades A-C at GCSE’ only where those grades include English/Welsh and Maths
- The Assembly Government formally consider the practicalities and implications of introducing ‘graduation’ – to include a clear statement of competence in literacy, numeracy and IT – at an appropriate point in secondary education
- The Welsh Assembly Government design and implement a Schools Pledge Scheme which incentivises schools for good performance, measured by outcomes, in generating literacy and numeracy

## 2. Context

### A significant basic skills problem in Wales

**13.** In its first Annual Report<sup>1</sup>, WESB observed that Wales ‘continues to have a major problem with basic skills’. It was noted that the UK ranks 20th out of 23 OECD countries in terms of the share of the population having adequate levels of literacy and numeracy and that Wales had more severe problems than almost any other part of the UK. More recently, statistics showing a continuing basic skills deficit in the school age population were presented to the Board. Using a standardised scoring system, an International survey<sup>2</sup> placed Wales at a disadvantage in both English and Maths for young people aged 15 years:

	OECD average	Wales
<b>English</b>	492	481
<b>Maths</b>	498	484

**14.** This continuing deficit at a young age is even more concerning than the overall population deficit. It suggests that not only has there been a historic shortfall in Wales’ development of literacy and numeracy but that the basis for a continuing shortfall is still in place.

**15.** Our Report recommended ‘that the government redouble its efforts to eliminate the basic skills deficit within the adult population and ensure that all education and skills providers give far stronger emphasis to basic skills’ and WESB committed itself to an investigation of support for improving Adult Basic Skills.

**16.** Since this initial expression of concern about the level of basic skills in Wales, WESB has continued to develop its thinking on the subject. Some initial points help to define our focus of interest and the nature of our continuing concern.

### Basic skills as a necessary condition for economic and personal success

**17.** Firstly, we recognise that there is a considerable academic literature on the value of basic skills to individuals and to the economy. This literature has been reviewed for the Welsh Assembly<sup>3</sup> and, more recently, for the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills<sup>4</sup>. The analyses are complex and do not show

<sup>1</sup> *A Wales that Works*, WESB, 2009

<sup>2</sup> *Achievements of 15-year-olds in Wales: PISA 2006 National Report*, NFER for OECD, 2006

<sup>3</sup> *Literature Review of the Effects of Improvements in Adult Basic Skills*, S. McIntosh for National Assembly for Wales, 2005

<sup>4</sup> *Economic Impact of Training and Education in Basic Skills, Summary of Evidence*, Institute of Education, University of London for DBIS, October 2009



perfect linearity between skill levels and individual outcomes or economic productivity. Part of the ‘non-linearity’ arises because of imperfections (as with other areas of skill) in the utilisation of basic skills. Simply, if the economy cannot supply jobs which require higher levels of basic skills then higher earnings and productivity cannot occur from their development. However, it is concluded, overall, that ‘People with higher literacy and numeracy skills earn more in the labour market than those with lower basic skills. The returns are over and above any general effect on earnings from a person’s background, ability, and qualifications’<sup>5</sup> and evidence is quoted ‘that basic skills are significantly related to economic growth.’<sup>6</sup>

**18.** On the question of whether Wales is able to deploy higher levels of basic skills we note that required skill levels in Welsh jobs are rising<sup>7</sup> and we note numerous reports, both in the press<sup>8</sup> and made directly to WESB, of employers’ frustration with the literacy and numeracy skills of potential and actual recruits. Of course, even if this evidence were not available, neither we nor the Assembly Government would countenance an economic future based on low value activity demanding only low basic skills.

**19.** Essentially, therefore, our perception of the importance of good basic skills to economic success has been reinforced, and a further conclusion of the literature – that ‘better basic skills are also associated with a higher probability of employment’<sup>9</sup> contributes strongly to our concerns about youth unemployment and employability skills raised in other parts of this Report<sup>10</sup>.

**20.** In addition, an absence of basic skills – literacy even more than numeracy – acts as a major barrier to progression throughout the educational system. The scale of the deficit we still witness among young learners in Wales contributes significantly to poor educational performance and therefore to the NEETS (those young people not engaged in employment, education or training) problem. Learners who lack the basic skills required at the next stage in their education are inevitably disadvantaged, if not precluded from further development. Very young learners are aware of their basic skills deficit and are motivated to tackle it; older school children are more likely to disengage. In so far as this leads to behavioural problems it also becomes a threat to effective learning among their peers.

<sup>5</sup> *op cit*, DBIS, October 2009

<sup>6</sup> *Literacy Scores, Human Capital and Growth across Fourteen OECD Countries, Statistics Canada Report, November 11, 2004*

<sup>7</sup> *Are jobs in Wales high skilled and high quality? Baselineing the One Wales vision and tracking recent trends, A. Felstead, Contemporary Wales, Volume 22, 2009*

<sup>8</sup> For example: ‘The CBI says that the majority of the Government’s adult skills funding should go on helping individuals to improve basic skills... and supporting employers’ efforts to compensate for shortcomings in the education system’, CBI press release, November 10, 2009

<sup>9</sup> *op cit*, S. McIntosh, 2005

<sup>10</sup> *Moving Forward: Foundations for Growth, Vol. 4, Youth Unemployment, WESB, 2010; Moving Forward: Foundations for Growth, Vol. 3, Employability, WESB, 2010*

## The problem demands an urgent response

**21.** Our second consideration was of the roots of Wales' basic skills deficit. There are two obvious contenders. The first is the historic and current character of Wales' economy and its cultural associations. The second is failure in the processes by which basic skills are developed. Clearly, a historic dependence on heavy industry based on manual skills disposed to low basic skills in the past. Now, areas where dependence on welfare is frequent have a culture of low aspiration and concomitant low levels of basic skills in their populations. Evidence presented to us that performance in literacy and numeracy relative to expected standards falls between Key Stages 2 and 3 may reflect some young people's declining motivation as their confidence that they can get a good job also falls as they get closer to entering the labour market. Similar evidence that boys' performance falls most may well reflect changes which have stripped well-paid manual jobs for 'non-academic' young men out of the economy. In these circumstances, it seems that the failure of basic skills development processes is not an absolute one. Those processes continue to succeed where young people's motivations are strong, but are sorely tested in areas and for individuals where motivation and aspiration are weak.

**22.** The relative weight of the cultural and process factors cannot be measured and they are, in any case, clearly interactive. Our key point is simply that economic and cultural regeneration is a long-term issue whilst processes can be, and should be, urgently strengthened – and it is, therefore, in this latter area where our attention to policy is focussed in the later part of this discussion,

**23.** We recognise that within 'processes' there are important questions concerning the way in which literacy and numeracy are developed. These include the methods by which young children are initially taught to read, the relationship of dyslexia and dyscalculia ('number blindness') to basic skills development, and the extent to which adult basic skills education is 'embedded' within other kinds of learning, sometimes in order to reduce the perceived stigma of learning basic skills at older ages. Our point here is that such aspects of the issue are beyond WESB's expertise and we simply trust that DCELLS specialists are abreast of the latest thinking on these matters and are ensuring that 'the system' is responding appropriately.

## Basic skills and strengthening communities

**24.** Our fourth contextual point goes back to earlier discussion here of the effects of having or not having good basic skills. We noted that good basic skills increase employability and earnings for individuals and, in aggregate, are one basis of high productivity in the economy. However, the academic literature referred to earlier also recognises that basic skills contribute to the wellbeing and health of individuals and communities. Good basic skills promote self-confidence and self-esteem and allow participation in those community processes which need adequate literacy and numeracy. Communities which can articulate their concerns in formal ways are more effective than communities which cannot.

**25.** WESB is supportive, therefore, of localised programmes which seek to raise basic skills standards in particular communities; and, particularly, of family learning approaches which address inter-generational skills problems in deprived areas

## Literacy and numeracy as the key focus

**26.** Our final contextual point is that WESB (in line with national strategy) has focussed its attention on 'basic skills' as comprising literacy and numeracy skills. We recognise that skills in English (or Welsh) for immigrants with other first languages is an important basic skill. We also recognise that IT skills are sometimes regarded as 'basic' to much employment in the modern world. Indeed, we recognise and do not wholly discount, the argument that IT skills possessed by young people, even when their formal literacy and numeracy skills are moderate or low, can represent a comparable asset. However, whilst acknowledging these points, we believe – not least from our employer representation and contacts – that deficiencies in conventional literacy and numeracy remain the central issue for Wales.

## 3. Basic skills strategy: principles

### Introduction

**27.** Against this background, we move to set out WESB's key observations and recommendations regarding basic skills policy in Wales.

**28.** We note, of course, that the Assembly Government is moving towards renewal of national basic skills strategy as last set out in 2005<sup>11</sup> and has produced some initial thoughts on the form of that renewal.<sup>12</sup>

**29.** We welcome the fact that basic skills strategy will receive impetus through this further development, and we are impressed by the enthusiasm and commitment of the leadership of basic skills delivery within DCELLS. We hope that our views on strategy and delivery will help reinforce and accelerate the direction of government travel on this issue.

### Maintaining an 'all age' approach

**30.** Firstly, we strongly support the view (also taken by the recent draft strategy) that basic skills strategy is most effective when it retains an 'all-age' perspective on design and delivery. However, we note that the 'skills' policy area – that which directs resources to support the development of adult skills – has moved from the previous Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning, and Skills to the Department for the Economy and Transport. We are concerned, therefore, that shifts of responsibility between Departments of government should not induce division in the all-age character of basic skills strategy in Wales. *The dangers, if this should happen, are twofold. First, there is the obvious 'governmental' threat that funding to tackle basic skills deficits would not be appropriately balanced between disconnected 'young person' and 'adult' parts of the strategy; and that government expertise would be dispersed. Second, there is the more fundamental threat that linkages and feedbacks between basic skills problems at younger and older ages would not be addressed.*

#### WESB therefore recommends:

- That the Assembly maintain its address to basic skills problems on a united, all-age basis, perhaps using a 'basic skills unit' approach to do so, and that it ensure that neither changes in responsibilities or departmental budgets undermine the effectiveness of the all-age approach

<sup>11</sup> *Words Talk – Numbers Count, Welsh Assembly Government, April 2005*

<sup>12</sup> *Draft: The Basic Skills Strategy for Wales, Qualification, Curriculum, Learning Improvement Division, Welsh Assembly Government, December 2009*

## Setting targets and measuring performance

**31.** Our second point concerns the way in which the objectives of basic skills strategy are framed and in which progress towards those objectives is measured. The last formal strategy document ('Words Talk – Numbers Count') produced in 2005, concluded with a section on 'measuring outcomes' which set out a schedule of objectives with associated performance indicators and monitoring procedures. This section is clearly fundamental to the notion of 'strategy' – it set out what Wales was trying to achieve and how achievement would be assessed. Our review of this approach is:

- The objectives were clearly driven by perceived and well-understood deficiencies. However, they were all expressed in terms which sought improvement (fewer deficiencies, more activity, greater effectiveness) with only very restricted reference to the volume of improvement which was to be brought about (either in absolute terms or in relation to a known scale of deficiency or under-performance). Although the strategy is 'all-age', the only numerical outcome target was: '80% of working age adults to have at least Level 1 literacy skills, and 55% to have at least Level 1 numeracy skills by 2010'.
- Many of the performance indicators are concerned with development of process (for example, regarding quality of provision, numbers of health professionals attending seminars, numbers of employees covered by the Employer Pledge).
- Quantitative measures of progress were to be applied. For example, LLWR and PLASC data were expected to show whether 'the effectiveness of post-16 dedicated basic skills learning provision' was improving or not. However, any observed improvement was not, in the main, to be related to objectives for the scale and pace of progress, since, as above, the strategy had few such objectives.

**32.** Our concern is, thus, that the strategy did not have a sufficiently hard edge. Mainly, it did not expect any particular level of activity or achievement (respectively just 'more' and 'higher') and cannot, therefore, assess what share of the national problem is being addressed. If data to measure outcomes has been generated and analysed, that analysis is not widely available. For example, the recent draft strategy has several 'outputs and outcomes' sections, but virtually all of these report progress in terms of activity and do not indicate how many people in Wales – children or adults – have better basic skills as a result of such activity. Presentations to the Board by DCELLS' basic skills specialists did show outcomes from particular elements of the strategy but there did not appear to be a systematic and across-the-board application of a performance measurement approach.

**33.** The evaluation of the first, 2001-2004, basic skills strategy<sup>13</sup> concluded in 2004 that 'Although data collection systems have improved, systems for reporting outcomes are currently weak and require strengthening' and 'There is a need to develop a shared vision of how sector development is expected to progress over time (and key milestones) for this development to help bridge the gap between current activity and ultimate goals of the strategy'. As far as we can tell, this critique did not result in any great change and remains largely valid.

**34.** We would also add that the basic skills strategy (and its proposed renewal) remains very broad. It is distributed across ten 'horizontal themes' which cross-cut ten target groups. While this approach reflects the width and scale of the issue, it generates a complex picture of activities, programmes and projects. It is unlikely that these have equal value (and some may have little value). However, unless better information on the results of these activities is available – information which allows benefits to be related to costs – there is no basis for the accurate direction of strategy towards maximum outcomes per unit of expenditure and effort. In conditions where public expenditure needs to be as efficient as possible, this is a serious concern.

**35.** Thus, when the draft basic skills strategy asks 'Are we evaluating impact effectively and what is the quality of the evidence that we can provide', WESB's answers, based on the evidence available to the Board, are 'no' and 'very limited'. When the draft strategy asks 'Are we targeting resources as effectively as we could?', WESB's answer is 'we don't know and, more worryingly, we doubt whether it is possible for DCELLS and DE&T to do so either'.

**36.** In summary, WESB's underlying concern is that Wales' basic skills strategy should actually be a strategy – a systematic and coherent application of resources designed to move Wales from a known position to a different, and better, known position. At the moment, we do not see a sufficient degree of knowledge, coherence and system in either the current or draft renewal strategies. Rather, we see a complex array of programmes and funding arrangements (which mostly look as though they should be useful) being applied somewhat inconsistently across different areas of Wales, different local authorities, different schools, different communities, and different social groups with limited information as to return on investment. We believe that, as in other areas of national skills policy, simplification is highly desirable; and, where simplification is not possible, at least its presentation to its customer bases should be much clearer than is the case at present – 'the wiring' should be hidden.

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<sup>13</sup> *Basic Skills Strategy Evaluation: Main Report, York Consulting for National Assembly for Wales, July 2004*

**37.** These issues are recognised in the basic skills strategy currently in development and we strongly endorse the view that they need a response.

**WESB therefore recommends that:**

- Programme performance indicators and monitoring of indicators should be much more robust and outcome focussed, and should reflect a coherent and readily understood strategy comprising clear goals, priorities, and targets



## 4. Improving basic skills strategy: key themes

**38.** When we turn to the delivery of strategy, our minor focus is on adult basic skills whilst our major focus is on the development of basic skills during childhood and adolescence.

### Adult basic skills

**39.** With respect to *adult* basic skills, we have two main points to make:

- Firstly, we strongly support the draft strategy in its intention to ‘substantially increase’ funding for basic skills learning in the workplace through the Employer Pledge and to place a stronger ‘focus on learner achievement through the Pledge’. WESB takes a similar view. Our key concern, however, is not so much with the numbers of employers signed up to the Pledge but with uncertainty as to what employers who have signed up are actually delivering. We believe that this needs to be closely monitored to ensure that progress is happening.
- Secondly, we believe that HRD advisors working within the Workforce Development Programme could and should have a significant role in promoting basic skills learning in the workplace. We believe that this should be a primary function of the advisor role. All advisors need to promote the importance of tackling basic skills deficiencies in the workforce and to be able to signpost businesses to the support they may need to do so.

### WESB recommends:

- That the performance of employers who have committed to the Employer Pledge in delivering basic skills outcomes should be closely monitored
- That DCELLS ensure that all Workforce Development Programme advisors are equipped to raise awareness of the impact of poor basic skills in the workforce and to point companies in the direction of the necessary skills and support to diagnose and counteract basic skills deficiencies

### Young people’s basic skills

**40.** With respect to the initial development of *young people’s basic skills*, WESB’s basic position is that we cannot go on like this. It is simply unacceptable that employers and other adult programmes should have to counteract deficiencies which should be eliminated by the compulsory age educational system. Other than for a small number of young people with pronounced learning difficulties, the aim should be to generate universal literacy and numeracy amongst school



and college leavers to a functional standard as measured by the capacity to undertake higher education or to enter mainstream employment without the need for remedial action. This aim should be adopted and promoted by the Welsh Assembly Government and a date for its achievement should be stated.

### **WESB recommends:**

- That the Welsh Assembly Government develop and adopt a target for a universal minimum level of literacy and numeracy for all school leavers (apart from those with a significant and measured degree of learning difficulty), this target to be achieved by a stated date

**41.** The developments we propose which would contribute to this end are, in essence, ones which would firm-up proposals and positions which are already discernible in the draft basic skills strategy or would make universal things which seem to us to be best practice but which are at present not consistently applied. They concern two main areas for further development. Firstly, that every child's journey towards the acquisition of adequate (or better) basic skills should be 'personalised'. Secondly, that every means possible to drive up the effectiveness of 'the system' by which children's and young people's basic skills are developed should be applied.

## **The 'personalisation' of basic skills development**

**42.** The 'personalisation' issue concerns the extent to which children's progress in basic skills learning is individually monitored throughout their period in school and college and, when falling behind, is subject to individual attention. The draft strategy recognises the challenge of 'maintaining a targeted and strong focus on those learners who are under-attaining... by targeting their progression and reinforcing their learning where appropriate'.

**43.** This clearly needs to start in primary school. Relative under-performance can already be apparent by age 7 and needs to be tackled early.

**44.** However, we noted earlier that there is relative decline between Key Stages 2 and 3. Development work on Wales 8-14 strategy<sup>14</sup> noted this and recommended research to investigate why the decline occurs. However, it appears that a particular failure may arise when children make the transition from primary to secondary school. Clearly, the experience of primary school, in which every child has prolonged daily contact with the same teacher, is different from that in secondary school where children move class to class for different subjects and individual attention via the 'form teacher' is lesser. Our position is that:

<sup>14</sup> Task and Finish Group on 8-14 Education Provision in Wales, *First Stage Report*, D. Egan, September 2009

- Throughout primary school years, the progress of every child's literacy and numeracy should be monitored against age group standards and those children who fall behind should receive individual support to improve.
- Every child leaving primary school should be prepared to a basic skills standard which allows them to participate fully in secondary education.
- Following transition from primary to secondary school, there should be a reliable and consistent assessment procedure for identifying where this is not the case, and 'catch-up' teaching supported by individual mentoring should be in place in every school for every child who has literacy and numeracy levels which are too low. This individual attention should continue for as long as necessary to support the child through their secondary education.
- Children's progress in literacy and numeracy should be diagnostically formally assessed at Key Stages 2, 3, and 4 (ages 7, 11, and 14). Such assessments would be individual ones, necessary to assure progress. They should be used collectively, however, to ensure that schools are 'adding value' in literacy and numeracy.
- Whenever young people move into Further Education, there should be a universally-applied Basic Skills assessment in students' first terms with appropriate subsequent attention to identified deficiencies.

#### **WESB recommends:**

- That all children's progress in literacy and numeracy be systematically monitored throughout their school and college careers and should be diagnostically assessed at Key Stages 2, 3, and 4
- That catch-up teaching supported by mentoring be universally available to all children and young people falling below the standard for their age at all stages of their education in primary school, secondary school, and Further Education
- That the basic skills levels of all entrants to Further Education should be assessed soon after entry and action should be taken to counteract any deficiencies

### **Driving the system towards greater effectiveness**

**45.** We believe that, underlying movement towards a position in which attention to children's and young people's personal needs is more reliable and consistent, the system as a whole needs to be galvanised into action. We see several important and related factors in this.

- Raising the *status* of basic skills.
- Strengthening the *leadership* of basic skills strategy and delivery.

- Introducing or strengthening mechanisms to ensure that ‘the system’ at various points is forced to perform to *minimum acceptable standards*.

**46.** We see a series of developments which we believe would contribute to major progress on one or more of these fronts.

### **Leadership from government**

**47.** We note that the 2005 strategy ‘Words Talk – Numbers Count’ took the view that ‘This is not the Assembly Government’s strategy alone. To be successful, it needs to be supported actively by other partners’. WESB appreciates the sentiment but it also recognises that where strategic responsibility is dispersed, cohesion and levels of activity and performance can suffer. From the perspective of employers outside government the dispersion of responsibility, while arising from good intent, both characterises and undermines too much of what government does: it ensures an absence of clear accountability for success. It also adds significantly to the frustration experienced by bodies outside government: they cannot identify to whom to turn when they seek action. We believe that government championing of the new phase of basic skills strategy will be vital in driving it forward. Thus, whilst, as above, we recognise the commitment of basic skills specialists in the relevant Department(s) of government. ...

#### **WESB recommends that:**

- Basic Skills strategy should have identified ‘champions’ at ministerial and senior administrative levels – individuals who put their power and influence firmly behind the delivery of basic skills strategy, who send out clear messages to delivery agents, including schools and colleges, that nothing less than excellent practice is acceptable, and who are accountable for the success of the strategy

### **Making local authorities more accountable**

**48.** Secondly, local authorities should be encouraged fully to adopt best practice in identifying and responding to basic skill needs. The draft basic skills strategy proposes that authorities should have a Basic Skills Strategic Plan within their Education Plans and ‘a similar focus in the education plans of all providers’. WESB considers that this proposal would have greater force if a defined requirement in respect of Basic Skills were included in the ‘Outcome Agreements’ on which the financing of most local authority expenditure is based.

#### **WESB recommends:**

- That the Welsh Assembly Government establish a minimum standard for Local Authority action to tackle basic skills as a formal ‘Outcome Agreement’ measure

## A more demanding inspection system

**49.** We note that the proportions of schools and colleges awarded the Quality Standard in 2009 are considerably above the proportions awarded the Quality Mark in 2001 and that Estyn inspections have become more positive in respect of schools' basic skills performance. We are not convinced that these changes are commensurate with the modest scale of improvement in children's and young people's literacy and numeracy. We believe this apparent 'disconnect' should be investigated and that *more emphasis in assessing quality should be placed on added-value outcomes than on procedures*. A graded, rather than an absolute 'yes or no', Quality Standard should be introduced in order to progress.

**50.** We also believe that Estyn inspection gradings should be more strongly focussed on basic skills. We believe that gradings should be adjusted so that achieving a Grade 1 for Leadership and Management should not be obtainable unless schools have a strong catch-up programme applying to all children below age-group standards for literacy and numeracy and can show a defined minimum level of added-value in English/Welsh and Maths achievement.

### WESB recommends that:

- That the apparent 'disconnect' between rising quality standards and limited improvements in basic skills should be investigated and far more emphasis in assessing quality should be placed on added-value outcomes than on procedures
- That a graded, rather than an absolute 'yes or no', Quality Standard should be introduced
- Estyn inspection gradings should be adjusted so that achieving a Grade 1 for Leadership and Management should not be obtainable unless schools have a strong catch-up programme applying to all children below age-group standards for literacy and numeracy and can show a defined minimum level of added-value in English/Welsh and Maths achievement.

## Raising the status of basic skills in schools

**51.** A key aspect of moving forward is to accord a far higher status and priority to basic skills throughout schools and colleges. The importance of basic skills can all too easily be overshadowed by the need to achieve good academic performances among the many – small numbers of learners with fundamental basic skills difficulties can drift below the horizon. This is especially true in secondary schooling because of the dominance of subject-based teaching and assessment, including the measurement of school performance in terms of 5 good GCSEs and A Levels. Institutions' priorities and status systems are set in

large measure by how their success is measured. This may also mean that basic skills become the preserve of some staff not all and that specialist basic skills teaching is not highly regarded. What is needed are measures which would help a high quality approach to basic skills to become universal.

**52.** We believe that all teachers (including headteachers) in secondary, as well as primary school, should take responsibility for identifying and working to eliminate basic skills deficiencies. It is a legitimate aim to work towards a point at which all teachers (but most especially headteachers) have a basic skills assessment and teaching qualification as part of their professional accreditation. It may also be valuable if a minimum of one 'inset day' per year dedicated to basic skills were mandatory for every school teacher in Wales.

**53.** The significance of basic skills would also be brought home if the '5 good GCSEs' measure of school outputs were adapted such that schools were permitted to report their achievement in respect of '5 grades A-C at GCSE' only where those grades include English/Welsh and Maths.

**54.** WESB is also taken with the idea of 'graduation'. This has been discussed in a further volume of this report<sup>15</sup> as a guarantee or, at worst, as a strong indicator, of employability (as well as being a good motivator for pupils). We believe that graduation which included a guarantee of a minimum standard of literacy and numeracy would be strongly approved by employers (as well as by Further and Higher Education).

**55.** As above, we believe that leadership and management within schools is critical to outcomes. We have made several suggestions which we believe would ensure that institutions 'buy in' to the solution of basic skills problems. Most of these suggestions involve bringing pressure on schools (for example, to make mentoring and catch-up programmes universal and to make inspection and quality awards more stringent). Our last suggestion is that an incentivisation scheme for schools may also be valuable – such that schools which sign up to a Schools Pledge and thereby commit to deliver an agreed minimum, but testing, degree of added value in respect of literacy and numeracy are rewarded with additional funding on delivery. We believe that such an approach would have a powerful effect in promoting the 'all school' and 'all schools' address to literacy and numeracy which we believe is necessary to bring about the scale of change which Wales needs.

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<sup>15</sup> *Moving Forward: Foundations for Growth, Vol. 3, Employability Skills, WESB, 2010*

**WESB recommends that:**

- All teachers (but most especially, headteachers) should have a basic skills assessment and teaching qualification as part of their professional accreditation
- All teachers (including headteachers) in secondary, as well as primary school, should take responsibility for identifying and working to eliminate basic skills deficiencies
- A minimum of one 'inset day' per year dedicated to basic skills be made mandatory for every school teacher in Wales
- Schools should be permitted to report their achievement in respect of '5 grades A-C at GCSE' only where those grades include English/Welsh and Maths
- The Assembly Government formally consider the practicalities and implications of introducing 'graduation' – to include a clear statement of competence in literacy, numeracy and IT – at an appropriate point in secondary education
- The Welsh Assembly Government design and implement a Schools Pledge Scheme which incentivises schools for good performance, measured by outcomes, in generating literacy and numeracy