

West Lothian: Unions hit out at school cuts

Teaching unions have warned that changes to budgeting rules designed to “empower” head teachers will in fact force them to make severe cuts to their schools

The EIS has accused councillors of “passing the buck” for education cuts onto head teachers, forcing them to make tough decisions on providing education with reduced funds for all schools from primary to secondary.

Their concern comes from draft proposals for the changes to what is known as Devolved School Management (DSM).

First introduced in the 1990s, DSM essentially means head teachers control the spending in their schools. The latest revision to the policy, however, cuts the amount of money available to each school and introduces new rules on funding for staff cover costs.

Heather Hughes, local EIS secretary for West Lothian and chair of the Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers (LNCT) outlined specific areas of concern about the revised plans including changes to funding for additional staffing which will, unions believe, result in senior teaching staff being used to cover for sickness absences in addition to admin duties.

The draft proposals for the changes will be decided by councillors when the Education Executive meets before the

start of the summer holidays in June, with the intention to introduce the new DSM rules at the start of the new school year in August.

Greg Welsh, head of primary education, outlined the results of working group discussions with the county's headteachers in a recent report to the Education Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel (PDSP).

Mr Welsh said: "West Lothian Council agreed to achieve an education and schools-based saving of £8.223 million over five years commencing in August, through a review of resources in Education, including budget allocations to schools through the scheme of Devolved School Management (DSM)."

The report added: "The scheme of Devolved School Management provides the method of calculating how resources are allocated to schools on the basis of clearly defined allocation criteria. Responsibility for determining how this budget will be allocated within each school rests with each Headteacher, however, and the scheme does not provide a prescriptive guide to how resources will be used within each school.

"This approach ensures that schools are resourced in a fair and consistent manner, whilst ensuring that Head Teachers are empowered to deploy resources in the manner best suited to meet the needs of the learners in their school, and the school community.

"This approach is in line with the national drive to empower head teachers which has been embraced within West Lothian Education Services."

In practice the new DSM means a reduction in the funding per pupil. In primaries, schools will pay for the first 10 working days of supply costs to cover a teacher's absence in all cases. Previously, if the absence lasted more than 10 days, the first 10 days were funded centrally.

At Secondary level, schools will pay for the first 20 working days of supply costs to cover a teacher's absence. This was previously 17 days.

Recording the dissent of unions to the proposals, Mrs Hughes told the meeting: "We believe these will significantly and negatively impact on the learning and well-being of children and young people in our schools."

She said: "We don't deny the budgetary challenges faced by local government, the terrible choices that you, the elected members, have had to make. But they are political choices that you have made and we in the EIS and our sister unions will not and cannot stay quiet about the impact of your choices."

Mrs Hughes told councillors: "It's fundamental that education be properly resourced for all learners to make sure that it is council's number one priority of raising attainment and maintaining positive destinations for all our young people.

"Cutting money year on year from these budgets is not the way to achieve that."

"Our headteachers are charged with implementing these cuts which will be a challenge for them. These proposals, we dress them up as empowerment which it is not. The choices head teachers will face during the planned five years of cuts will be very real and very difficult for them."

Teachers in Scotland already have the highest contact time of any teachers in the developed world. Mrs Hughes added: "80% of all teachers work an average of eight hours free on top of their 35 contracted hours every week. Teachers are already feeling burnout."

Councillors sought assurances that schools would not see their budgets eaten up by supply costs in the event of a surge of sickness absence. Mr Welsh said there would continue to be centralised support as well as support from clusters of

schools working together.

Chairing the meeting Councillor Andrew McGuire responded to Mrs Hughes' statement on the behalf of the LNCT, saying there were "no easy solutions" for the council.

He added: " We note your dissent and have great sympathy with the position that you advocate although against a backdrop of the pressing financial situation that local government and the wider public sector finds itself in there are no easy solutions but we can appreciate your candour here."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter

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