

LONDONASSEMBLY

Chair of the Education Panel



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Jennette Arnold OBE AM

30 September 2014

Boris Johnson
Mayor of London
City Hall
The Queens Walk
London, SE1 2AA

Dear Boris,

Support for Children with Complex Needs

As you recognise in your Annual Education report "a growing number of children and young people" have a statement of need or receive some level of intervention in their school. The data indicate that one in every five pupils has a special educational need and in London around 4 per cent of children have a statement. This is in line with the national average. However, the challenge to education professionals is intensifying as the complexity of need increases.

Your Education report highlights the gap in attainment of children with SEN compared to the cohort without: more than 70 per cent of children with no identified SEN achieve 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE level (including English and maths) compared with 35 per cent of those on School Action and 25 per cent on School Action Plus. For those with statements the figure is just under 10 per cent. Despite recognising the challenge facing these young people there is no specific strand of work in your Education Programme to support them.

At a recent session of the Education Panel we discussed the likely impact of the Children and Families Act 2014 on the education offer to young people with complex needs. Many stakeholders welcomed the opportunities for greater parental involvement in decision-making and for better public service integration. However, there was a sense that after decades of working to mainstream young people with complex needs there is now a growing separation with clusters developing as some schools actively work to support these children while other schools discourage their admission. And we were told there are more children going to special schools now.

Some of our panel noted how the new academies and free schools may be contributing to this increased separation with great variability as to whether or not they include such children. We were also told how directors of children's services are finding it increasingly difficult to challenge -- for children to be in mainstream schools when that is their parents' wish. I would also bring to your attention comments made to us that exclusions are higher from some academies - not all - and some free schools than would be expected, and the phenomenon of so-called hidden exclusion- where children have not actually been formally excluded, but where schools make it dear that they are an academic school, so might not be best placed to meet a child's needs- which is becoming more commonplace. You are a vocal advocate for academies and free schools and it would be welcome if you stressed that any and all new schools should have an inclusive ethos.

There was also an important point raised about making sure that where there are new builds, particularly in tight spaces, that the design of the buildings should not prevent children with physical disabilities from attending and that there should be adequate classroom space for the levels of intervention that children with complex needs might require. Again where you call-in planning decisions that include provision of new education facilities will you be mindful of those concerns.

Finally, experts at our meeting proposed one very specific action that they would like you to take which we wish to endorse and recommend you consider: is there scope for having three or four Gold Club schools based around their records for inclusion and attainment?

I look forward to hearing from you

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jennette', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM
Chair of the Education Panel

Cc Munira Murza, Deputy Mayor for Education and Culture