**A few personal thoughts …**

**almost at the start of yet another new financial year**

***“… Schools whose children find themselves in the most challenging of circumstances need a modern day educational ‘Marshall Plan’ ..”***

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***Ger Graus***

*Chief Executive of the Children’s University (CU) Trust*

It is undeniable that the gap in performance between schools containing disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged children and schools containing better-off young people has in reality only slightly narrowed in recent years. At current rates of progress, it will be many decades before, beyond the statistical playground, parity is achieved. It is time for society to consider fundamental changes in the way funds and resources, including human resources, are allocated to and deployed within schools which find themselves in the most challenging of circumstances.

These schools should receive funding based not on a formula that is unit driven, but on what it takes to improve significantly educational opportunities, achievement and attainment of course, with a strong emphasis on the children’s ‘immediate context’: their community. To be clear, here the definition of community includes: living in the same place, having particular characteristics in common, common interests and attitudes in the context of social values, joint identity, ownership and responsibility, and it includes of course the family and in particular the parents and carers.

More of the same simply will not do! Responding to the needs of those individual children ‘who need it most’ will inevitably lead to markedly different funding levels for a small but significant number of primary and secondary schools, linked to different ways of provision in differing contexts of engagement and deployment. The figure for England may be in the region of 250 to 500 schools (1 to 2 per cent), not an inconsiderable number but one that should not be beyond the means of what is still one of the largest economies in the world.

In broad terms, what I am advocating for this selected group of schools is a funding and resourcing regime not dissimilar to that enjoyed by learners in the private, or independent sector. Before I am accused of taking leave of my senses, I would ask you to consider whether it would be acceptable for surgeons working in the private health sector to be able to perform pioneering and very expensive surgery on private patients that was routinely denied to national health patients with similar conditions. The tax-paying public would never stand for funding a service that accepted it was routinely inferior to that which could be purchased by private means. This, in my view, is precisely what goes on within our present education system.

Living in a country where citizens are free to use their disposable income to purchase all manner of goods, services and privileges, it would be ludicrous to try to prevent individuals or groups from buying a particular kind of education. If the government – any government – is really going to bridge the achievement and attainment gaps between high performing schools and those catering for the most disadvantaged, it must consider very carefully the best way to organise, facilitate and support the education of those children ‘who need it most’.

Between 1948 and 1951, the USA provided financial support totalling some $13billion to Western Europe. This so called ‘Marshall Plan’ is generally credited with rescuing Western Europe from devastation at the end of the Second World War by providing effective management know-how but also, crucially, goods, finance and thereby a framework for individual and collective self-development.

Schools whose children find themselves in the most challenging of circumstances need a modern day educational ‘Marshall Plan’. This plan should be centred on the needs and potential of individual children and, where possible, their local community, linked to a relevant and appropriate public accountability framework. Key to the plan are a number of interrelated elements:

* Schools small enough for the individual to be known and valued and supported by parents and carers, and class sizes of fewer than 20 learners
* Full-time, permanent teachers judges to be good or better on terms and conditions of employment that suit the learning and reward all
* Strong purposeful links with the community, including business and community leaders as local role-models
* Involvement of professionals other than teachers managed by the school to the children’s needs, such as social workers, counsellors, mentors, educational psychologists, plus parental engagement and family learning
* Good physical learning environment and where appropriate boarding facilities (the environment is after all the ‘third teacher’)
* Continuous professional support and development for all
* Extensive range of relevant high quality extra-curricular learning activities
* Good and relevant resource levels
* Defined links with both similar schools and others as part of collaborative working towards high achievement and fulfilling potential

Although all of the above are essential to the successful implementation of this educational ‘Marshall Plan’, in my view the two most significant factors, by some distance, are the quality and stability of the teaching body in its broadest sense underpinned by a strong commitment from parents and carers. The majority of schools operating under conditions that would qualify them as ‘Marshall Plan’ members generally experience difficulty in recruitment and retention and lack parental support and commitment. Given the often challenging nature of the children, which is often exacerbated by high rates of mobility, there is an over-riding need to ensure that not only the most talented and committed professionals are recruited, but also that they have tangible incentives to encourage them to remain in post for at least five years. These incentives would need to include a substantial earning-related premium, enhanced conditions of service which are flexible to the needs of the children, and the recognition that these ‘Marshall Plan’ teachers are members of a corps of elite front-line practitioners. The support from parents and carers, which will often need to be re-created or even re-invented, is as essential an ingredient and will need to be nurtured within a context of values, purpose and responsibilities.

Research on the effectiveness of small schools and reduced class sizes is often hotly debated but is in my view beyond contention – in the end the debate tends to focus on economics rather than education. Teachers who teach smaller classes report that the atmosphere is more conducive to learning, that their children receive more individual attention and that they have greater flexibility in supporting the children’s often self-directed progression of learning. They also report an increase in motivation, confidence and engagement. Research has also shown that in the most disadvantaged of areas small schools and small classes are likely to be friendlier and safer, enabling children to develop better relationships. Transition gaps, particularly between primary and secondary, are in this way also more likely to be bridged successfully. Disadvantaged children reportedly benefit most from smaller classes and smaller schools and these benefits persist over time.

*“… I want to be in a school where everyone knows everyone and knows good things about them – not in a school where only the naughty children and the clever ones are known …”* Tom, age 11

To ensure maximum benefits from the ‘Marshall Plan’, all participating schools would over time at least need to exhibit:

* Excellent leadership (and management)
* Very good teachers
* Very strong parental involvement
* Strong focus on knowing individual children, achievements and the continuous ‘raising of bars’
* High expectations with an accountability framework based on achieving individual children’s potential in particular the most able
* A relevant and challenging curriculum that provides real purpose for learning
* Effective use of data to support learning and collective target-setting accessible to and understood by all stake holders
* Relevant and appropriate resources both on and off site
* Effective staff development practices
* A strongly collegiate climate
* Very strong community links, including business and Higher and Further Education

The current national educational thinking with its emphasis on choice represents, for me, a loss of courage, aspiration and faith. Policy-makers appear to have come to believe that they really cannot make every school a good school. All they can realistically do is increase marginally the number of good schools and, in a limited way, the number of places available in higher achieving schools. Many schools in this latter group would only contemplate expansion if they were able to determine the composition of the additional intake.

Policy-makers, after countless initiatives and oodles of exhortations, appear to have simply run out of steam, out re-naming projects and effectively seem to be giving up the ghost, which represents an abandonment of hope for the most disadvantages children – for those ‘who need it most’.

Socially, morally, ethically, educationally and economically this is never acceptable!

Therefore as educators with the potential to all be champions of an educational ‘Marshall Plan’ – for the sake of all our presents and futures – we must pledge to continually re-invent ourselves so as to keep open the avenues of possibility down which all our children should be invited to walk!

