

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Consultation on Draft Regulations for the Training of Newly Appointed Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) in England

Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, May 2009

ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL Policy

ATL's education policy is underpinned by the professionalism of teachers. Teachers should be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in promoting social justice. Development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders and assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools should work collaboratively to provide excellent teaching and learning with a broad and balanced curriculum, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. This means that mechanisms must be developed that ensure a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, and which supports collaboration rather than competition.

Introduction

Last year, when responding to the DCSF Consultation on Draft Education (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) (England) Regulations 2008, ATL members stated their support for the requirement that the role of SENCO should be undertaken by a qualified and trained teacher. Therefore we welcome the current focus on training for SENCOs and these proposals for a national framework of approved SENCO training.

ATL believes it to be crucial that SENCOs have the opportunity to access relevant and high-quality training, as the role of SENCO is a varied and extensive one. Furthermore, the training available needs to be appropriate to the needs of the SENCO. SENCOs have challenging and very busy schedules which can make the fulfilment of assignment requirements difficult. Also, SENCOs work in a broad variety of contexts, using different methods as appropriate for each context which raises challenges for the type of training to be available to SENCOs. While standardisation of SENCO training may be useful, particularly in the form of opening up professional development opportunities for SENCOs, it is critical that any qualification stays up-to-date and relevant with the fast-changing area of SEN.

Consultation questions

The requirement for a nationally approved qualification is clear in the regulations and guidance. The communications strategy will be of high importance to ensure that all governing bodies and schools are aware of their duties in this regard, particularly where schools are employing SENCOs who are 'new' under the description given by the Regulations.

The document makes clear which SENCOs the mandatory training requirement applies to. However, our members are concerned regarding the limiting of the offer to early-SENCO career teachers and whether, in actuality, more experienced SENCOs will be able to access this training.

The period of latitude of three years for gaining the SENCO qualification is within usual parameters and also fits with the one-year grace period and 2-year latitude given to current non-teacher SENCOs to achieve QTS. This period of latitude allows schools and individuals the necessary flexibility to access the most suitable training provision for their needs.

Experienced SENCOs

ATL is concerned that with this focus on the National Award, there will be less attention on the provision of high-quality continuing professional development for SENCOs with more experience in their roles. There is little exploration of whether this Award will be available for more experienced SENCOs and what funding, if any, will support their take-up of this training. This runs the risk of creating a two-level SENCO workforce, having a negative impact on those who have not had access to the National Award training and qualification.

ATL is also concerned that its support staff members who currently hold SENCO positions have any relevant qualifications recognised and accredited towards both award of QTS (to fulfil recent Regulations) and towards the National Award. It is vital that their experience and expertise is properly recognised and not lost to the role of SENCO and to the many schools and settings in which they play such an important role.

National Award Training

We support the training model as developed by the TDA; it clearly sets out the required knowledge, skills and attributes whilst allowing opportunities for participants to personalise the training and accumulate credit. The extent of personalisation and how well the training provision can meet the needs and requirements of individual SENCOs and their schools will need to be monitored; it is vital for professional confidence in the qualification that there are good systems of quality assurance across all providers and settings. One of the challenges for the Award training will be the assurance of national consistency in the flexible local model outlined by the TDA and we look forward to further detail on this and other matters of QA.

We understand the accreditation of this Award training at Masters Level as part of the government's overall drive to make teaching a masters-level profession. However, we require further detail and clarification of how this qualification will fit with the Masters in Teaching and Learning. Indeed, as SENCOs are being encouraged to have a role at leadership level, and many already do, there is also a need to ensure its fit with the leadership standards and NCSL leadership qualifications.

Workload issues for SENCOs

Whilst ATL members continue to welcome the current focus on the importance and professionalism of the SENCO role, many have raised the issues around workload issues for SENCOs, particularly in

relation to these new requirements. There is recognition of inconsistency across schools in relation to the amount of time, including non-contact time, SENCOs are allocated to do their work. The delivery of SEN service as envisaged by the Regulations and also by the Children's Plan is further affected and potentially undermined by the variety also of contracts for SENCOs, resulting in part-time SENCOs in a number of schools, due to lack of funding. As a result, SENCOs have to deal with a range of often complex SEN issues under severe time constraints, which leads to major workload issues that ATL would like to see addressed as a matter of urgency. Unless these are resolved, the training is likely to be viewed as a time-consuming add-on to what is already a cumbersome and almost impossible pressure and workload.

Conclusion

ATL, as the education union and a social partner, takes very seriously its responsibility to preserve the role, status and overall responsibility of SENCOs in schools and of teachers and education staff in general. In this light, we support these Regulations around the training of SENCOs. We believe that this training, if of sufficient high-quality and flexible enough to meet needs of particular professional contexts, will enhance the status and professionalism of SENCOs, increasing their competence, confidence and self-esteem.

However, for this training to be most effective in having a positive impact on pupils with SEN, issues such as SENCO workload, coverage across the SENCO profession, ways forward for support-staff SENCOs and quality assurance of provision need to be addressed, as a matter of urgency within the current tight timetable for delivery.