

Friday 09 October 2015

Rishi Sunak: Why rural schools must receive a fairer deal on funding

By **Rishi Sunak**

Ene of my constituents summed it up best. Their belief was that education is the greatest single tool to allow you to change your own life and make an impact in your community.

My grandparents grew up on other side of the world with very little. Two generations later, I have the incredible privilege of being a Member of Parliament. Many of us can tell similar stories of where our families started, what they worked to achieve and how their efforts passed something on to the next generation. I am confident that all these journeys are built on the foundation of a strong education.

However, since becoming a Member of Parliament, it has become clear to me that our current means of distributing funding between schools is, at best, out of date and, at worst, unfair for our rural schools and local children.

This week I hosted an education forum with more than 50 local primary school teachers and governors to learn about their experiences. We agreed to work together and launch a campaign to fight for a better deal.

Many of our children and grandchildren attend wonderful village primary schools that are the beating hearts of their communities. But because of the nature of our countryside and the distances between settlements, these schools will often be small.

There are particular costs of providing education in small rural settings that are often not well understood by policy-makers sitting in Whitehall. For example, it is often difficult to organise seven primary school year groups into a standard class structure and sometimes an additional half class is needed. More obviously, small schools cannot spread the cost of administration or leadership over a large number of pupils.

The way funding was allocated between schools historically did not adequately recognise these factors. This led to significant problems in under-funded areas, in particular the East Riding a decade ago, where there was talk of four-day weeks and mass redundancies.

Although people often talk about problems with the education funding formula, the reality is that there is no formula. In response to crises like the one in East Riding, it was dropped a decade ago and, instead, whatever a local authority received then has been either uniformly increased or decreased.

So if your local area was under-funded 10 years ago, it will continue to be. If your local schools got a raw deal back then, it most likely still will do now. What was a temporary fix is now long overdue for reform.

Today two children, both on free school meals but living in different places, can receive very different sums of money for their education. Schools around the country that are similar can get very different budgets and children with the same needs can receive very different levels of financial support.

Last year, a pupil in my constituency in North Yorkshire received £500 less than a pupil only a few miles away in Middlesbrough. In the case of a city such as Manchester, the gap is as high as £700. A pupil in one of the top five funded areas received over £2,000 more than North Yorkshire does.

This simply needs to change. In a climate where money is tight as we balance the books, it is even more important that schools receive their fair share.

Thankfully, some progress has already been made. My Yorkshire colleague Graham Stuart MP is leading the campaign for change, supported by other Yorkshire MPs Julian Sturdy, Nigel Adams and Kevin Hollinrake.

This summer, the Government confirmed that an additional £400m would be added to the schools budget and permanently allocated each year to the least fairly funded authorities – this gave pupils in North Yorkshire an extra £130 a year in funding. Moves like the Pupil Premium see a further £2.5bn for those on free school meals, which has helped to close the attainment gap between poorer and wealthier families.

Crucially, in Parliament, the Prime Minister and Education Ministers have recognised that there is a problem with our lack of a funding formula and appear to accept the argument for change. The issue has been raised by multiple MPs.

Furthermore, the independent National Audit Office recently examined funding for disadvantaged children. In its report it advised that we “should use a fairer formula so that pupils across England receive similar funding, related more closely to their needs and less affected by where they live”.

So there is a growing consensus that change is needed. The campaign has got underway and a petition – launched this week at my education forum – will be handed to 10 Downing Street and I know many other colleagues are doing what they can to campaign for change.

At the forum I heard inspiring stories of what heads, teachers and governors are doing to ensure our local schools can continue to thrive. They all deserve their fair share of funding so they can continue to do the vital job they do so well.

Providing a fairly funded and excellent education is one of this generation’s most important responsibilities to undertake for the benefit of the next generation. We simply must get it right.