

**** Check Against Delivery ****

Children and the opportunities available to them to develop is the main reason that I sought to become a member of this House, and so I am delighted to have been able to secure today's debate on the importance of Teaching Assistants to our children and the whole school system. They add tremendous value to classrooms around the country, and I hope to be able to counter the attitude of some that they are a high-cost, low-return intervention. I want this House to celebrate their achievements and recognise the positive role they add to our children's future.

I hope to emphasise the huge potential that Teaching Assistants have to help improve and enrich educational outcomes. Because, despite the promise and potential Teaching Assistants provide, these valuable assets are currently undervalued, underpaid, and their contributions largely unrecognised. I really hope that this debate will set the record straight on this matter once and for all.

Like many present here today, I have long argued that those teaching our young people and assisting their learning are of great importance to all our lives.

And this is why I have not only supported the call for our teachers to be properly trained and qualified, but also tabled Early Day Motion 753 in November last year to recognise the immense value Teaching Assistants bring to classrooms and schools across the UK.

I am in no doubt that we need great teachers at all levels of learning, each one equipped to deliver a modern education, based on an up-to-date understanding of developments in teaching practice, specific subject knowledge and the latest in educational tools and technology.

However, a report from Reform in 2010 took this argument further – and much too far, I would argue – when it was suggested that Ministers should, and I quote: “[r]emove the various Government interventions into the cost and size of the teaching workforce” in order to increase accountability of schools to parents and to strengthen management and performance.

A natural consequence, the report went on to contend, would be “a fall in the number of teaching assistants, since the value of the rapid growth in their numbers it claimed, is not supported by the research evidence”.

To give some background to today’s debate, a significant increase in Teaching Assistants came as a result of the 2003 Workload Agreement in England and Wales – an effort of the last Labour Government to raise standards in schools.

The aim of the Agreement was simple: to allow teachers to teach. To do this, the Agreement sought to lessen pressure on teachers by reducing the administrative bureaucracy and cutting teachers’ hours through the creation of new and expanded school support roles, including Teaching Assistants and Higher Level Teaching Assistants to extra resource and provide high level support for teachers.

Teaching Assistants now make up over a quarter of the total school workforce in England, with more than 359,000 in classrooms across England alone. The vast majority – almost 250,000 – work in primary schools, almost 20% are in secondary schools and 9% in special schools.

With primary schools spending £2.8 billion on Teaching Assistants and support staff in 2010/11, and secondary schools spending £1.6 billion during the same period, such support accounts for a large proportion of the annual education budget.

And it is for precisely this reason that the role and worth of Teaching Assistants has been in the public spotlight, particularly since questions were raised several years ago about the value for money they provide.

The Institute for Education's Deployment and Impact of Support Staff project, for instance, was surprising in that it found a negative relationship between the amount of Teaching Assistant support and academic progress in students.

Similarly, the report from Reform that I mentioned earlier also suggested that as much as £1.7 billion could be saved each year through reducing the costs associated with Teaching Assistants, repeatedly forwarding the contention that Teaching Assistants "have a negligible effect on educational outcomes", and even claiming that their interventions can "harm a child's education".

These questions, however, are very much the result of a Government whose focus is squarely aimed on resource allocation and productivity per pound spent rather than on the actual educational outcomes and opportunities provided.

Or, to put it another way, an ideologically driven attentiveness to cost at the expense of value.

Indeed, several articles that appeared last summer reinforce this point. A piece in the *Sunday Times*, for instance, appearing in the run-up to the Comprehensive Spending Review, made the argument that Teaching Assistants should be cut as the evidence suggests that they do not have a positive impact on pupil attainment.

In a similar fashion, an article in the *Daily Mail* also reported that officials from the Treasury and the Department for Education were considering mass reductions in the number of Teaching Assistants working in our classrooms, citing an effort to “save some of the £4 billion a year spent on them”.

Again, the focus was primarily focussed on finances, with the article suggesting that schools “could improve value for money by cutting the number of teaching assistants and increasing class sizes”.

However, the claims made in both articles were based on assertions from Reform, which in turn were highly selective with the evidence used. Take, for example, the Teaching and Learning Toolkit produced by a collaboration of the Education Endowment Foundation and the Sutton Trust.

While it is true that the toolkit suggests that Teaching Assistants have a low impact for a high cost, it is important that the toolkit also specifies that this judgment is “based on limited evidence”. The implication, of course, being that the sentiment should not necessarily be taken at face value, or at least not without the addition of some fairly substantial caveats.

Indeed, the Education Endowment Foundation made it clear that such a simplistic reading of their evidence is decidedly unhelpful. And, to be sure, the toolkit also specifies that Teaching Assistants “can have a positive impact on academic achievement”. But this assessment was not given equal weighting by Reform.

And the researchers at the Institute of Education have openly criticised the idea of cutting Teaching Assistants as being based on only a “partial reading of the evidence”, and saying that doing so would actually “do more harm than good for students, teachers and schools”. It is sad when institutions pick and choose what they want from research and distort it to give a particular impression.

In fact, the original research from the Institute for Education found that support staff “[c]an have a positive effect”, noting that “there is more pupil classroom engagement in the sense that pupils are more on-task and less off-task” when Teaching Assistants are in the classroom.

And if that were not enough, the researchers have confirmed that the results “were not attributable to pupil characteristics” or to “decisions made by [Teaching Assistants]”. Instead, they resulted from “the way schools and teachers deploy and prepare [Teaching Assistants] – factors that are out of [Teaching Assistants’] control”.

The intention of the report, then, seems to have been aimed at generating scaremongering headlines rather than addressing the real issues that are affecting Teaching Assistants – something I hope that we can do today.

But before I continue any further, it is important that we are clear at this point that the term “Teaching Assistant” is something of a catch-all term. Teaching Assistants carry out a huge range of responsibilities to support teachers, ranging from the administrative to the face to face work with children, and I am in no doubt that they form a central cog in the modern education system.

Yet, many Teaching Assistants feel that their contribution to education is poorly understood and undervalued. And with scaremongering from Reform being picked up by the mainstream media, many now fear that Government cutbacks and the need to make savings in departmental budgets will inevitably lead to their roles being earmarked for job losses.

While I understand that the Department for Education does not currently have national plans in place for nationwide reductions in numbers of Teaching Assistants, I can’t imagine that my unofficial reassurances will provide comfort to those who see their role as being directly in the firing line.

I am sure, therefore, that they would welcome the Minister’s confirmation that no plans exist to axe Teaching Assistants and other support staff through some centrally driven edict.

There is no doubt that the plans that the Government has for the future role and contribution of Teaching Assistants are in need of clarification. Despite the crucial functions they fulfil, clarity for vital support staff has been notable for its absence. For much of this parliament, the Government has remained indifferent to Teaching Assistants and other support staff, rarely mentioning their roles in documents detailing future policy intentions.

So while the last Labour government legislated for a School Support Staff Negotiating Body at the end of the last parliament, this body – intended to look after the pay and conditions of support staff – was abolished within the first year of the Coalition as quangos were indiscriminately eliminated as part of a cost-cutting drive.

Similarly, the Government has axed national funding for Higher Level Teaching Assistant training and has archived all the national Teaching Assistant and Higher Level Teaching Assistant training resources and guidance, with high-quality training for Teaching Assistants becoming just another victim of the Coalition Government's austerity package.

On this point, it is worth noting that EDM 753, which I mentioned a little earlier, had broad support on a multi-party basis, though not a single Conservative member cared to add their name to the motion to recognise the difference Teaching Assistants make to the education and support of children in our schools. It is of little wonder, then, that stories suggesting staffing cuts are causing anxiety within the education profession.

Last year saw two separate days to celebrate the contributions that Teaching Assistants make in classrooms across the country. And I even understand that the greetings card manufacturers got in on the act, too, recognising the value that Teaching Assistants can add to education – well they would, wouldn't they?

Whilst I am sure that in many cases Teaching Assistants ought to be used more effectively, most contribute very positively to education – and in the best cases this is clearly evident.

Take, for example, Mark Fielding – a Teaching Assistant from Salford. Working on a one-to-one basis with a Year 11 pupil with ADHD, rather than in a class-based environment, Mark helped to transform the pupil's attainment from predictions of Es in Maths and English in November, to achieving Cs in June.

Similarly, Mark has worked with a group with behavioural problems to raise their opportunities. Many were expected to leave with no qualifications yet, after Mark's interventions, all achieved at least 2 GCSEs at C or above.

Or take Guy Smith from Richmond, who has worked with a Year 11 student who was involved in offending behaviour and substance misuse and whose attendance at school was dropping. Attending YOT meetings with the pupil and providing support in lessons and with homework, as well as offering a contact to speak about any problems he was having and attending meetings with his CAMHS workers and social workers, Guy helped the student to achieve 5 GCSE's at A-C and is now on an apprenticeship in Business Administration with Richmond upon Thames council.

To put it simply, there is more to be gained from sensible investment in Teaching Assistants than there is from running down the numbers or abolishing the role altogether.

We are a long time overdue in our recognition of Teaching Assistants, and this is only exacerbated by the recent run of negative publicity that has sullied their good reputation.

So, while days of celebration and recognition are indeed welcome, we must continue to push for more. What we need now is serious action to confirm and codify the role that Teaching Assistants play in our education system and the functions that they can rightly be expected to undertake, not to mention the remuneration that they can fairly expect, in order to make sure that their contributions are recognised fully.

I have consulted with a number of organisations in the preparation of this speech – and I well understand why Unison and the GMB, who between them represent the vast bulk of Teaching Assistants, are anxious about the future for these people.

With Teaching Assistants not having the reassurance of a national pay scale, pay varies not only according to geographical location, but also between and within different school types. The result is great uncertainty for Teaching Assistants, with terms and conditions that are not readily comparable with others who may be expected to fulfil the same roles elsewhere.

This can be bad for morale, and can potentially leave Teaching Assistants under-rewarded for the contributions they make.

Fortunately, with school leaders, rather than the Department for Education, having responsibility for employing support staff, school leaders have sought to recruit more Teaching Assistants rather than less despite the negative agenda of the Government, with a 5.7% increase between 2011 and 2012. And this reflects the 95% of school leaders who say that Teaching Assistants add real value in schools.

And in case there was any doubt, Ofsted, who routinely report on the positive impact of Teaching Assistants despite not having an official remit of inspection for support staff, have looked upon their role very favourably. For instance, Ofsted's report for Goringe Park Primary School in Surrey last year read:

“Teaching assistants are sensitive to pupils' needs and offer good support and guidance to those who need extra help. Consequently, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs achieve as well as their classmates and sometimes better”.

And while I will not go into greater detail, the role of Teaching Assistants has traditionally been closely connected to the work our schools do with pupils with the highest level of special educational needs in mainstream settings, both in terms of teaching and inclusion, and should not be overlooked.

Largely a result of the failure to specifically address SEN as part of initial teacher training, teachers have historically not been sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of the pupils who struggle most with learning and engagement. And it was Teaching Assistants who took the responsibility to step up to the mark in these instances.

With reforms that will change how schools address the needs of students with special educational needs due in September, such clarification of the role of Teaching Assistants could hardly be better timed.

With schools set to receive additional funding to better support disadvantaged students, it is high time that the Government clarified its strategy on Teaching Assistants – not only how they are to be funded, but also guidance on how they are to be trained and qualified to ensure that their contributions have the maximum impact on the education of those young people they help.

At the same time, school leaders also need to be clear about the role and purpose they see Teaching Assistants fulfilling in their schools, defining the contributions they will make to learning. And this means initiating specific opportunities for teachers to liaise with Teaching Assistants in advance of lessons, not only so they know what will be taught, but so that they are clear on what tasks will be undertaken and their specific responsibilities, as well as the expectations that the teacher has of pupils. This happens in many schools, but needs to happen everywhere.

But we must also ensure that Teaching assistants aren't deployed to roles which are inappropriate. They are not there to substitute for teachers on a temporary or permanent basis.

They are not trained to take a class of 30 children, to prepare detailed lesson plans for a term. They are not there to help the school stretch the budget by substituting them for a teacher's role even on the odd day.

They are there to provide assistance to a classroom teacher to help enhance the educational achievement of the pupils and to help that vital one-to-one support that some children need to ensure they reach their full potential.

So we get the roles right – teachers to teach and Teaching Assistant to assist – it is precisely this environment of openness and collaboration that we must foster if we are raise standards and rival the best education systems in the world.

And again, similar to teachers, one key measure in doing this is to promote continuous professional development throughout the course of a Teaching Assistant’s career that will ensure their knowledge and skills remain at the fore.

It is this level of training and development that will allow Teaching Assistants to properly deliver specific, high-quality teaching interventions that will be to the advantage of teachers and pupils alike, whether it be in the shape of specialist support for pupils with special needs, administrative support to teachers to ease the pressure, or targeted interventions in other areas of learning.

I have said before that education is a dynamic field. But it cannot be greater than the sum of its parts unless teaching as a profession is equally ambitious, continually striving to improve and to provide the skills our young people need and that employers demand.

To do this, we must enhance the standards of the teaching professions across the board, including those of Teaching Assistants.

We know well-trained Teaching Assistants can make a real difference. The latest research from the Education Endowment Foundation confirms this, demonstrating the significant positive effects they can have in literacy and numeracy “when they are deployed well”.

And this is the crucial point – Teaching Assistants, when properly instructed and deployed, “can be effective at improving attainment”.

What we need, then, on top of greater clarity surrounding roles, is enhanced sharing of best practice about how Teaching Assistants are trained and deployed to ensure that the myths regarding Teaching Assistants are dispelled and their contributions recognised. And the very fact that they are valued and utilised in increasingly large numbers should be the starting point for the analysis of their worth.

As I come to a conclusion, I’d like to pose a number of questions to the Minister:

1. What does she see as the future for Teaching Assistants?
2. Does the Government plan wholesale reductions?
3. Will the Government consider reintroducing a national pay body?
4. Does she recognise and support the need for formal ongoing professional development for Teaching Assistants?
5. Will funding for the training of Higher Level Teaching Assistants be reinstated to aid development?

Properly utilised, Teaching Assistants are neither low-cost substitute teachers, nor high-cost babysitters. Rather, when deployed effectively, the reality is that they add real value to our education system and improve the learning and support that our young people are able to access. It is only right that we recognise this.