

## INTERVIEW

**I**F YOU'VE heard schools minister Jacqui Smith on the TV or radio recently, the chances are you've heard her say how much the government values school support staff. With the rumpus surrounding the introduction of compulsory planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time for teachers, Smith has been defending the government's decision to allow teaching assistants to supervise classes in place of teachers – and by doing so has been sticking up for support staff generally.

"I think those who argue against implementing PPA by denigrating support staff are completely wrong. Support staff are making a massive contribution to children's outcomes in schools," she says.

Smith replaced the popular Stephen Twigg who lost his seat at the election, and she certainly knows what the inside of a school looks like. She grew up in Worcestershire where she is now MP for Redditch and although she may not manage to collect her two young sons from their Redditch schools very often, she worked as a teacher for 13 years in secondary schools in the county before she was elected to parliament in 1997.

Since Labour came to office in 1997, says Smith, school support staff numbers have increased by 130,000. "In the schools my children attend there has been a transformation because of that. There are more adults in the classroom, staff are more able to focus on individual children and there are more opportunities to do different activities. That is great, and support staff should be really commended for their contribution to children's learning."

Teaching assistants are certainly taking on more responsibilities, but does the minister believe there are limits to the jobs they should be asked to do? She says guidance and regulations issued by the workforce agreement monitoring group makes it

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clear what support staff should and should not be doing "Preparing and planning a lesson is the job of a teacher", says Smith, "but a Higher Level Teaching Assistant will have developed the sorts of skills to enable them to help children make progress under the supervision of the teacher and that is an important role."

But what about pay and conditions? Despite the minister's warm words, some support staff believe they are being exploited by schools – and the government – because pay has not always

Support staff have come an awfully long way, Schools Minister Jacqui Smith tells Frances Rickford in an exclusive interview with Learning Support



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for school holidays, though their term-time pay may be spread across the whole year.

Smith says they will be able to boost their income by working more hours as schools provide new services such as after school clubs and holiday play-schemes. She cites her own seven-year-old son who does “fun maths” and “fun English” after school, with a teaching assistant. “It slightly suggests that all the other maths and English he does isn’t fun, but never mind, it’s a great opportunity for him but also for the teaching assistant.”

In some schools teaching assistants run clubs and other activities outside school hours on a voluntary basis, and some schools have even invited support staff to attend staff meetings in their own time, presenting this as a privilege. Smith seems shocked to hear this. “No. That is wrong in my view,” she says.

Teaching assistants and other support staff could be set to take on even more responsibilities in the future, with the government and unions discussing what other jobs traditionally done by teachers could be handed over to support staff. Assemblies, reports about children’s social needs, and meetings about school organisation have all been mentioned as possible candidates.

Smith says the debate about the role of teachers in schools won’t end with the introduction of PPA

improved in line with their higher skill levels and extra responsibilities. *Learning Support’s* June/July issue reported huge inconsistencies in teaching assistants’ pay and conditions round the country, with some even facing pay cuts, and the National Head Teachers Association has added its voice to the trade unions’ in calling for national pay scales for teaching assistants and other support staff.

But Smith is cagey about national pay scales. She argues that local authorities should be making sure schools are paying teaching assistants according to the workforce agreement, and says local workforce agreement monitoring groups are there to make sure they do. “Ruth Kelly flagged up the fact that there are not national pay and conditions for support staff, and was saying, ‘Let’s have a debate about what the implications of that are’. I think there are some strong benefits to having local arrangements for staff who will tend to be recruited and used locally, so we have not made any presumption that we will move to national pay and conditions.

“The question I’m interested in is what do support staff need and deserve in order to be able to do their job properly? Well, they need decent rates of pay, they need decent training, they need the opportunity to develop their careers, and those are things we should be focusing on. There are all sorts of opportunities for support staff generally and TAs in particular to take on new responsibilities which in some cases mean better pay and conditions. For example if you are operating as a Higher Level Teaching Assistant we have made very clear in the guidance, you should be better paid on that basis.”

What about issues such as term-time only contracts? Many teaching assistants are not paid



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time. But as a former teacher herself, she wants limits set on how much responsibility teachers should give up. “There is an ongoing discussion and debate about whether there are important new roles that will help children learn that support staff can take on. But none of these things have been decided. For example, I have views about whether I would want to see teachers not doing assemblies – I think teachers should do assemblies actually.”

Whatever the outcome, Smith detects a huge change already in attitudes towards school support staff, both in government and outside. “I was in this department as a minister in 1999 to 2001 with responsibility for reducing bureaucracy. I was the first to say we should invite the unions and associations that represent support staff into the department to discuss it. Nowadays it would be unheard of not to include them.”

“It is a fast moving area, and we do need to keep up in terms of the guidance we are developing so support staff can feel confident that their role is recognised and their voice is heard. But actually we have come an awfully long way.”