

Association News – Christmas 2010

Inevitably, almost, the first half of the Autumn term was dominated by work relating to the Academies Conference, about which there is a separate article already in this Newsletter. It seems inevitable that this topic will remain on the agenda at least for the year ahead, both locally and nationally.

The cuts that have been announced in principle as the result of the Government's recent Comprehensive Spending Review – given that the extent of the interest alone involved in repaying the National Debt is greater than the amount the country spends on its schools – are inevitably going to be significant. At the time of writing we know very little of the detail of these cuts and how they will impact directly upon our school budgets. Given that Dudley had no promises from the national Building Schools for the Future (BSF) budget then we have no broken promises with which to contend (unlike a number of unfortunate schools in some other parts of the country); however there remains very real need for some capital investment in the fabric of several of our schools and there is little enough available from the council's resources to cope with this. We shall continue to press our case at Westminster through the agency of our local Members of Parliament for an improvement in this situation but we are not hopeful of much success on this front. We shall try to get our local MPs to meet with local governors in each of their constituencies in order that the Dudley message does at least reach Westminster.

The (very) recent Government White Paper (entitled "The Importance of Teaching") has just materialized (November 24th 2010) and will require much discussion before we can fully appreciate its individual components and what it means for us as governors, and what it means for the students in our schools. However, an initial overview reveals a number of elements, some of which may have applicability locally:-

- The National College (formerly called the National College for School Leadership) will be offering "high quality" training for Chairs of Governors. There is as yet no indication as to how this is to be delivered nor as to whether it is to be extended to other governors apart from Chairs alone. Issues of the costs involved and how they are to be met remain unclear at this stage.
- There is to be some relaxation with respect to the size and composition of Governing Bodies – this does not appear to be a significant factor at this stage.
- Governors will have improved access to data to enable them to compare their own school with others – again this is short on detail.
- The requirement for a school to have a School Improvement Partner is to be removed.
- The "floor" levels for student attainment are to be raised. In future Secondary Schools will be required to ensure that at least 35% of their students achieve 5 or more GCSE

passes at grades A* to C and Primary Schools to ensure that at least 60% of pupils at KS2 achieve Level 4 in both English and Mathematics. In both cases there will also be a required level of performance improvement lower down the school to be delivered.

- The “Teach First” initiative is to be expanded in order to attract the “best” candidates into shortage subject areas (*there could be much debate as to what constitutes “best”, of course*).
- There is to be an increase in the numbers of both Local and National Leaders of Education.
- It is intended to establish a network of Teaching Schools (similar to Teaching Hospitals) to give outstanding schools a role in leading the training of teachers.
- The English Baccalaureate is to be introduced.
- There is to be a further reform of Vocational qualifications (*again??*)
- A new, slimmer, National Curriculum will be introduced.
- There will be a reduction in the number of ‘modular’ GCSEs, causing the emphasis to revert to assessment taking place at the end of the course. (*Will this impact upon GCE “A” levels which are now totally modular?*)
- GCSE assessment (*and conceivably GCE “A” level?*) will have marking schemes revisited in order to reintroduce spelling, punctuation and grammar into all GCSEs (*perhaps those who proof-read the document for the Government should be assessed against these same elements – since they spelled the word governors’ without an apostrophe !!!*)
- There will be further expansion of the Academies and Free Schools programmes.

Obviously these issues will be discussed in the media and we shall want to find out the views of Governing Bodies on the more contentious so that we can communicate those opinions to Westminster. There is, however, one gripe of some consequence concerning a number of the changes. We are, repeatedly, being subjected to initiatives from one Government, only to find them repealed or changed by the next. These mean therefore that money, which could be used to improve childrens’ education, is being wasted – a challenge therefore to this and to successive governments is to establish a way of minimizing (if not removing completely) this type of waste. Any politician may speak of their “green” credentials – getting rid of this particular form of waste would be welcomed.

Amongst other issues that are ongoing is included the work of the Association in respect of Traded Services, which, given the likely cuts in school budgets in real terms, will necessitate careful scrutiny so as to ensure best value-for-money for schools. There is unanimity on the

Traded Services Management Board concerning the importance of this and, although much work remains to be done, the willingness to do so is self-evident.

The long list of “Health and Safety” type checks, surveys and remedial work is, equally well, in a prominent position on the agenda. One problem is of course that these surveys are not required only by one source, which compounds the difficulty in getting them organised – at present the intention is to provide schools with a check-list of ALL the surveys which can be used as a means of ensuring that every one has been undertaken, as appropriate to individual schools, and the costs known beforehand. There is however a real problem concerning remedial work, especially given the possible extent of the cuts in budgets.

There is also the issue of schools making payments to clear the costs of “single status” and a number have raised this as a current cause for concern. Questions really require a clarification as to how the figures have been calculated and full details concerning the repayments. As these are likely to be taken out of budgets for some years we need to be able to ‘hand down’ to new governor colleagues exactly what is being taken from their budgets and the reasons why this charge is being inherited against the needs of the children in their schools at different points into the future.

Finally, although by the time this Newsletter reaches individual governors, Christmas will be past, I would at least like to extend to everyone our best wishes for 2011 – noting (a la Terry Pratchett) that we live in ‘interesting times’.

Brian Patterson

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