

Association News Spring 2010

As we emerge from the worst Winter for 31 years, hopefully into a better Spring, it is appropriate to review what we have been doing during the course of the past three months since the last News was written.

Meeting with local MPs

Early last December a number of governors met with two of our local MPs, Sylvia Heal and Lynda Waltho, to discuss matters of concern to local governors. The meeting was forced to take place during the daytime, and also at relatively short notice which made it well-nigh impossible for us to get a large number of governors there; we had e-mailed as many DAGB representatives as we could invite (or others from their Governing Body, by virtue of their own contacts) and achieved a workable Board meeting style event. Both Sylvia and Lynda have always been most supportive of our work and listened carefully to what governors had to say.

The meeting discussed issues of League Tables and SATs Testing, the number of students who find themselves forced to leave education in order to support low income families (on account of the current national economic situation) and the Ofsted requirement that Special Schools had to be inspected at least every three years even after being found to be outstanding* (for equivalent mainstream schools the figure was five years). Further discussion reflected problems surrounding attendance returns when students are obliged to undertake their studies at more than one centre, or when snow caused some schools to close whilst others remained open. The issue of licensing teachers when Ofsted and other monitoring already provided the means of ensuring that teachers were of a satisfactory standard formed another discussion point. Other topics included the issue of expenses for governors, the selection of Local Authority governors, the new vetting and barring legislation, capitation levels for both Dudley and Sandwell and the possibility of inviting the Secretary of State for Childrens' Services to visit the Borough.

Sylvia and Lynda were able to respond to a number of governors' questions and promised to take others up at Westminster on our behalf.

{*subsequently we were advised that the three year requirement for Special Schools inspection by Ofsted was because (a) there was limited external evidence available of academic success and (b) of the particular level of vulnerability of children in these schools}.

Attendance Returns

The problem of school closures occasioned by the snows of twelve months ago subsequently manifested itself with its impact upon school attendance returns. Many schools had found that, when they remained open despite others staying closed, the levels of attendance fell substantially. Further discussion revealed two further factors which also had adverse impact upon attendance returns. The first was the incidence of a pandemic or of some other wide-scale illness – and influenza has clearly made such an impact from time to time. The second was the situation where a child might be registered at one school but from time to time might be required to spend some

time off-site at another school or sometimes on an employer's premises and so be "not present" at their main school.

As an association we have written both to Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Children's Services and also to Christine Gilbert (as Head of Ofsted) about these cases. In addition Sylvia Heal and Lynda Waltho, following on from the MPs meeting in December, have also added their voices in support, by subsequent communication with the Minister for Schools, Vernon Coaker. Whilst this matter is still on-going we can report that Christine Gilbert's response clearly recognises the potential problems caused by the situations we described and promises that Inspectors will accept such lower levels of attendance provided that they are clearly seen to be exceptional and provided that Head Teachers can provide evidence to substantiate the figures. We are attempting to establish now examples of what might be considered as suitable "evidence".

The responses from DCSF and from Vernon Coaker make it quite clear that the current system of attendance returns does require modification in order to cope with situations which are quite different from those which might have been encountered in schools some years ago. We have an assurance that the current system is being investigated and that appropriate modification is possible, even likely. Vernon Coaker did however make a point of congratulating those schools which did remain open in the best interests of the children.

Traded Services Update

We were pleased to be able to report in the previous issue of our success in changing the method whereby the Traded Services Management Board deals with submissions from various departments in presenting their quotations for the Traded Services brochure which goes out to schools in the Spring. We can now confirm that this appears to be working well; all departments have managed to keep their costs realistically low and, where there is any increase in charges above an acceptable level the department concerned has provided a proper justification (the provision of an enhanced service) for such change. Currently we do have two schools who have reported what appear to be excessive increases in respect of one service and these are currently being investigated by the Director of Children's Services at our request. Should any Governing Body have evidence that runs contrary to this then we would ask that they contact us as soon as possible with full details.

Childhood Obesity and Poster Competition

In the previous Newsletter we referred to our concerns over the increasing incidence of childhood obesity and to its impact within our Borough. At that stage we had plans to make a contribution to tackling that problem, plans which have now reached fruition.

We have introduced a competition for all Key Stage 2 children within the Borough which is under way at the time this article is being written. Contestants are required to design an A3 poster to advocate a Healthy Lifestyle and these posters will be judged at Easter. There is a prize both for the winner and for the school that s/he attends as well as prizes for five runners-up.

The competition is intended to assist in meeting the objectives of the Schools Obesity Prevention Team and to help in making Dudley a “Healthy Town”.

Information about the competition was sent out to the Head Teachers of all Primary Schools and to Special Schools with a Primary Setting at Half Term.

We are indebted to Ruth Hill and Anna Hill of the Schools Obesity Prevention Team (Health Promoting Schools) from the Dudley Primary Care Trust and to Kate Arnold of the Council’s Healthy Towns Marketing and Communications team for all the support and encouragement they have given us.

Area Meeting

There was a high turn-out at Priory Primary School early in March for this event at which Mike Williams (former Borough Treasurer and currently employed by the Council to lead on the issues of Single Status and Equal Pay, and Brian Gordon (Assistant Director of Corporate Property) spoke about their two fields.

Mike explained the background and the complexities of this most vexed of issues at great length; the initial financial implications should be with individual schools by now – it was clear that the Council had done its best to achieve the best settlement for schools whilst the unions had also done their very best for staff who were the subject of the claims. Whilst readily acknowledging the legitimacy of the equal pay and single status issues we are going to have little or no choice but to bear the consequences of this settlement for many years and regret any impact that this may have on the education of young people.

Brian spoke of the changes to Dudley Property Consultancy (DPC as was) in becoming Corporate Property. He also spoke of the considerable amount of work done with DAGB over the course of the past twelve months in order to create a better system – this will include training as part of the Governor Training Programme for this Authority.

General Election

DAGB is strictly a non-political body but we are well aware of the interest of school governors in the forthcoming General Election. For this reason we have posted some relevant information in the Current Articles section on our web-site at www.dagb.org.uk and would invite readers to refer to that to find out more.

Brian Patterson
Chair, DAGB