

Association News – Easter 2011

Under normal circumstances this component of the Newsletter would cover the updates for the best part of a term; on this occasion however it can only relate to the first half of the current term (from January 2011 through to half-term in February). The reason for this is, quite simply, that we are reliant on Dudley Childrens' Services Department (Governor Support) to distribute the Newsletter with other materials (usually the following term's training schedule) and, because of the financial cut-backs, they are having to review and reduce their mailings. This particular Newsletter will therefore be sent out earlier than usual and we will need to vary the method we use for the distribution of subsequent issues. Just how this will be achieved is currently unclear but we do expect to resolve it in the near future and will notify school DAGB representatives accordingly.

The initial announcements concerning the financial savings which have to be made by Dudley MBC and by Childrens' Services in particular came as no surprise in the light of the national picture. However, at the time of writing, the detail relating to the implementation of the cut-backs is far less clear. It is for this reason that we arranged with Dave Perrett, the Assistant Director, for him to address a gathering of school governors at Saltwells E.D.C. on Tuesday March 22nd and for him to be supported by Rachel Jones from Education Personnel. By this date far more of that missing detail should be available and we currently anticipate that Dave will share as much as possible of what is known with those present. Because we know that some governors have already identified staff redundancies as a possible solution in order to produce a balanced budget (and that some schools are already being forced to investigate such unfortunate options), Rachel will provide an input into this associated issue. We are well aware that the Authority has no choice but to deliver a program of savings but governors do require the most up-to-date information to enable them to discharge their responsibilities in the most effective manner. By the time colleagues read this the meeting will have taken place but at the time of writing we are all still awaiting the detail.

Although we are awaiting details of meetings with local Members of Parliament we do have positive responses from Margot James (Stourbridge) and from Chris Kelly (Dudley South) indicating that they both welcome the initiative and we anticipate hearing from James Morris (Halesowen) and Ian Austin (Dudley North) shortly. As soon as arrangements can be made they will be circulated through the DAGB Representatives.

Despite the "gloom and doom" of the financial cuts, we do have some items of good news to circulate. We had been made aware that when schools had to close on account of snow conditions this had no effect upon attendance returns; however if one school stayed open when others were closed this adversely impacted upon the attendance returns of that school if, as was quite common, the actual attendance levels 'on the day' were poor. About a year ago we made representation to the then Secretary of State for Education and also to Ofsted about this issue and, apart from polite responses and the promise of 'investigation into this matter' we heard nothing more. However we are now aware that new guidelines

have been issued which redress the problem – which mean that schools that do stay open (ultimately for the benefit of their students) can legitimately mark absentees as “unable to attend” without the negative effect upon their returns. It would be naive to think that our actions were solely responsible for this change (however much we might like to) but, equally, it is quite realistic to believe that we have certainly assisted in getting changes made.

A second item of good news relates to the competition we launched last year for primary school children in Dudley. As the direct result of support from the Healthy Schools team (part of the NHS) we have launched not one, but two competitions this time, a repeat of the Primary one plus a new Secondary school equivalent. Children from Special schools are eligible (as last year) to take part in either competition as appropriate. In addition the Healthy Schools team are offering £250 to the winning school in each category as well as prizes for the individual winners. It really is good to know that, despite cut-backs affecting the Health Service as well, they regard what we have introduced as being of sufficient importance to childrens’ health to make such an investment. We look forward to the Awards Ceremony on Thursday May 19th.

The latest position on “Health and Safety” type checks is that it is expected that a check-list will be published in the Summer term of ALL the surveys that may be required, cross-referenced insofar as is possible with costs and other details. The number of potential (and statutory) tests runs to 38 although not all of these apply to every school – the result should constitute a one-page list which can then be adapted as necessary for each school. Once the full picture emerges we are committed to ensuring that the list is fully monitored and that the implications (and the associated costs incurred) are brought to the attention of our local MPs in the first instance and to the powers-that-be at Westminster. Nobody questions the importance of Health and Safety in schools but there have been numerous instances where it has been taken to farcical lengths and we do need to have a practical and realistic system in place.

It seems very likely that Traded Services will take on something of a new dimension when the full impact of the cuts to the services offered by the Local Authority is felt. Equally, it seems possible that some aspect of the “Health and Safety” type checks may appear in the list. It may well be in the Summer term before this stabilizes and the detail becomes clearer.

Reference was made in the last Newsletter about the English Baccalaureate (referred to as the EBacc) which appeared in the White Paper last Autumn. For the benefit of those who are unclear as to what this will mean, it is intended to differ from the International Baccalaureate in two main ways. First it will be aimed at Year 11 students whereas the International version (or IB) is aimed at Year 13 students – the former being therefore at GCSE level whereas the IB is a replacement for “A” levels. Currently the IB is only available to Independent schools but it will be available to the maintained sector as well under new

regulations. The other difference is that the IB is a specifically created curriculum and assessment, being offered as an alternative to “A” levels, whereas the award of the EBacc is solely based on GCSE or iGCSE results (the iGCSE or International GCSE has in the past been restricted to independent schools). In order to qualify for the award of EBacc, students are required to achieve passes at grades A* to C in the following subjects:-

- Mathematics
- English Language (but not English Literature nor English as a Second Language)
- Two passes in Science (either a pass in “double” science or passes in two from the separate Biology, Chemistry and Physics)
- A humanity (History or Geography)
- A language (modern or ancient)

Other GCSE (or iGCSE) subjects may still be studied and assessed but will not count towards the award of EBacc.

Predictably, the requirements for the award of EBacc have already been changed since its first inception and many questions have been raised concerning, for example, the omission of Religious Education from the list of humanities and the complete absence of computing/information technology. It contains no element of vocational studies whatsoever and is clearly intended to focus solely on traditional academic courses. Less than one sixth of the national Year 11 population would have qualified for the award of the EBacc in 2010. Across the border, across Offa’s Dyke, a Welsh Bacalaureate has also emerged !!!

DAGB members will therefore appreciate some of the issues surrounding what seems vaguely reminiscent of the School Certificate which had been in existence since 1918 but was replaced by the introduction of GCE “O” level in 1951.

Will this new award survive? Will it be modified yet again? Who knows – but how many more changes are we going to witness to the educational system – and to what end?

Brian Patterson

Chair, DAGB