

Association News Summer 2010

When this article is read by Dudley governors it will be September and a new Academic Year will be starting, with all the inevitable trials and tribulations that will involve. However it has to be written before the end of the Summer term which does mean, for most of us, that, at the time of writing, we still can look forward to a break, hopefully without the volcanic ash problems that beset so many of our educational colleagues at the end of the Easter holidays. This brings to mind a question which was raised at the AGM at the end of June, concerning sanctions against staff who had not managed to get back to their school in time for the first day of the Summer term. As far as we were able to determine nobody had been penalised financially because of this unfortunate situation on the basis that their absence was totally outside their control.

Actions Taken

This term there has also been the SATs boycott by a substantial number of Primary Head Teachers. The Association has not taken a stance on either of these two issues since individual Governing Bodies were well able to decide for themselves what action (if any) to take.

Looking back at what we have been doing during the course of the term, one of the more obvious was the Poster Competition, referred to elsewhere in this Newsletter. Realistically it is the other issues which need to be brought to your attention since they represent what goes on in the background, things achieved by your Association which most people will accept as being of value whilst they do not otherwise hit the headlines.

Inspections

During the course of the past year a number of governors have alerted us to the rapidly increasing number of "Health and Safety" type inspections and the costs which are associated with these. We are not yet absolutely certain what has sparked off the plethora of such inspections, whether it is the Health and Safety Executive flexing its muscles, whether Brussels can be identified as the responsible agent or whether there is some other agency at work. The fact remains that they do appear to be on the increase. We have discussed the issue with the Director of Children's Services and Mark Wyatt is just as concerned as we are. He has agreed to investigate the problem and to let Head Teachers and ourselves know what is found out.

Further to this we have now a list of some 35 different inspections (and increasing), some of which are the more "obvious" ones relating to fire safety and suchlike, whilst not all of these relate to every school (not every school has a swimming pool for example). Each of these is linked to a charge for conducting the survey plus the possibility of there being further costs

which may be involved in paying for remedial work to be done..... it can be quite hard for schools to budget for these so the first thing that we are trying to do is to create a comprehensive list of inspections, helping to identify which schools are involved with each one, the frequency of inspection and the costs of conducting the inspection. That, at least, will help with the budgeting process. Currently it is possible, under the banner of Traded Services, to subscribe to a service (under the Buildings section) which will cover the statutory testing. How we can move this forward to include the costs of remedial work (which would effectively provide for an Insurance service) is another matter at the time of writingbut it is being investigated.

Traded Services

With reference to Traded Services the work done during this past year has made a significant difference to the extent of charges made to individual schools. We are delighted with the efforts made by the Traded Services Management Board to contain the costs. This does not mean that we are necessarily as yet satisfied with the total package; the Chair of the Board has himself spoken of the overlying need for greater transparency in respect of the charges so the Association will be pressing for still further improvements to be made.

Members of Parliament

The outcome of May's General Election has not only given the country a new Government but it has also changed the personnel who represent our Borough at Westminster. One only (Dudley North) of the four seats was retained by the previous incumbent, Labour's Ian Austin whilst we now have Chris Kelly representing Dudley South, Margot James for Stourbridge and James Morris for Halesowen, all three being from the Conservative party. We have already been in contact with the four MPs and they are agreeable to continue having meetings with school governors locally. As yet the details for this have not been finalised but we can expect to have some announcement made during the Autumn term.

As is well-known, the Association will not align itself with any particular political party but we remain committed to ensuring that we liaise with whoever represents the constituencies at Westminster. We are all aware that the next year or two will be very difficult financially for us all but we do want to see that the best possible use is made of what we do get and that young people in particular do not lose out.

We will therefore be revisiting some of the issues that governors have aired during the past couple of years (such as SATs testing, League Tables, the impact of school closures caused by illness and snow etc on attendance returns etc) in order to see if our new Government will be any more sympathetic towards our views and to see if the support they indicated whilst in opposition can be translated into action now that they are in Government. We also intend to leave on our website the statements made by the candidates in the run-in to the Election and hold them to account if they fail to deliver.

The fact that the Local Council and the Government at Westminster are “on the same side of the political divide” may lead to more effective co-operation between the two than when each was criticising the other as was frequently the case previously. This is therefore something for us all to keep an eye on to see whether this proves to be true or otherwise.

Partnerships

The Poster Competition gave us the opportunity of working collaboratively with representatives from the Health Service so we will not only be hoping to continue building upon that relationship but we also intend to investigate other possible partnerships in the year ahead.

Academies

The announcement made by Michael Gove about Academies has caused many to question just what this “is all about”. There is no doubt but what the whole has been made to appear very attractive, with (or so we are told), a reduction in unnecessary bureaucracy, better funding, greater control over curriculum and so on. The problem is of course that there has not been sufficient substance on which to enable individual schools to make related decisions. Several local schools have indicated “an interest” in becoming academies but this is currently likely to be more in order to find out what the benefits actually are and what the disadvantages are before coming to any decision at all. With “failing schools” having been the main target for academies in the past it seems odd to think that “outstanding” schools should be fast-tracked into becoming academies under the new regime. In consequence many (most?, nearly all?) governors are confused and need far better information than is currently available (at least at the time of writing).

The Association has therefore decided to run a Seminar on Academies, provisionally to be on the morning of Saturday October 9th. A Saturday morning represents an unusual change from the traditional “mid-week evening meeting” and is the result of a straw poll taken at the AGM. It does offer the opportunity for a longer-than-usual provision and we believe that it is worth trying out in order to see what the response is to such an experiment. We are fully aware that it “cuts into” a family weekend but hope that the importance of the subject matter makes it a worthwhile exercise. More details will be made available during September.

Thank you

As we come to the end of the academic year it is right that I take this opportunity of thanking all who have given us support in any form during the year past, especially to the DAGB representatives and of course to the members of the Executive. We are equally grateful to staff within the Directorate for the support that they too have given us. Elsewhere in the Newsletter are details of the membership of the new Executive for 2010-2011, a mixture of new faces and longer established stalwarts. Do please remember that

you are always welcome, nay encouraged, to contact us with any ideas for activities or for topics to act as a focus for debate and action. This is **your** Association and we need your input to help us to keep improving what we are able to do for you and for the schools community in Dudley.

Brian Patterson

(Chair, DAGB)