

Briefing on The National Association for Small Schools Seminar held at the House Commons on Tuesday the 10th June

Introduction

Members of the SNT Executive attended the seminar and heard four speakers outline how small schools can be highly successful in producing real dividends for society, as well as some of the best academic results in the Country.

Three schools were represented: one primary first school, teaching key stage one and the first year of key stage two, ages 4 to 8; a standard 11-16 secondary school and a federated 3-16 primary and secondary school. The fourth speaker was Mary Tasker of HSE, Human Scale Education.

One myth that was quickly dispelled by both secondary school heads was that being a small school means that the curriculum has to be narrow or restricted. Given the problems that are being experienced in Isle of Wight high schools in relation to GCSE subject choices this seems to be pertinent to our situation. This is also relevant at the earlier stages too, as one of the reasons given by Steve Beynon for middle school abolition or rationalisation was that our middle schools are simply too small to deliver a sufficiently broad curriculum, and that's at key stages two and three, let alone GCSE. We clearly need to re-evaluate this.

I quickly got the impression that what we were hearing was largely a result of ambitious and lateral thinking and that here on the Isle of Wight we could achieve so much if only we bought into the best practice apparent at these beacon schools as well as the centres of excellence that do exist on the Isle of Wight already.

Each speaker's contribution and my assessment of the possible application of their work to our situation here on the Isle of Wight is detailed in the following pages of this report. Clearly this is a cursory glance at what they are achieving and based solely on their own presentation but in the case of the schools, backed up by outstanding Ofsted results and other commendations. Each has something to offer us here and if we miss any opportunity, particularly one so freely offered, to engage with and learn from their experiences then we only have ourselves to blame if reorganisation fails to deliver the promised improvements.

Armathwaite First School in Cumbria is a 44 pupil-school for children age 4-8. It was featured in the 2005 DfES report of schools offering a distinctive curriculum, in this case the rich links between the school and its community. The school is now part of the DCSF Innovations Unit programme developing radical new approaches to primary practice.

The head teacher Jenny Dixon, explained that the school has a rising roll, in a county that is like most others is experiencing falling or flattened rolls. The rise is understandable as parents exercise their freedom of choice and send their children there, in preference to their local schools. This rather underlines one of the major problems with education policy and practice in the UK today. Increasing levels of parental choice are often

resulting in poorly performing schools or those in deprived areas, falling further behind as bright children understandably move away. This a big subject and not one that I will go into detail on here but suffice it to say that one would hope that other schools could make use of the best practice being demonstrated at schools like Armathwaite to turn their pupil “drainage” around.

Pupils at Armathwaite are judged “average” on entry, the point being that there is no element of selectivity. However as more than 50% of the pupils attending the school are from families who have relocated to the catchment area, it is a fair assumption that there is a higher than average proportion of motivated parents and well supported children at Armathwaite, which we need to recognise as a form of, possibly, quasi-selectivity.

The school is engaged in workforce remodelling, something undertaken successfully by Trish Wray at Chale Primary and an essential component in mixed aged teaching. For Armathwaite, this involves employing a larger number of part time teachers with a focus on individual learning and concentrated progress tracking. Together with the head teacher, who is the only full time member of staff, they employ the equivalent of 2.8 full time teaching staff through 6 physical posts. Jenny Dixon was eager to say that “the staff are focused on learning; not systems and structures”.

The school has built a successful relationship with local businesses, in particular the local bakery, where pupils are able to apply the knowledge and skills they learn in the school, to practical processes at the bakery. The children are all involved in the detailed production process. This is clearly a motivational experience for the children and staff alike. The links established between working adults and children are an important thread in placing the school firmly at the heart of the community.

Two important adages were expressed by the head and her deputy. These were “everyone is someone important” and “pupil initiated learning”. The message that I got from this was that everything is focused on learning. Quality teachers who are focused and inspirational, employing innovative teaching methods that are pupil centred and pupils take ownership of their education, rather than having lessons imposed on them.

It all sounds rather too good to be true and somewhat utopian and I am expect that is how the local authority views it. But OFSTED judges the school outstanding and it clearly works.

To make it work, the teachers have to be inspired and that takes strong and charismatic leadership. The teaching staff although they are part time must be highly skilled and moreover, dedicated to the sole task of providing this specific style of education. There can be no room for disaffected teachers or unruly pupils.

A key point that was made, was that parental involvement is crucial. This echoes the findings of research that shows that children do best where there is strong parental support and engagement. This means that it is all the more important when trying to emulate such schools that the issue of parental apathy is addressed. Removing schools from the communities will inevitably mean that many parents do not visit the school and engagement will fall away and the problem of parental apathy will get worse with inevitable consequences for standards.

Fairfield High School, Herefordshire is small 11-16 secondary school of just 360 pupils which received a first glowing report from OFSTED noting several distinctive approaches to teaching and learning, with a further report in 2007 deeming it “outstanding in every thing it does.”

Headteacher Chris Barker came across as a somewhat maverick character who revels in being different and making the seemingly impossible work. I was inspired just listening to him.

The thing that struck me immediately was that he put much of his success down to high levels of collaboration with his feeder primary schools. Chris described the regular meetings that they hold and the way in which they all work together towards a common goal. This is exactly what we advocated as a solution to split key stages within our three tier system but was never implemented satisfactorily by most schools or by the local authority as a whole.

Chris proudly told us that Fairfield is “small by design not by accident”. Officers from Birmingham are soon to visit the school to find out about successful small scale education as they investigate the benefits of reducing the size of schools in their authority.

Interestingly, Birmingham has an average year 11 (GCSE year) size of 124 pupils (4FE) across 107 schools.

The majority of their schools have no more than 200 per year group (7FE).

17 have between 200 and 260 (9FE).

The two biggest schools have 311 and 417 pupils in year 11 (source DCSF 2007).

The 83 smallest schools had no more than 180 in their 2007 year 11's (6FE).

Birmingham are keen to learn about successfully reducing the size of their secondary schools and so should we. Cowes will have 300 per year group, Ryde and Sandown 360. Our research shows that size affects performance and we need to act now during the planning phase of the reorganisation to address this issue.

At Fairfield, a number of factors are advanced as contributing to excellence.

All staff teach. Managerial time is kept to a minimum through lightweight and nimble management, with all teachers being appointed as department heads emphasising and rewarding the importance of leadership as a key teaching skill. On average each member of staff teaches for 20 of the available 25 lesson units.

Staff training is carried out with minimal reliance on external courses, the majority of training being done through visits to other schools and places, to gain understanding of best practice in a practical context.

All staff including ancillary staff are expected to work with pupils. The focus of all activity is educational. Chris Barker has introduced what he terms workforce reform,

where all staff have a teaching role, regardless of their occupation. He is keen to encourage bright, talented and gifted non-teaching staff to become teachers and is involved in the school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) and graduate teacher training programmes, using the Open University.

The school has no one day absences and does not use any supply teachers.

Chris Barker considers the learning environment to be paramount. Knowledge is “caught not taught”. He has involved his students in the construction of new buildings for the school and sees the design of the school as an important factor in the way in which his teachers teach and students learn. He felt that by siting buildings disparately without the traditional corridors linking buildings, he is able to provide a more diverse environment for the students and staff, with fresh air and walks, a necessary part of the school day, between lessons and during breaks.

He described the environment as the whole school being a single classroom.

The curriculum is broad and each child and their parents, is interviewed to determine a personalised agenda for their learning. The school boasts a broad curriculum of varied subjects which are taught sometimes on a one to one basis. If there is a requirement from one student for a particular subject then everything is done to provide access to it and a course is constructed.

I could see that this would motivate and excite students who might otherwise be stuck with subjects they simply dislike and cannot see the point of. I could also see that the demands on teaching time to allow this must be significant and from what I could gather, there is a high level of extra curricula activity at the school, with after hours teaching and high levels of parental involvement. In a large school I cannot see how this could be achieved. A big factor in all this is Chris Barker’s inspirational vision of how education should be. Herefordshire’s director of Childrens Services attended the seminar and it was clear that he had problems with Chris Barker’s approach to education. I suspect that running schools like this is expensive and demanding of resources. From what I could see almost any price seem worth paying to achieve what Fairfield is achieving and without a doubt if this became the mainstream the cost would be likely to fall.

The school is situated in a rural area and as a result, agricultural studies and related topics are taught. A BTEC diploma in small animal care is offered and the school has the equivalent of a small holding on site, with rabbits, sheep and lamas.

Chris Barker explained that as well as outstanding results, the schools has no permanent exclusions with demands by students and their families for social support or police and court intervention being very low.

The school is clearly very successful and attracts interest from parents out of area. However Chris feels that the school should not expand to more than 450 (3FE) in total. Their 2007 GCSE year 11 was 71 students which makes the school less than 3FE.

The Five Islands School, St. Mary's Isles of Scilly was for me the most interesting from a practical perspective. For us to retain small primary and secondary schools on the Isle of Wight, we need to employ federation and help and encourage them to work closely together, accepting and welcoming mixed age teaching as a vital and attractive feature of our Island education system. Their 2007 Ofsted report makes excellent reading and is a must for anyone involved in the current reorganisation.

The Five Islands school, is pioneering a return to mixed-age schooling following amalgamation of the four separate primary schools on the various islands and the one secondary school on St Mary's. The total roll is barely 250 pupils with only single digit rolls in some of the primary schools. Children have to attend St Mary's from age 11 to 16 and boarding accommodation is provided. This is federation against all the odds including the weather as children often have to travel by boat from island to island. The head teacher, Andrew Penman's story was compelling and remarkable.

Judged outstanding in all respects by Ofsted in 2007, the Five Island's School was not always successful. Previously the school was placed in special measures, having laboured under a succession of different head teachers, twelve in sixteen years until Andrew's appointment in 2005. Recruitment and retention of staff in Scilly is very difficult and puts our problems firmly into perspective. Just the journey to and from London to speak at the seminar took Andrew three days of travelling.

In 2002 Ofsted highlighted a number of failings including failings of the Local Authority in providing adequate leadership in addressing the problems. The Scilly Islands' schools suffer from budgetary instability, with the cost of sports trips for example, being as much as £1500 just for the school cricket team to visit the mainland to compete in a one day event. School buildings were poorly maintained and there was a serious loss of community trust in the schools and their ability to deliver a quality education for the islands' children.

The same year, the DfES had forced the island schools to federate but this was unsuccessful having been opposed by the communities of the various islands, fearing a loss of individuality and identity. In 2005, agreement between the communities was eventually reached and federation was accompanied by the appointment of the new head.

Considerable efforts are now made to bind the schools together, maintaining the community values and traditions of the various islands that make up the Five Islands School.

The success of federation has taken a failing group of schools and turned them into a single outstanding institution under one head. The curriculum is praised by Ofsted for its breadth and diversity. The way in which learning is pupil centred has much in common with both Fairfield High and Armathwaite First School. Education to address the needs and requirements of the students rather than to fit in with the bulk processing that is employed in many of our schools, is a striking feature of this type of approach.

Forced by their circumstances to employ federation, the Scilly Islands have shown us the way and we should take note. They are about to address the issues thrown up by the introduction of new 14-19 diplomas and whereas here on the Isle of Wight we are told that we cannot have small community based secondary schools because they would be

unable to provide a curriculum broad enough to cope with the demands of the new diplomas, this is exactly what the Scilly Islands are about to have to do. They say necessity is the mother of all invention. If they can do it then so can we.

I am keen to explore the possibilities for Ventnor, the West Wight and other areas that would benefit from a federated 0-19 approach, by looking more closely at the Five Islands School example. In this way the size of the three largest proposed secondary schools could be addressed as well as ensuring that rural and semi-rural areas such as the South and West Wight were able to have their own secondary provision based close the heart of their communities.

Human Scale Education

The final speaker was Mary Tasker of Human Scale Education. Founded in 1985 the organisation is an education reform movement committed to small scale learning communities. The patrons are former London Schools Tsar and educationalist Professor Tim Brighouse, Political Theorist and proponent of social justice Sir Bernard Crick, peace activist and editor of Resurgence magazine Satish Kumar, Environmentalist and Chairman of Friends of the Earth Jonathan Porritt, Educationalist and head of the Nuffield Review Professor Richard Pring and Environmentalist Anita Roddick.

HSE works with schools, parents and educationalists to promote human scale learning within a community. They firmly believe that size matters if children and young people are to do well at school and to flourish as human beings.

They are currently developing small-scale working practices in a volunteer group of large secondary schools and are supported by substantial interest and funding from the Gulbenkian, Esmée Fairbairn and Paul Hamlyn Foundations.

Mary Tasker spoke about the need for small, human-scale, school organisation throughout education and the need to judge schools not only on their academic results but also on their impact on society and the communities where they are based. She said the Government are about to close a number of schools that are sub-standard results-wise but are actually delivering great benefits for society in terms of social inclusion, low rates of youth crime and pregnancy and in areas where this would not otherwise be happening. In effect, we need to value education for much more than just test results and academic outcomes.

The views of HSE fit in well with the approach adopted by SNT in its opposition to the previous and current reorganisation plans here on the Isle of Wight. Our argument was never solely about three-tiers being necessarily better than two tiers, although there are many reasons to believe that with the right central and local government support, three tiers is a more child centred approach to learning. SNT has always said that education needs to be community based and that small schools can deliver excellent results both educationally and socially. It is becoming increasingly obvious to us, that on the Isle of Wight, in addition to problems of accountability and collaboration, many young people experience their greatest difficulties at the high school level. Size is almost certainly a factor in this and probably plays an important role in our lower than expected results,

given the generally satisfactory, good and sometimes outstanding performance at the primary and middle school stages.

Until now nobody has been able to completely explain why this is. We identified lack of accountability because of split key stages and poor collaboration. Sub standard leadership from past LEAs was also identified as a contributory factor. We suggested increased levels of vertical (and horizontal) collaboration as is being practiced in both the Five Islands School and Fairfield examples. But rather than taking that imaginative and common sense route, the Local Authority has forced us to make massive changes to the existing structure, as if this is in some way the crucial answer to our problems. We think that the size of year groups, effectively the form entry or intake, is the next important factor that needs to be considered for the reorganisation to be successful.

The very fact that the council are happy to propose the closure of small rural schools rather than federate them speaks volumes. Furthermore, the existence of any secondary school with year sizes in excess of 7FE post reorganisation, demonstrates to me the local authorities lack of understanding of the impact of size on educational outcomes.

The message from the National Association for Small Schools and Human Scale Education provides clear support for our views. The fact that both central government and local authorities like the Isle of Wight are not listening or if they are listening they are not taking any action, is down to a gap in knowledge and understanding and most importantly in motive between the politicians, civil servants and local government officers as opposed to teachers, heads and parents. For the government and local authority it is simply a matter of test and examination results. For teachers and parents it is a matter of producing rounded, educated and socially responsible individuals who can contribute at their own level to the communities that they live in. At every stage in the process of reorganisation it has been clear that what we as parents want for our children goes way beyond what the local authority think we should have.

Small community based schools are seen as an unaffordable luxury by the local authority. It has done nothing to discourage jealousy by the larger schools for the situation of the smaller schools and has used what it sees as budgetary imbalances between large and small to in part, justify its stance on closure.

We need to shift the focus of our fight, to delivering a small school solution to the Isle of Wight's problems, regardless of structure. In this way we can turn the current situation to everyone's advantage and obtain educational benefits for the whole Island population. After all, it is not just children and young people who benefit from a well educated society.

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13 June 2008
(with amendments 5 July 2008)