

Standards-Not-Tiers Press Release

20th March 2008

Standards-Not-Tiers is extremely disappointed that members of the ruling Conservative Group did not have courage to allow the people of the Isle of Wight the opportunity to decide in a referendum, the future of our education system. Clearly they felt that the risk of failure, having nailed their structural colours to the mast, would have been too great. We agree with this analysis. On the basis of their victory in 2005 it is likely that a majority would have voted once again to retain the existing three tier system.

For many people, this has been as much about a failure of democracy as it has been about education. Because schools affect so many people and the majority of those people are without a vote, the integrity of decisions like this, is at least as important, if not more important than other decisions that politicians are called upon to make. I will always maintain that this decision was forced through without fair and proper consultation. That is no way to treat the electorate and it is no way to treat democracy. Sadly we are all used to such behaviour from even our most senior politicians and in a perverse way we have come to expect it as part of the process.

There will be some, who will understandably feel that we should fight on and try to reverse this decision through the courts. I am convinced that this would succeed. However, I feel that such action would be counterproductive and not in the interests of our children.

You may be aware that the education system on the Island has for some time been split in its opinion on the way forward. The majority of primary and high schools have long maintained that we should adopt a two-tier structure. Middle schools have largely, but crucially not unanimously, sought to promote the virtues of three-tiers. Standards-Not-Tiers have supported the middle schools, because their fight was just and educationally sound (never forget the reasons for three-tiers and the way in which our local authority, for years, failed to lead the changes that were needed to address the requirements of the national curriculum and key stages and key stage testing). SNT have also been very clear in saying that two-tier and three-tier systems are equally able to deliver good results. It is how they are managed that matters.

What we have been most concerned about, is the effect that wholesale reorganization may have on the educational life chances of children caught in the midst of any such change. Other authorities have inflicted terrible pain on their schools, families and staff, in the pursuit of a reorganisation utopia. We need to ensure that change is managed well on the Isle of Wight.

We should now all unite to ensure that the changes are implemented smoothly and in a way that has the least negative impact on children's education over the next seven years.

Accordingly, we urge all protest groups to consider the effect of further protest in respect of attempting to reverse the decision by judicial review or by any other means for that matter. We would be in danger of creating the very disruption that our campaign was designed to avoid and SNT will not be a party to that. The decision is made, the Island is about to move to a single transfer system of education and we need to accept it and move on.

That does not mean that we will not challenge the Isle of Wight Council regarding our allegation that the consultation process was fatally flawed and misleading. Councils, their politicians and officers must not be allowed to operate in such a cavalier way in the future and we intend to make a complaint in respect of the process, as suggested by Lord Adonis. It will then be a matter for the Local Government Ombudsman to determine.

We will also continue to rigorously oppose this council's plans to create large primary and secondary schools and close small rural primary schools. We must see the rural schools as more than just another cog in the education budget. The removal of these schools has far ranging consequences that many are more than happy to dismiss. We should not join them. We are prepared to fight all the way on this.

We will now work together with like minded politicians and other action groups towards opposing the LibDems who cynically refused to back our call for a referendum and all members of the Conservative ruling group who have reneged on their promise to the electorate. We will stand by our pledge to field candidates at the next election and herald a new era of independent councillors who will stand up for their communities and not party interests.

Ends.

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