

## 2nd September, 2003

### **EDUCATION: Not Alright, Guv'nor?**

#### **Collaborating with state schools**

In the second year of school for that well known assisted places' beneficiary, Harry Potter, Lucius Malfoy arranges for Professor Dumbledore to be suspended from his Headmaster's duties. The power he wields to undermine this famous wizard? His position as Governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, *of course*. LEA-appointed, parent and co-opted Governors of Primary and Secondary schools in England can only dream of such influence. In reality, their lot is a frustrating one. They are unpaid, but accountable, amateur enthusiasts motivated by a desire to give something back to the school with which they have their association. Most are parents or local political animals (Councillors or Association officers), but as they begin to understand what the position requires and then reveals to them, they are lucky if they can avoid being overwhelmed by a crushing sense of despair.

It started for some of us with the Criminal Records Bureau and Sex Offenders' checks that all staff and governors were required to undergo. We observed as that requirement was extended, incomprehensibly, to parents of children at the school who wished to help with reading practise or school trips. What logic suggested that a would-be abusive parent would come *into* a school to commit an offence? I mean, is there any serious evidence that this sort of thing has actually been happening, anywhere? Instead, these volunteers are obliged to pre-register their possible plans to help with their own children's education, wait for clearance from an overworked department and only then be permitted to look after the children they entertain at their own homes in the holidays anyway.

For the governors on a school's Premises Committee the misery increases exponentially as they watch planned capital investment being diverted from the upkeep of the school infrastructure to plug gaps in the current account. For Curriculum Committee members, changes and additions to the curriculum, that emanate at least once a term from the "Department of Education & Skills", and the impact these will have on the children's chances of passing their exams, are of huge concern. These are the exams which Charles Clarke has now indicated may be scrapped (Key Stage 1), added to (Key Stage 3) or replaced (the Bac for the A level).

Perhaps one would expect that the Finance Committee members would be the most acutely depressed. It is they who have observed at first hand the utter shambles of the budget round this year, the resulting need to balance books that have to incorporate the almost discredited Teachers Workload agreement and the arbitrary removal of grants, cancelled unexpectedly, after having previously been made several years on the trot. The formula by which a school has its' per pupil financial allocation calculated requires Maxwell-like creativeness to comprehend, but in spite of all of this, it is in fact the Staffing Committee members that lead in the depression stakes.

When the Education Department announces later this year that teacher redundancies have not increased after all (as they somehow will try to do), don't think for a moment that all is well in schools throughout the country. Headteachers and governors will fire a member of staff only as a long-after-the-last resort. Before that point has been reached, every

aspect of a school's quality of life will be degraded, sometimes over a long period of time. Thus a school might be able to report consistent staff numbers, when in truth each child has suffered from cuts to their education at many levels. Existing teachers cannot be freed up to carry out career training, unless it is after hours and free. Retiring teachers are not replaced. Less experienced assistants in the nursery year are employed instead of the more expensive but better qualified NNEBs (and yes, I do know what that means). "Non-contact time", which allows staff to have a half-day preparing lessons occasionally, is as rare as an affordable house for a teacher in London. There is no slack left-in 90% of schools in Wandsworth Borough, as supply cover is done without, so Headteachers and, where they have not been dispensed with, the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator are the sickness or emergency stand-ins. The SENCO is supposed to be paid for out of funds specifically delegated to the schools by LEAs. But guess what? The amount delegated does not cover the cost of the position. And this is in an era where increasing numbers of special schools are being threatened with closure, as special needs children often are forced into the mainstream, against their and their contemporaries' better interests.

These represent a fraction of the average governors' concerns. Given that many sit on more than one Committee, it is a wonder that Wandsworth Borough has managed to fill every single one of its LEA appointed places across the 81 schools in the area. That serves as a testament to the resilience of the Wandsworth Conservative presence (mainly; Labour supply roughly one in every four governor nominees), but it is not enough for us to sit patiently at our termly meetings and rue the mistakes that Labour have inflicted upon state schools. We have to be ready to improve the lot of our schools as soon as the day after the next election, and if we do not believe that throwing more money at the problem will help, then what should Damian Green offer to save our schools?

Giving headteachers far greater powers over their budget and where it is spent looks like an elegant proposal, for starters. It appeals to the Conservative philosophy of smaller government, and there are public sector precedents within the Armed Forces, for example, where professionals trained for other specialities, nevertheless manage effectively to run and distribute an annual budget. It is entirely reasonable to suppose that staff and governors of schools know best where to increase funds and where the areas of greatest need lie. However this noble aspiration will only work in practise if certain conditions are met. In a London primary school of 460 plus pupils, the administrative team might contain three people. These would ordinarily be the Headteacher, the Administrative Officer and an assistant or deputy. There might be 20 years experience between them — much more in many cases — and they will perhaps have been managing the school's finances for years, surviving Audit inspections and Ofsted Reports along the way. But if their goalposts are moved each year, they cannot be expected to shoot and score. (Not that the National Curriculum allows time for sport anymore — but that's another issue).

First of all, the huge discrepancy between the amounts different schools within a Borough receives for each pupil has to be reduced. In Wandsworth, the range between primary schools is as much as £2400 versus £3700. This can amount to more than half a million quid variations between seemingly similar schools. Then the allocation should reflect to some degree the success of schools. It might reasonably be assumed that schools that get

it right year after year would be given further chance to flourish, expand and share their good practises with others. In fact, successful schools are penalised. Schools that achieved a small surplus in 2002/2003 through careful husbandry and tough decisions were not bailed out like deficit schools by “loans” from the LEA. (These loans are the type a bank would never issue: you don’t pay interest and there is no date by which to repay). One school in Battersea was commended in a Commission for Racial Equality brochure for its imaginative and example-setting approach to the integration of a meaningful equality policy. As a reward, last year it lost its grant for Ethnic Minority Awareness development.

More controversially, and perhaps unpalatably so for some ideologues, is the fact that there will be schools which *don’t* want the responsibility of administering their budgets. Headteachers and Governors of some schools have acquiesced during the imposition, over the last six years, of increasing prescription and box-ticking from central government. Like the proverbial frog in a saucepan of water which doesn’t realise that the water is being brought to the boil and never leaps out to save itself, schools have to some extent brought this sorry state of affairs upon themselves. It is always the same few Heads who kick back against the latest edict from the DfES — but sooner or later they get written off as malcontents, and their voice wanes. And the DfES always seems to be able to drag out some pro-change spokesman to justify their policy reform. If Headteachers and Governing bodies behave like this when asked to react to proposals, how likely is it that they will be successfully pro-active, as Conservative Party policy would have them be?

And to come full circle, how can Governors be incentivised to put still more of their time in, as they would have to in our intended brave new world? Your time and my time is precious — and presently we donate it out of altruism and because we can. But when it becomes the remit of a Governing Body truly to set budget levels, with all the responsibility and the professional duties of care that this will impose, is it realistic to expect anything like the current crop of Governors to continue to contribute in the same way? The Shadow Education Secretary must give serious thought to how this will work in practise, or we will end up by imposing yet more unwanted change-for-change’s-sake on a fragile and deteriorating beast.

*Jonathan Gough is the Finance Committee Chairman and LEA appointed Governor at Allfarthing Primary School in Wandsworth. He is also the Deputy Chairman of Battersea Conservative Association; and on the Tory slate for the GLA elections next year.*