

Campaign for Real Education

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NEWSLETTER

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HOW CAN THIS BE SOCIAL JUSTICE?

Regular readers will remember how members of the educational establishment plotted to 'federate' Boston Grammar School (BGS) for boys and Boston High School (BHS) for girls in 2006 – see our Winter 2006 newsletter at http://www.cre.org.uk/news/newsletter_06_3.html. The schools were federated the following year.

At the time of writing, BGS and BHS have a single 'executive' headteacher and a single governing body. If the establishment gets its way, one new co-educational grammar school will be built on the site of one of the schools. The future of the 'redundant' school and its land remain unclear. In any event, the effects of the federation have been disastrous.

Between 2008 and 2009, the percentage of boys achieving 5 or more A*-C GCSEs including English and maths fell from 99% to 83% – a 16% drop in a single year.

In September 2009, only 69 boys were given places out of a possible 112. Instead of entering the boys' school as usual, they were admitted to the girls' school, though the admissions criteria for BHS had not been changed from girls only to co-educational to allow this. Almost certainly, these boys will miss the presence of older boys as role models. And losing them meant the boys' school's budget was reduced by more than £200,000 each year.

Several of the original plotters have now fled the scene. Three who remain are Peter Duxbury, the director of children's services with Conservative-controlled Lincolnshire County Council (LCC), Andy Breckon, the local manager of CfBT, the educational charity hired by LCC to manage its schools, and Helen McEvoy, who was head of BHS, but became 'executive' head of both schools after the federation.

Earlier this year, Mrs McEvoy and Tony Elmer, the chairman of governors, attempted to 'de-federate' the two schools, hoping to leave the 500-year-old boys' grammar financially unviable and ripe for closure. They even hired lawyers from Nottingham (Browne Jacobson LLP) to advise them, but without notifying the full governing body; or agreeing who would pay the legal fees amounting to over £11,000.

Under the banner of LCC's School Improvement Service, Andy Breckon of CfBT served the governors with a warning notice that he must inspect the schools and 'review' the effectiveness of the federation. However, at an extraordinary meeting of the governing body on 2 February 2010, the joint governing body voted **not** to 'de-federate' the two schools. Their meeting was attended by Mark Blois of Browne Jacobson and a colleague. Although Mr Blois had already provided written advice on the easiest way to 'de-federate' (though he changed his mind during the meeting), much of his advice concerned the employment implications for the head, who might have lost her 'executive' headship. Depending on the circumstances, Mr Blois advised the governors, if Mrs McEvoy lost her position, she may sue the governors and/or be entitled to £66,000 in compensation.

Extracts from the minutes of governors' meetings, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, highlight a disturbing situation: 'Mr Duxbury informed the Governors that the DCSF [Department for Children, Schools and Families] were very aware of what the County were doing in terms of forming

Federations of schools'; 'The children are suffering'; 'Governors unanimously agreed that the examination results were not satisfactory'; 'Staff were finding it difficult to work on both sites'; 'A deficit budget had been produced'; 'Concerns were aired over teacher travelling time, teacher morale, Learning walks (*sic*), teachers not teaching their main subject'; 'It was suggested that perhaps the good teachers were spending too much time on management issues and not teaching'.

Towards the end of March, Tony Elmer resigned as chairman of governors, though he wants to remain on the board. Helen McEvoy also resigned. Rumours were circulating that LCC and/or CfBT might appeal to Ed Balls, the education secretary, to remove the governors and replace them with his own nominees. So to keep parents informed and pre-empt possible misinformation from the establishment, the governors published the minutes of recent meetings on the schools' website.

Throughout this disturbing saga, the parent governors and their allies, led by local businessmen Phillip Bosworth and Charles Campion, have worked tirelessly to maintain standards, retain staff and reduce disruption.

Mr Bosworth has now been elected chairman, but Andy Breckon is adamant he must still 'inspect' the schools in early May. Yet it was Mr Breckon and Mr Duxbury who caused the disruption in the first place on the grounds of questionable falling rolls and skewed performance data. Are they capable of putting things right? Or will the pupils (and teachers) continue to suffer?

FEWER SCHOOLS MEAN LESS CHOICE

'School closures soar', screamed the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* headline on 4 March 2010. Overall, 1,039 primary schools and 286 secondary schools have closed in the last 10 years – a large proportion of them during the last 2 years.

But does it make sense to close small and medium sized schools to create massive 'factory' schools in their place? Is the population falling anywhere? How will the children from 2009's record birthrate be accommodated? What about the effects of immigration?

Cross-party political support for school federations and academies are largely to blame, along with the lure of millions of taxpayers' pounds under central government's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. Politicians are also to blame for failing to challenge their officials. Or, in some cases, for failing to oppose the governing party. Too often, this means that evidence against federations or school closures is never considered by the decision-makers. And while the number of state schools has declined, the independent sector overall has grown by 132 schools since 1999.

Even John Bangs, the head of education at the NUT, has accused local authorities of 'short-termism'. 'I am constantly amazed by local authorities' lack of capacity to work together and carry out proper demographic studies', he stated.

In some cases, it may be sensible to close an under-performing school and start again. In others, wouldn't it be better – and cheaper – to appoint a new head and some local business people as governors to re-invigorate a failing school?

On 8 March, ministers proudly announced another £418m to be shared among 6 local authorities including Lincolnshire (see page 1). How much of this is really necessary?

'TRANSFORMING' EDUCATION?

The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education by (Professors) Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes (Routledge, 2009) is highly recommended.

Therapeutic education, of course, is part of Personal, Social, Health and Economic education. (Economic education is a new addition, perhaps to add some credibility to the mix.)

Among the authors' concerns are that children as young as 3 are being coerced into revealing their innermost thoughts and feelings to their teachers and classmates. The lessons are supposed to help children to be happy and avoid emotional problems. But teachers are trained to ensure that every child, without exception, expresses concern about something or other, whether real or imagined. The dangers, including the possibility of psychological damage, are obvious.

The authors meticulously document the extent to which ministers and the DCSF are promoting therapeutic education. The Department lists over 70 organisations involved in this work. In July 2007, ministers announced grants worth £60m – £30m for the year 2010-2011 alone.

Names to watch out for include Antidote, Circle Time, P4C (Philosophy for Children) and SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning). The latter specifies 42 'outcomes' for 3 to 11 year-old children and 50 for 11 to 16 year-olds.

END OF PARLIAMENT BRINGS BENEFITS

'Sir – Parents and guardians have the primary responsibility for bringing up their children in accordance with their own values and culture. They may entrust the task of formal education to a school of their choice, but the overall responsibility for the upbringing of their children remains theirs. The Children, Schools and Families Bill undermines this principle and seeks to impose a particular ideology by means of statutory sex and relationships education from the age of 5 (which primary schools do not currently have to teach). We would therefore urge Parliament decisively to oppose it. A state which seeks to centralise responsibilities which are properly fulfilled by families is acting in an unjust manner and undermines the basis of a free society.'

The letter above was published in *The Sunday Telegraph* on 28 March. It was arranged by Norman Wells, director of the Family Education Trust (www.famyouth.org.uk), and signed by 640 headteachers, faith leaders and others.

Fortunately, the dissolution of Parliament for the general election compelled the government to remove several of the Bill's most damaging requirements. Measures dropped included: sex education lessons for children as young as 5; the removal of parental rights to withdraw their child from sex education after he or she reaches 15; compulsory registration by all parents educating their child at home; and overhauling the primary curriculum to remove traditional subjects such as history and geography in order to replace them with 'areas of learning'.

NO NEED TO READ WHOLE BOOKS

Distinguished neuroscientist Baroness Susan Greenfield informs us that spending too much time on the internet is destroying young people's ability to concentrate. Now we hear that overcrowded timetables and pressure to improve exam grades mean that pupils are reading only extracts from great literature, instead of the complete works.

Prior to speaking at this year's NUT conference, children's author Alan Gibbons said: 'Schools use extracts to spot the metaphor or the simile, instead of allowing children to read whole books.' 'One of my daughters came home to tell me she was doing *Great Expectations* as part of her GCSEs. It turned out that all they were doing was reading chapter one, when Magwitch first appears, and then skipping to chapter 39, when he reappears, to compare the two scenes.'

GROWING SUPPORT FOR GRAMMARS

An overwhelming majority of the public support the continued existence and autonomy of England's 164 grammar schools and the 68 in Northern Ireland. An opinion poll carried out in February by ICM for the National Grammar Schools Association (www.ngsa.org.uk) found 70% of those questioned support the retention of the 232 grammar schools in England and Northern Ireland as self-governing state schools and additional voluntary choice for parents. Only 19% oppose the idea and 10% don't know.

Asked if they would support the introduction of some new state grammar schools, especially in urban areas where there currently are none, 76% supported the idea, 17% opposed it and 6% didn't know. Support for grammars is strong across all age and income groups with a remarkable 85% of 18 to 24 year-olds wanting more grammar schools. How different from the 40% support the largest political parties strive so hard to achieve!

WAR ON CHOICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland's selective schools consistently produce better overall exam results than those in England. Yet the Province's top schools remain under attack from Sinn Fein/IRA politicians and their educational establishment allies. Meanwhile, opposition politicians are remarkably complacent.

Now the Catholic Church has joined in. Cardinal Sean Brady wants the 30 or so grammar schools that are Catholic to become 'all-ability' (ie comprehensive) schools by 2012.

Parents are justifiably concerned on the grounds that neither Sinn Fein/IRA, with its record of lawlessness and violence, nor the Catholic Church, with its failure properly to deal with child abuse, should be allowed control over their children's education. Who can blame them?

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS FIGHT BACK

Political pressure on top universities to offer places to under-qualified applicants from state schools at the expense of better qualified applicants from independent (and grammar) schools has been fiercely attacked by leaders of independent schools.

The Independent Schools Council has also denounced research claiming that students from state schools achieve better degrees than their privately educated counterparts, because the researchers had manipulated the data.

This has outraged Professor Steve Smith of Exeter University, the chairman of Universities UK, which represents vice-chancellors. He has called for more offers to be made to applicants from under-performing state schools with lower A-level grades. But why should the state educational establishment expect help to raise standards from independent (and grammar) schools, whilst it simultaneously undermines them? Isn't this a tacit admission that the state system is incapable of improving itself? And why can't state schools compete on a level playing field?

LOCAL NEWS

Bedfordshire: When a 9-year-old pupil at Woodland Middle School called a fellow pupil 'chocolate', he was placed in isolation for the whole of Friday afternoon, then again for the whole of Monday morning even though he apologised sincerely and wrote an essay against 'racism' as punishment. The incident has been recorded against the pupil's name in the local authority database and may stay there. His mother, Vanessa Walsh, has written a letter of complaint to the governors and awaits their decision. The head, meanwhile, sees nothing amiss in such harsh punishment.

Norfolk: Norfolk County Council reports that it has trained 20 artists to go into the county's schools as part of its Artists for Climate Change project. They will be working with children and young people to raise awareness of environmental issues and address issues of sustainability. The project is supported by several organisations including the University of East Anglia. Helen Newell, the head of St Michael's Junior School, said: 'Our pupils are already incredibly enthusiastic about environmental issues...This project really helps to bring the green agenda to life for our children using their imaginations and creative ways of working...'

Is there some confusion over educational priorities here?

Richmond-upon-Thames: A bright 13-year-old at Christ's Church of England School in Richmond wanted to take GCSEs in both French and Spanish. But this option was not available. Instead, Claire Brown, informs us, her daughter's weekly timetable consists of 3 periods each of English, maths, science and French, 2 each of PE and Technology (food and textiles), plus 1 each of geography,

history, humanities, art, citizenship, drama, ICT and music. Nevertheless, the school's percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more A*-C GCSEs including English and maths is a creditable 63%. But how much better for the pupils if they could spend more time on serious subjects?

Suffolk: Seduced by millions of taxpayers' pounds from Labour's Building Schools for the Future programme, Conservative-controlled Suffolk County Council is still determined to close the popular Clare Middle School, along with several other excellent schools across the county. Clare parents, meanwhile, have to wait until after the general election to see if their more sensible plans to keep their school open and expand it will be allowed under Conservative proposals for 'free' schools, which will be funded by taxpayers and run by parents.

PUBLICATIONS/NOTICE

Liberal Education and the National Curriculum by David Conway defines a liberal education as an education whose primary purpose is to prepare children for life in a free and democratic society. It is not simply training them for work. All children, not just the elite in grammar and independent schools, should be taught English, maths, science, geography, history and foreign languages. Replacing subjects with themes, the author suggests, is 'reactionary and anti-progressive', because it particularly disadvantages the under-privileged. £11.75 including postage from Civitas, 55 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL or at www.civitas.org.uk

An end to factory schools: An education manifesto for 2010-2020 by Anthony Seldon argues that too many state schools have become factories, where reluctant students are processed through a system which is closely controlled by the state. As a result, universities receive well-drilled automatons who cannot think independently. £10.00 from the Centre for Policy Studies, 57 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL or free at www.cps.org.uk

Making Britain Literate and *Making Britain Numerate* by Kevin Norley cover key requirements for teaching basic literacy and numeracy. Suitable for professional teachers and homeschoolers, both books include helpful examples and exercises. Published by Imprimata, they cost £10.00 each from bookshops or www.amazon.co.uk

- The Annual Schools Bible Project for 2010, organised by Christian Projects, is open to secondary pupils aged from 11 to 16. The first prize is £500, the second £250 and the third £100 for the winners' schools, plus individual prizes for pupils. Entrants are required to write an essay describing a specified event from the New Testament and the closing date is 30 June. Full details at www.christianprojects.org.uk

SNIPPETS

A qualification that Ofsted has warned is of 'doubtful value' has become the fourth most popular 14-19 course in English schools...A 669 per cent rise in entries in the last two years means the OCR National level 2 in ICT...is now being taken by more pupils than many GCSEs in maths, English and science...The longest version is deemed equivalent to four good GCSEs for league tables despite needing half the teaching time. *TES*, 15 January 2010.

Exam watchdogs secretly downgraded the GCSE results of thousands of pupils last summer to avoid a damaging public row over grade inflation, newly released internal emails have disclosed. The documents show that in mid-August Ofqual, the standards regulator set up by Ed Balls, the schools secretary, was given predictions of a big jump in science results. Just two days before grades were finalised, [Isabel Nisbet], its chief executive ordered the independent boards that set and mark papers to cut the number of pupils who would win top grades. *The Sunday Times*, 28 February 2010.

Almost one in five children are failing to make enough progress in the three Rs at primary school, according to official figures. Government data shows 19 per cent of pupils effectively gained worse results in maths tests aged 11 than in comparable assessments taken at seven. Some 18 per cent of children also failed to make the expected progress in English – a drop in standards compared with two years earlier. The disclosure comes just days after Ofsted said

that Labour's £4.5 billion National Strategies – flagship teaching programmes designed to improve standards in the three Rs – were failing because teachers had been 'overwhelmed' by initiatives. *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 March 2010.

The government is set to scrap some qualifications in England for 14 to 19 year-olds, it has been announced... The current system is too complex, says the Joint Advisory Committee for Qualifications Approval (JACQUA)... The Department for Children, Schools and Families has said that of some 6,500 or so qualifications, 65% are taken by fewer than 100 students a year. *The Guardian*, 2 March 2010.

Staff will not be comforted by a confidential report I've uncovered from the Institute for the Development of Innovation-Orientated Teaching Skills (IDIOTS)... Here are its highlights:

- Teachers must discontinue their antiquated practice of penalising pupils who do not give so-called 'correct' answers. The concept of 'correct' answers is elitist, as it discriminates against pupils who do not know them...
 - The custom of grading pupils according to the merit of their work is divisive, as it fosters the outdated belief that it is better to be 'clever' and 'hard-working' than 'stupid' and 'lazy'...
 - To avoid stigmatising pupils, teachers should refrain from employing negative terminology. Instead of telling a pupil that his answer is 'wrong', the teacher should tell him that it is 'factually divergent from the norm'...
 - The teaching of history should be abolished, on account of its backward looking focus on the past. In its place will be a new, more up-to-date and relevant subject known as The Present...
- The Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 2010.