

SUBMISSION TO LEICESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL CABINET from parents of Rosebery Primary School, Loughborough.¹

1. The background

At a meeting with parents of children at Rosebery school on 5 April parents sought to provide the Cabinet with arguments for keeping Rosebery school open. These were mainly based on their own positive experiences and those of their children. They also pointed out that they had not received any criteria on which to base an argument which might persuade Cabinet to revise its decision to recommend the closure of the school. In response, the leader of the council, Cllr Parsons, suggested that a small group of (four) parents meet with the Director of Children's Services in order to learn what criteria would be appropriate. That meeting took place on Wednesday 26 April. Mr Tony Mulhearn also took part.

2. The Consultation process

Parents felt that they need to explore every avenue to save Rosebery School. That does not mean that they accept that the consultation process as a whole has been fair. On the contrary:

- a) the statutory consultation process which lasted less than five weeks, finishing with the Cabinet decision of 14 March to recommend closure was unreasonably short.
- b) since 14 March parents and the school as a whole has been working with the threat of closure hanging over them, which cannot be considered a fair context for discussion.
- c) while we appreciate the help offered by Mr Williams and Mr Mulhearn the fact remains that the time given to parents to prepare this case has not only been unreasonably short but it has put the onus of argument on parents, who are not experts, to make an expert case.
- d) in the period from January to March no genuine consultation took place. In particular the possibility of a federation with another school could and should have been given more serious consideration (see below).

Parents are therefore continuing to pursue their complaints about the consultation to the Local Government Commissioner (Ombudsman) as well as making a submission to the Audit Commission, for consideration at their next review of the County Council's performance. They are taking advice on how to obtain a judicial review of the decisions which have been, or may be taken about the future of Rosebery Primary School. They will provide a summary of their complaints to the Schools Organisation Committee, when it convenes.²

¹ A final draft of this submission was sent to all parents and carers of children attending Rosebery School on Friday 5 May, comments which were received by 7 May have been incorporated into it.

² The Statutory notice to close Rosebery Primary School was posted at Rosebery Primary school on 2 May. The statutory period for representations to the Schools Organisation Committee lasts at least four weeks (where a school is subject to special measures or has serious weaknesses) see DfES website 'School Organisation Public and Parents Guide,' paras 9-21.

3. The criteria

Our understanding from the talks with Mr Williams and Mr Mulhearn is that the main criteria for turning a school around and thus also the basis for any case to keep Rosebery school open are:

- 1) Headship: to ensure secure long-term management for the school a suitable permanent headteacher must be in place.
- 2) Secure checks on the leadership of the headteacher from the governing body.
- 3) A clear vision of where the school wants to be, i.e. an articulated vision that people can “buy into.”
- 4) Effective targeted management of budget involving all teaching staff.

4. Headship and Federation³

The difficulties of obtaining suitable primary heads are well-known and not in dispute. There is a difference of view about the failure to appoint a head to Rosebery in summer 2005 but clearly the chance of successfully advertising for a head while the school is in special measures is small, although there is disagreement about how small. It is also clear that there is no point advertising for a headship when the school is under threat of closure.

The alternative, which does not require a search for a new head, and has other positive educational advantages, is federation. The potential benefits of federation are well-known and do not need to be rehearsed here in detail. In the case of Rosebery we believe that federation deserves more consideration than it has so far received. We understand that federation was discussed with governors shortly before the Ofsted inspection, but that governors rejected it. Whatever the precise context and nature of this discussion we believe that when the school was placed into special measures the possibility of federation should have prompted this decision to be revisited. The DfES guidelines state that when a school goes into special measures the LA statement of action should “assess the scope for the school to be closed or *federated*, taking into account the number of surplus places in better performing local schools.”⁴ We have no evidence that any assessment of the scope for Rosebery to be federated did in fact take place after the Ofsted inspection. The LA commentary on the school’s action plan refers only to a “governors’ exploration of federation” *before* the Ofsted Report. The reason given for rejecting the proposal by Cllr Mike Jones that it be considered (paper to Cabinet 31 January 2006 (Part B, 24) are therefore not well founded. The paper also fails to make clear the circumstances when the governor’s discussion took place and uses of the term “recently” to describe a meeting which took place over three months before. We note that Cllr Peter Lewis took the view on 25 January 2006 that the suggestion by Cllr Jones of federation “might have merited more detailed consideration” by the governors. However this too overlooks the point that the LA could and in our should have considered it after the school was placed in special measures.

We understand that it is the view of Mr Williams that since the school has been placed in special measures federation is no longer an option because no school would wish to federate with a school which is in special measures. However we consider that this view is too pessimistic. According to the Department for Education and Skills (School Improvement and Targets Unit) there are at least at least 20 examples of schools in special measures being involved in federation nationally. In general the Department wishes to encourage the kind of

³ The principle sources for this section are the Leicestershire County Council consultation document on the proposed federation between Richard Hill C of E Primary School and Woollen Hill Community Primary school, the DfES Standards Site web page (What are federations?); Centre for educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), Evaluation of the Federations Programme, 1st Interim Report, April 2005; oral communications by Mr Elridge Foster and Mr Peter Clough, School Improvement and Targets Unit, DfES, 3-4 May 2006.

⁴ Schools Causing Concern, September 2005, DfES/1549/2005, para 24, emphasis added.

federation in which better performing schools help “failing schools” raise their standards and believes that such partnerships provide a fruitful way of doing this.

Informal, exploratory, talks with other local schools which have already taken place strongly suggest that federation is an option which, even at this late stage, should not be dismissed.

5. The Governors’ role⁵

We understand that the current governing body of Rosebery Primary School has been subject to strong criticism, while noting that at the time of the Ofsted inspection it suffered from a lack of experience. Whatever the judgement about past performance, it is clear that the governing body and the teachers of Rosebery now have as their main priority the implementation of the agreed action plan with the support of the LA.

Sustaining those improvements after the initial twelve month period will depend on a number of factors. If Rosebery Primary School were to federate the governing body would need to be restructured in order to work together with a new headteacher, whoever that might be, but also to act as a “critical friend” to the headteacher and staff, to “exercise its right to discuss, question and refine proposals” and not simply to rubber-stamp every decision of the headteacher. The raising of standards and maintaining improvements in behaviour would clearly be a central priority.

If Rosebery were to be federated with another school the actual composition of a joint governing body would clearly need to be subject to discussion and agreement. One of the benefits of federation is that more experienced governors are able to exercise a mentoring role for the less experienced ones.

6. A Vision for Rosebery

Rosebery Primary School was founded in 1897 and since then has been an integral part of the community in this part of Loughborough.

The school’s vision is to

- Provide the highest standards of education for all its pupils.
- Develop each child to his or her full potential at a pace appropriate to them.
- Provide a comfortable and safe environment for learning in which children thrive collectively, understanding the value and benefits of team work and communal endeavour
- Provide an early learning experience which encourages and promotes stability, tolerance and respect for others, maximizing each child’s ability to enjoy an independent future.

Its aims are to

- Encourage and promote a safe, healthy and life-long joy of learning
- Encourage, promote and nurture personal growth, perseverance, motivation and independence
- Maintain the school as a positive focal point within the neighbourhood and wider community

⁵ The following section is primarily based on ‘Governing Bodies and Effective Schools, <http://www.governornet.co.uk/>; Ofsted, Making it better. Improving school governance, 2001. We are grateful to Tony Mulhearn for directing us to this literature.

Its specific objectives are to

- Create an environment in which pupils are able and willing to learn in an orderly and purposeful atmosphere, without fear of disruptive behaviour.
- Maintain a policy of inclusion and extend learning opportunities equally to all.
- Build on and extend the good performance of children at KS1 throughout the school.
- Provide excellence in learning for children with special needs
- Provide a thorough assessment of each individual child's needs, working with the children and their parents or carers
- Foster values of care and mutual respect by developing knowledge and understanding of different faiths, beliefs and religious practices; through participation in school and inter-school sports and through engagement in town and local community events.
- Develop pupils' awareness and appreciation of cultural difference through the acknowledgement of pupils' language capabilities and by providing opportunities for the early learning foreign languages.
- Develop the creative potential of its children by stimulating interest and fun in art and music and to promoting and encouraging practical life-skills such as healthy eating and exercise.

7. Finances and budget

We do not feel competent to go into the detail of Rosebery's future finances or offer a detailed breakdown on how its future budget could or should be targeted. Nevertheless we offer the following points for consideration by the Cabinet. We are aware that Rosebery school is currently running a deficit, and we understand that a decline of the roll will increase this. We do not want to minimise this problem in any way.

At the same time we believe that the school's deficit is not larger than many other Leicestershire schools. If the school were to remain open with federation under active consideration we would anticipate an increase in roll, including the return of children who have left the school in the mistaken belief that its closure was inevitable. In the longer term we expect that building developments in the area (including on-campus accommodation by the university) will help reintroduce more families into the area and thus help increase rolls.

Federation itself brings economies of scale as well as savings on planning and administrative time. We understand there is also additional funding available for federation projects, from the DfES.

Clearly there some pressure on staff numbers will remain. We are not in a position to propose how this should be eased, but it seems likely that, as in the past there will be some "natural wastage." Individual arrangements are a matter for negotiation with individuals and, where appropriate, trade unions.

8. Conclusion

We believe that federation with another local primary school can provide a viable, sustainable alternative to the closure of Rosebery Primary School. We believe it will raise standards of teaching and learning, and will sustain that improvement into the foreseeable future. We also believe it would be far less disruptive for our children's lives, for parents and carers, and for after school arrangements, and for the community as a whole. Last but not least we believe that it would maintain the school's distinctive ethos. We therefore request that the Cabinet give it serious consideration and allow the school's governors to continue the informal exploratory talks which have taken place over the past ten days.

Robert Knight, Tim Bird, Graeme Murray, Sharon Severn.
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