

**Academy Staff Consultation meeting
3.45 p.m., Tuesday, 24 January, 2012**

Present: David Linsell, Headteacher, representatives of staff, governors, representative from Strictly Educational, trade union representatives, local authority representatives.

Mr. Linsell welcomed everybody to the meeting and shared the following PowerPoint consultation document with the audience.

The presentation consisted of:

Purpose_of the meeting:

- Mr. Linsell emphasised that a decision has not been made yet but will be decided by governors on 6 March 2012. This meeting was to give staff the opportunity to raise any questions/concerns, positive and negative points, and share views on the proposal.
- To outline what an Academy could mean for our students.

Mr. Linsell clarified the difference between the Academy statuses:

- Sponsored Academy – forced to convert by central government as a way of improving a failing school;
- Converter Academy - good schools trusted by Government make their choice to convert;
- Although Academies are independent from local authority control it was a misnomer that they are Independent (Private) schools, they remain state funded schools, can still buy in services from the local authority and would still be subject to Ofsted inspections.
- The relationship between Trust and Academy was explained and it was emphasised that we would wish to take Trust forward into the Academy: the Trust would need to be dissolved and then reformed within the Academy.

Key advantages:

When the Governors investigated Academy status they identified 4 main advantages:

- Freedoms. These include the freedoms we gained as a Trust School: admissions, directly employing staff, conditions of service for non-teaching staff and ownership of the site. As an Academy we would gain additional freedoms including: the curriculum, teaching staff conditions of service and term-time dates. In their discussion governors took the same view as they did when we became a Trust School, that they have no plans to exercise these freedoms but felt they wanted them vested. For example governors have no plans to change teachers' conditions of service in the same way as they have not changed them for non-teaching staff when we became a Trust. Whilst we are broadly happy with the current National Curriculum we could decide whether any future changes are in the best interest of our students. Developing partnerships - Ratton is already working in partnerships with other schools and organisations for the benefit of our students and we have to have these partnerships as an Academy but we want to preserve the partnerships we have with our Trust Partners, other local secondary schools in the Eastbourne Federation, with Primary Schools and the Community as a Performing Arts Specialist school, and with other schools as a Local Leader of Education. As an Academy we would be free to use our resources to preserve and develop these partnerships as well as set up new ones with the clear expectation that we support other schools.
- Financial flexibility – As an Academy the school gets about 10% extra on its budget, this equates to about £400,000. A significant proportion of that money is taken up by additional expenses, i.e. insurance, licence agreements and services we have to provide but we will have the flexibility to decide what we spend the remainder on and where we buy in the other services we require.

- As we all know there has been a reduction in capital funding for schools but the Government has said that when the money becomes available there will be a pot for Academies.

Disadvantages:

When the Governors investigated Academy status they considered 5 main disadvantages:

- Loss of LA control would mean a loss of local democratic control. You could argue how effective that link is and we feel we have better local control by virtue of our Trust and governors.
- Many staff oppose Academy status, as a matter of principle because they see it as a move towards the privatisation of education. Also there is a fear of the unknown, particularly around conditions of service as what we have now currently works for us.
- There is a concern that the introduction of Academies will create a two-tier system with all the best schools becoming Academies and leaving the others behind. Governors believe that it is likely that all schools will become Academies anyway and if there is to be a two-tier system – then where should Ratton be.....
- There is a danger that the energy and time required to consult and convert could distract us and take our eye off the ball. This did not happen when we became a Trust school. We have employed Strictly Educational to do a lot of the work for us.
- The loss of local authority support – they acted as a kind of insurance if there was a disaster. One of the additional costs for Academies is extra insurance. If there is a major disaster then the DfE/LA steps in.

Summary

Following the governors meeting, they considered the 3 key reasons why they believe Ratton should become an Academy.

By converting to an Academy we will retain control of our destiny – convert before we are converted. Governors believe that becoming an Academy is inevitable; it is not really a matter of whether but when and we want to determine our own shape. We might have less flexibility if we don't do it now. We also need to respond to changes to the local landscape such as the rise of Free Schools. Financial advantage – more control over our budget. Yes we believe we will get more money but flexibility is the real advantage. Many schools that convert say that there is a significant financial advantage. However, even if this is not the case we will have greater control of more of our budget - which means we can decide what services we buy and from where. We can work in partnership with other schools to share or jointly commission services.

The freedoms and flexibilities associated with academy status encourage innovation and enable preservation. It is like the difference between renting and owning your own home. You think differently about your home because you own it. In the same way gaining freedoms and flexibilities allows you to think differently. For example, taking over direct control of the school canteen has been a great success – we could have made many of the changes before – but did not think to do them.

QUESTIONS FROM STAKEHOLDERS AT THE MEETING

Q. Further to the budget discussion and the fact that we would have to increase our insurance and possibly software licences, what other additional costs would there be? You have given gross figures but I would like net figures.

A. Conversion of similar sized schools Headteachers have advised me that they have gained approximately 60% over our present budget. More detailed information about the cost/benefit analysis to follow.

Q. What are the freedoms the governing body would like to do in the next 3 months that you did not have the freedom to do now?

A. None, we are just looking to the future freedoms that we want to have if needed.

Concern – how people outside of education view Academies. Will you have a marketing plan in place and how are we going to tell people?

A. The number and range of schools converting means that this distinction is blurring. No plans to spend significant amounts of money on marketing. It is important that we make the distinction clear to our students, working through the School Parliament and Assemblies to achieve this.

Concern – that this is a permanent change and that at present teachers have trust in the Headteacher but should the Headteacher move, the procedure cannot be reversed

A. This is true it cannot be reversed. Although Headteachers do change, the governors are a more permanent fixture. We cannot legislate for an unknown future.

Q. What will governance of the school look like after the change to an Academy i.e. what sort of balance?

A. This has not been discussed. If we proceed it will form part of the next consultation phase. Governors are clear that they would like the Trust to be more active than it is in many Academies.

Q. What would happen if new staff were appointed once it has become an Academy? Would there appointment be different?

A. No plans to change conditions of service for new or present staff.

Concern - Teachers feel confident with the national curriculum and the group of people that decide on it but they would be concerned if a new group of unknown people were deciding on an Academy curriculum, any changes to it and they may not hold the national curriculum in high regard.

Comment – would like to have the safety-net of the local authority and wouldn't want there to be a two-tier system. What opportunities would there be to work with weaker schools once we have become an Academy.

A. Already working with another school and we know there are mutual benefits but we sometimes don't know whether those benefits are good for us or good for them. We would encourage this in the future.

Trade Union Representative - Union has a long standing anti-academy position. Criticisms of the consultation document around the loss of local democratic control. Absence of concrete information. Too vague. Better the devil you know.

Q. Did the school intend to hold a ballot amongst staff?

A. Governors have thought about this but felt that they would like a consultation which encompasses the depth and richness people's views rather than a simple yes or no. In addition the decision is the Governors and the Trusts responsibility as they are accountable for the strategic direction of the school.

Trade Union Representative - Financially they would want to get more in-depth costs transferring to an Academy. There is evidence of considerable costs in converting, there is no windfall.

Q. Have you considered any of calculations on the long term maintenance of the building?

A. Yes. One of our Trust partners is an architect and we have a ten year condition plan.

Comment – the decision to become an Academy is based completely on money. Yes you can decide on this now but in two years' time the budget might be restricted then you will have to go to the Minister of State and ask for more. By the time there are a number of Academies he won't be able to give more money.

A. There may be less money in the future but the position would be no different if we were an LA school or an Academy

Q. Timescale?

A. 6 March decision. Reasonable timescale if we get a vote on 6 March; it would be September 2012.

Q. Would we all receive new contracts by then?

A. No. This happened when we became a Trust School

Q. Would statutory subjects change in the curriculum?

A. No

Q. Pensions for support staff?

A. The Academy would take over responsibility for support staff pensions. There would need to be due diligence on the liability the Academy would incur.

Q. Would continuous service benefits remain.

A. Yes, continuous service will be taken forward.

Q. Is Ratton going to recognise the unions with an "agreement"?

A. If Ratton was to become an Academy there would need to be an "agreement" wording of this would be a part of the next phase of consultation

Gareth Strictly Educational - I have been involved in over 140 conversions. I am not here to sell them. Governors and the Trust will base their decision on the facts as they are now. Our object is to ensure that the process is transparent. We work with the governing bodies to make an informed choice on where we are now.

Q. Your personal view? (to Headteacher).

A. As in the presentation. 5 years ago would have said not sure, 3 years ago more likely. Today my feelings are in the presentation, based on the local landscape and the need to protect the future of the school.

Trade Union Representative view - this is privatisation, a transfer of public money into private hands, depends on what side you are on - should we be maintaining public services despite all their faults. Go to the anti-academy website for background information. There can be separate meetings organised and the Trade Unions will be more than happy to help with organising these if required.

Meeting finished at 4.45 p.m.