

CLAREMONT HIGH SCHOOL
Minutes of the Extra Meeting to discuss Communication Strategy
held on 8th December '10 at 5pm

Attended by governors; Mr Z Arif (Chair), Mr T Molloy (Head Teacher), Mr S Arnell, Mr B Cuggy, Ms L Coles, Mr J Jhally and Dr D Wright.

Also present; Ms G Aspinall (SLT), Ms A Green (Teacher), Ms C Geddes (Support staff), Mr F Hughes (Teacher), Mr M McEvoy (Support staff), Ms S Quinn (Teacher) and Ms N Parker (Clerk).

The meeting had been called to allow open discussion and the sharing of ideas between members of the governing body and union representative members of the school staff regarding the possibility of Claremont High becoming an academy.

Mr Arif opened the meeting by effecting introductions and explaining the decision making process and actions taken to date.

- The governing body had met in October and received all available information regarding academy status but found that there could be no specific information with regard to how Claremont would be affected unless an expression of interest was made to the DfE.
- The governing body had unanimously agreed to submit an expression of interest so as to gain the necessary information in order to assess the benefits or otherwise of becoming an academy and thereby make a properly informed decision. They had also agreed that stakeholders would be informed.
- Following that meeting it was found that the full information needed would only be made available if the school put in a formal application which is not a full commitment and could be withdrawn at any time.
- An application and expression of interest have since been submitted and the DfE has assigned an adviser to the school.

Mr Arif assured those present that the governing body takes its responsibilities very seriously and always keeps the good of the school and its community at the centre of their decision making. They consider that all opportunities have to be considered to ensure that the school is not disadvantaged but would only make changes if they would benefit the school.

The governors had agreed that they would like to have openness and transparency, ensuring that all stakeholders have the chance to share their ideas and opinions.

The governors and management were aware that there has been a lot of concern and angst among the staff as they wonder what is happening and how it would affect them. This meeting had been called in order to share these concerns and to look at ways in which the staff can have contribute to the process and to set up an effective communication system between management, governors and staff.

Mr Arif invited everyone around the table to express their concerns or to explain their views.

- Mr Hughes said that they had heard lots of argument against academy status, such as changes to working terms and conditions and loss of central services but nothing about good aspects. He felt that colleagues would appreciate an understanding of what the governors thought the benefits would be.

- Mr Cuggy said that although staff terms and conditions could be changed under academy status, the governors could, and probably would, decide to follow the School Teachers Pay and Conditions Document. He added that the focus of the decisions must be entirely on whether the school and pupils would benefit and referred to the decision 20 years ago to accept Grant Maintained status. There had been similar concerns and issues at that time.
- Mr Arif added that one of the key benefits would be the flexibility that would allow the school to develop and adapt to meet the needs of the local community. This would include flexibility around the curriculum, the ability to commission subjects from other providers, not limited to the Local Authority and wider options for the 6th form provision. Mr Arnell gave examples about how improvement to the 6th Form is restricted under the current system but would benefit from additional funding and flexibility afforded by academy status. The Local Authority is also restricted in what it is able to offer by way of support so support has to come from another source which would be expensive.
- There was a discussion about Claremont's relationship with the Local Authority which, when Mr Molloy had joined the school had been very poor but has developed over the years to being a mutually supportive. However, the role of the LA and its powers are diminishing so that the main link would be SEN in future. The school will have to look for other sources of support whatever choice is made.
- Ms Aspinall said that she had seen a question from a member of staff who was worried that their working hours could be changed if the school were an academy. This would be worrying for anyone who has school aged children. Staff members would need to be able to bring these concerns forward and have them addressed.
- It was pointed out that there was no intention to change people's working hours but the need to have meaningful consultation was acknowledged. How would this happen – via union reps, focus groups etc?
- Ms Quinn asked about the reference made to Grant Maintained status – how had things changed for the staff at that time and what is different now?
- Mr Cuggy had been on the governing body at that time and was able to explain how Claremont had been the first school to adopt Grant Maintained status which later became Foundation Status. He outlined the legal position of the responsibility for staffing under the different regimes and pointed out that as a Foundation school, the governing body is already the employer with a certain amount of discretion. The main difference with academy status would be the additional discretion not to follow the STPCD but the governors do not see any reason to do that.
- Mr Molloy added that as an academy the school could agree to keep to the letter of the STPCD rather than the recent cuts and exceptions that appear to be the current trend.
- Dr Wright referred to a recent review of Local Authorities and pointed out that although Brent had been effective under the previous Director, a lot is changing. Since the change of Government there have been many changes including the Fair Funding review which may not work out well for Claremont – academy status may bring a more advantageous settlement. There are also possible changes to the STPCD, including the end of the spinal system so staff may regret being tied to this. However, under TUPE arrangements the terms and conditions cannot be altered and pensions are protected. He also pointed out that changes to teachers' terms and conditions since 2003 have led to an increase in the number of Teaching Assistants to carry out certain tasks and provide cover which has eroded the teacher proportions in schools.
- Ms Quinn asked whether parents are also expressing concern. Ms Coles said that her experience was that parents were not really sure what to be concerned about – whether the school is left behind or whether it goes first and finds the pitfalls. They did not have

much information to go on but it seems that as more cuts and changes are announced, the worry about becoming an academy has reduced.

- It was noted that there is a need to provide proper balanced information rather than leave people to glean information from rumour or political cant.
- Ms Aspinall pointed out that when academies were originally put forward by the current Government they had been identified with failure but it is becoming clear that it is actually more like another form of Grant Maintained status.

Mr Arif thanked everyone for their input and asked them to consider what would be the best mechanism for opening the channels of communication to all stakeholders.

- Ms Geddes suggested that a full staff meeting would be the best start and Ms Green added that it would be helpful for people to have some written information beforehand so that they can come with their questions ready. She asked if it would be possible to issue a statement that the terms and conditions would not be changed if the school becomes an academy.
- Mr Arif said that it may be possible to say that there are no immediate plans to change anything but it would not be right to give a guarantee. Mr Molloy added that it would not be wise to set things in stone at this point. So much is changing that it may be necessary to keep options open but he suggested that it may be possible to say that there would not be change unless it is to improve or keep in line with others.
- It was agreed that it would be helpful to know what the staff concerns really are with the benefit of having had proper information. The staff members present said that there should be time for questions and that the information should include clarity about what the benefits would be for Claremont.
- Reflecting back on the change to Grant Maintained it was pointed out that there had been a difficult atmosphere between those in favour and those against. It took some time to overcome that and it would be unfortunate if it were to happen again. People need to accept that change is inevitable but to be professional and work together to make it work for the good of the children.
- It was agreed that working together to make sure that the staff and parents get proper answers to their questions would be the best way to make sure the school stays in control of the process. 'Chinese Whispers', rumour and political pressure could force the wrong decision. The best way forward is to have an ongoing dialogue starting with a big meeting for everyone possibly followed by smaller meetings focussing on specific themes.

Having agreed on how to engage with the staff Mr Molloy asked for guidance on how best to engage with the Union Secretaries. It would be good to get past the rhetoric and develop a more meaningful dialogue which would probably be more supportive to the Union reps on staff. He was told that a meeting had been called for Tuesday 14th for the unions to address the staff but that it was not clear what the agenda would be. It was agreed that a meeting between the Union secretaries and the governors would be helpful.

AGREED ACTIONS

- Mr Molloy will put some information onto the school web-site by Friday 10th for staff, pupils and parents to access. This would include a draft timeline.
- All staff would be invited to a meeting on Monday 14th in the afternoon where they could ask questions about the information given and raise their own concerns.
- The Union meeting would be held on the afternoon of Tuesday 15th.

Mr Molloy then shared a brief power point slide show which would form the basis of the information to be put on the web-site, asking those present if they felt it would give enough clarity about the rationale for change, the benefits to the school and assurances about staff working conditions. Alongside this, he would include the anti-academy information and some links to other relevant national and local web-sites including a list of the schools currently going through the process.

A number of additional items were suggested including that it should be made clear that the reason for making a formal application had to be made to get the necessary information and that it is not irreversible. The make-up of the governing body in an academy could also be mentioned – would it include teacher and parent governors as now?

There was some further discussion on general issues between those present but the substance of the meeting was finished at 6.20pm.