

**Academy Parent Consultation meeting
6 p.m., Tuesday, 17 January, 2012**

Present: Peter Lindsey, Chair of Governors, David Linsell, Headteacher, Ann Wardle and Liz Fitzpatrick, Deputy Headteachers, 22 parents and 10 Governors.

Mr. Lindsey welcomed the parents to the meeting and introduced himself and Mr. Linsell.

The presentation consisted of:

Purpose of the meeting:

- To hear why the Governing Body (GB) has taken the decision to look at the process of becoming an Academy, the process for which has started and will end with a final decision on 6 March 2011;
- To give parents the opportunity to raise any questions/concerns, positive and negative points, and share views on the proposal and to respond during the start of the consultation process;
- To outline what an Academy School will 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 they are not Independent (Private) schools, they remain state funded schools

It was explained that when Trust status process started 3 years ago the Academy route wasn't available at that time. If Ratton was to become an Academy, then 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 that having control of them would benefit the school. For example Governors have no plans to change teachers' conditions of service in the same way as they have not for non-teaching staff when we became a Trust. Another example, we would be able to access any future changes to the National Curriculum and decide whether they are in the best interests of Ratton's students.
- Ratton is already working in partnerships with other schools and organisations for the benefit of our students. For example, 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.
- As an Academy we receive about £400,000 additional funding. This is the money that the local authority (LA) retains to support education. Based on the experience of other schools that have converted, up to about 40% of this will need to be spent on providing like-for-like services or the additional cost of being an Academy. Whilst it would be wrong to see the other 60% as free additional money we will have the flexibility to decide what we spend it on and who we spend it with.

A major consequence of the public expenditure cuts has been the loss of money for building projects. Not only was the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme slashed but the amount we received for building works was cut by over 80%. Whilst there is little money available currently for building projects, the Government has indicated that in the future it intends to make a fund available to 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. However, Governors feel that there is still local accountability through the Academy Trust and OfSTED as well national accountability to the DfE. In practice the LA has very limited powers to intervene with schools and responsibility already lies with Governors.
- Teachers Unions are opposed to Academies. Apart from opposing Academies as a matter of principle they represent a threat to their power to collectively bargain on behalf of teachers. Not surprisingly teachers' support their Unions. Also they have seen what happened with the old style Academies where jobs were lost and roles were changed: they fear for their conditions of service as well as opposing the principle. Governors have no plans to change conditions of service for teachers, or other staff.
- There is a concern that the introduction of Academies will create a 2-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 the school from its core purpose. 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 LA 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.

The Chair of Governors outlined the 3 key reasons why they believe Ratton should become an Academy.

By converting to an academy we will retain control of our destiny – by converting at this time we can control the type of Academy we become. Governors believe that becoming an Academy is inevitable; it is not really a matter of whether but when. Also with so many schools intending to convert the LA is in danger of no longer being a viable support service for education.

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. Governors are clear that they do not want to exercise many of the freedoms – but are clear that retaining them enables us to preserve what we believe to be important - such as a comprehensive admissions policy or a curriculum that meets the needs of our students.

Q. Should some tragedy befall the school, would the local authority still step in?

A. Mr. Linsell confirmed that the school would have to substantially increase its insurance but in the case of a major disaster such as the school burning down the LA/Central Government would still have an obligation to ensure pupils would be taught.

Q. At present should a group of children need support, i.e. SEN, or excluded children, the local authority have a statutory duty to support them, what would happen once an Academy?

A. The distinction would be whether they are on school roll: if so they would still get the support; if not, Mr. Linsell was not sure what the process would be.

Comment – A parent felt that some of the comments were nebulous. If there could be a saving on the payroll, book purchasing or capital investment, why did the school not make the savings now? He felt that it was just a political agenda by the government to run education by fear.

Q. A parent asked to whom the Headteacher be accountable if there was a problem with the Academy?

A. It was confirmed that central government would intervene following an unsatisfactory OfSTED, and sack the Headteacher and governors if needed.

Concern – There was concern that the Headteacher and senior staff of an Academy could be paid extortionate salaries compared with state schools.

A. Mr. Lindsey confirmed that Mr. Linsell was not overpaid but should he leave the school and have to be replaced the GB if necessary may need to pay more to recruit an excellent new Headteacher.

Clarification on accountability was requested – There is currently a balance of power between the governors and the Ratton Trust. Accountability would be to the Trust and to the GB. It was confirmed that there were six parent governor positions at present but that it was always difficult to recruit them. It is yet to be decided how many parent governors there would be if we were to convert.

Q. Would school times and uniform be changed (include a blazer)?

A. No plans to change times of day or terms. The governors were looking at uniform but this is unconnected with moving to an Academy.

Q. Could there be a joint meeting with teachers and parents?

A. No plans for this. The minutes of the Staff meeting will be published.

Q. What would have to happen in consultation for the school not to become an Academy?

A. The GB has not yet made the decision. The GB will listen to all comments received and take them into account in their decision.

Concern about the speed of the consultation process (the parent meeting following so quickly after the announcement). Parents were advised that the consultation period will continue until the end of February and that they or any other parent was welcome to make a written response.

Q. Concern about Trust partners failing in business and affecting the school

A. Mr. Lindsey assured the group that the five Trusts on board were excellent and were already bringing diversity to the school i.e. careers advice, use of St. Bede's courses and facilities, expertise in technology, and should it be necessary Trust partners could be increased. The Trust partner from St. Bede's supported the move, felt both schools ethos was the same and had enhanced teacher relationships.

Q. Should the budget be overspent, what would happen?

A. It would have to be repaid. Central government would know and intervene through the audit process.

Mr. Lindsey thanked all present for giving up their time to come along to the meeting.

The Meeting closed at 7:15