

Mid Wales Regional Committee Mid 01-03 (p 3)

Date: Friday 24 January 2003
Time: 10.30am to 1.15pm
Venue: The Arts Hall, University of Wales Lampeter

CEREDIGION – SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

1. BACKGROUND

75% of Ceredigion schools have fewer than 90 pupils and over half have fewer than 50 pupils. The County has a higher proportion of small schools than any other county in Wales.

2. 1998 CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

In 1998 the Authority produced a major consultation document entitled *The Future of Primary Education in Ceredigion*. The first chapter of the document dealt with 'Issues for Consideration' including the curriculum, teaching, provision for special needs and early years, the management role of headteachers, finance and community issues. The second chapter dealt with 'Possible Alternative Patterns of Provision' – amalgamations and closure, voluntary collaboration, federated schools and area schools.

The major consultation exercise led to a meaningful debate amongst the education partners throughout the County. Whilst there was a willingness to accept a degree of change, no clear view emerged regarding the way forward. Generally it was felt that approaches should be tailored to meet the needs of particular locations.

During the ensuing years:

- One small school was closed by mutual agreement with parents;
- Small schools were clustered when headships became vacant;
- Innovative curricular use of ICT was introduced to some clusters of schools;
- Plans were considered for an area school in mid Ceredigion.

3. EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLAN 2002 – 2005

During 2001 the requirement to prepare a new ESP served as a catalyst to undertake a major review of education provision.

During the Autumn Term 2001 representatives of all the main partners within the education service in Ceredigion were brought together to create the new Education Strategic Plan 2002–2005. The process started with a detailed review of the current state of education in Ceredigion and ultimately led to the definition of our vision for the service up to 2005 and beyond. That vision is articulated in the Plan as follows:

"Elements of the vision

Ceredigion has a long tradition of high educational achievement. We have a high 'base level' and have made substantial improvements over the last few years. However, in the spirit of 'school improvement' we wish fundamentally to 'improve on our previous best'. If we are to substantially improve on our already high standards we must:

- *ensure that all our teachers better understand how learners learn and their preferred learning styles;*
- *create a system which 'allows teachers to teach and leaders to lead';*
- *provide 'seamless' educational provision for pupils from 3-18 and beyond;*
- *give a greater voice to the learner in his own education;*
- *ensure that every young person benefits from his 'entitlement' of services and facilities beyond the school day;*
- *involve parents more in the learning process;*
- *open-up our facilities and resources for community use;*
- *provide buildings and resources which are suitable and equipped for twenty-first century education.*

Structural issues

A number of structural issues arise from this vision. The Education Authority will consult fully with Governing Bodies and other interested parties with a view to:

- *Grouping primary schools under one management team and governing body.*

- *Appointing new headteachers to areas rather than individual school buildings.*
- *Providing Area Schools where appropriate and practicable.*
- *Grouping primary and secondary schools together to plan and deliver education as a seamless progression i.e. creating 'families of schools'.*
- *Promoting lifelong learning by opening up our facilities for community use.*

Taken together these developments should logically, over a period of time, lead the schools/families of schools to become community learning centres. These would be managed in an integrated fashion, providing a well planned education for pupils and offering appropriate learning opportunities for adults.

*The proposed pattern of provision does **not** of necessity demand the closure of many school buildings but advocates changes in management structures and patterns of provision which would be of benefit to pupils and adults alike. Some current Education Department functions could also, possibly, be decentralised to fit in with this pattern.*

These developments should integrate with the Council's wider strategies for its communities. They also fully conform with National Assembly for Wales strategies as outlined in documents such as 'The Learning Country' and 'Extending Entitlement'."

The future of small, rural schools in Ceredigion must be viewed within the context of this overarching philosophy. The aim is to improve learning at all levels. That can be achieved by:

- ensuring that all our INSET and professional development revolves around better understanding how learners learn and their preferred learning styles.
- planning education within an area as a seamless whole from 3-18.
- reducing stress levels by separating teaching and management roles at primary schools.
- giving greater voice to the learner in his own education.
- getting more adults involved in learning.

This major agenda is currently being pursued in depth in two catchment areas. In those localities the education partners are in the process of developing Area

Development Plans.

Traditionally the public has tended to be very sceptical of LEA 'reorganisations' of primary schools. Such moves have been viewed very negatively as cost cutting exercises, as a means of reducing the number of spare places or simply as a mechanism for closing schools. Our new approach emphasises the positive:

- improving learning
- retaining an educational presence in most villages
- a 'bottom up' approach from the communities.

4. **FINANCIAL ISSUES – ASSEMBLY'S SPECIAL GRANT (No 6) (WALES)**

The purpose of this grant match perfectly Ceredigion's vision for 2005 and beyond. Grant money has been utilized together with the LEA's own resources and WAG Key Stage 3 monies to promote the agenda described under 3 above. More specifically the Grant has been utilized:

- to second a secondary and a primary headteacher in the Tregaron area on a part time basis to promote collaboration between primary schools and between the primary phase and the secondary school.
- to appoint a part time project manager or 'progress chaser' to facilitate and coordinate the complex ESP agenda.
- to appoint an Outreach Worker in the Cardigan Area to complement the WAG monies received for the Eliminating Rural Disaffection project.
- to promote Y Ddolen Ddysgu (The Learning Link) – the utilization of video-conferencing facilities for curricular purposes to link a cluster of small schools in the Llandysul area.
- to provide additional administrative assistance for headteachers who manage more than one school.

4. **CHALLENGES**

- Too many governing bodies as a consequence of the implementation of Section 36 School Standards and Framework Act 1998

- Will the creating of fewer educational units lead to a reduction in our SSA?

ROGER J. WILLIAMS

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