

Organising for Excellence – Bedfordshire County Council Review of School Structures

February 2006 Consultation Project Update

This document provides stakeholders with an update on the consultation project that Four S is managing. The document gives a brief overview of the initial consultation with educational organisations (school headteachers and governors, trade unions, professional associations, and other organisations such as the two Diocesan Boards). It also explains the next stages of the process in March 2006.

The findings presented in this document are indicative. The purpose of the consultation undertaken so far was to identify key strengths, issues, challenges, and opportunities within the current three-tier system. The next stage of consultation, and the public consultation taking place at the same time, looks towards the future and how the current or alternative structures could overcome issues that have been identified.

Thank you to everyone who has been involved so far, and also to those who will be involved during the rest of the consultation.

What has been achieved so far?

Four S is using a variety of consultation methods to engage with different sections of the Bedfordshire community at different times. The consultation has two themes:

- **Reflection** – considering the current system and its strengths and areas for improvement – what barriers are there to raising pupil attainment, and how important is the structure of schools within these barriers?
- **The Way Forward** – what structure of schooling is most likely to overcome the barriers that have been identified? Do the possible structures, including the current three-tier structure, have their own inherent strengths or weaknesses? Is there consensus about the best structure for the next generation of pupils?

During January and February the consultation project has:

- ✔ Launched the Consultation Discussion Paper and Consultation Leaflet (70,000 copies)
- ✔ Launched the online questionnaire
- ✔ Run 5 workshops with a randomly selected group of headteachers (who represented all types of school and all areas of the County) and 2 with randomly selected Governors
- ✔ Started individual phone consultations with randomly selected headteachers
- ✔ Met trade unions, professional associations, and other educational organisations
- ✔ Run a workshop with the 5 Further Education or Sixth Form colleges

In response to requests from stakeholders during the initial consultation, Four S has published more pupil attainment data on the Four S website. This compares the performance of Bedfordshire schools with those in councils that Government believe are similar – these ‘statistical neighbour’ comparisons inform judgements about how well the Bedfordshire school system is performing overall.

What are the key findings so far?

The initial consultation with educational organisations was focused upon *reflection* and understanding:

- what people perceive to be the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the current system;
- what people believe are the barriers to raising pupil attainment within Bedfordshire schools, and how significant is the structure of schools within these barriers

The following diagram illustrates the more typical strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that were identified by respondents.

Initial Findings: Respondent’s SWOT of Bedfordshire

(comments in brackets indicate frequency of response, or the group that made the response)

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedication of school staff (general) • Pastoral care of Middle Schools (Middle Schools) • Early exposure of pupils to specialist teachers and facilities (Middle Schools) • Familiarity of system to parents and teachers (occasional comment) • Parental expectations for pupils are high (occasional comment) • KS1 results are above national averages (Lower Schools and other agencies) • Governance is effective (general comment) • Pupils have a more gradual transition to large schools than in change-at-11 systems (Middle Schools, occasional others) • There are still small Lower Schools serving local communities (some Lower Schools) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attainment is too low, especially GCSE (Upper Schools, Lower Schools) • Too little trust between schools – tendency to blame earlier schools (schools and most other organisations) • Lack of effective use of pupil and school attainment data to challenge schools and inform targets (general) • Out of line with National Curriculum Key Stages (Lower, Upper Schools) • Lack of ‘primary school ethos’ in years 5 and 6 (Lower Schools) • Poor control of pupils behaviour as reach teenage years (Upper Schools) • Disagreement among schools about accuracy of pupil achievement information at points of transfer between schools (general) • Poor Local Authority leadership of the education service (general), exacerbated by the current internal reorganisations (general)
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and build upon strengths of current system (Middle Schools) • Accelerate KS3 to improve accountability and lead in time for GCSE (Middle, some Upper Schools) • Building Schools for the Future funding to improve buildings and facilities (Upper, some Middle) • Reorganise to change-at-11 system and create full primary phase (some Lower Schools) • Reorganise to change-at-11 and give stable five year lead in to GCSE (some Upper Schools) • Link the current system to the future 14-19 curriculum (Middle Schools) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small rural Lower Schools worried about implications if reorganise to change-at-11 system • Some Upper Schools worried about potential impacts upon Sixth Forms if reorganise • Can Bedfordshire remain different to the majority of Councils? (Lower, Upper Schools) • Recruitment and Retention of high quality staff irrespective of system (general) • Recruitment and Retention of specialist teachers for Middle Schools if Bedfordshire does not change system (Lower and Upper Schools) • If there is change of system, need to manage process so that children currently within the system are not negatively affected (general)

What have people said are the barriers to raising pupil attainment?

- **Teacher Recruitment/Retention** – this reflects national trends, and the importance of high quality teachers. It also reflects some schools concerns about the ability to recruit subject-specialists for Middle Schools in the future if Bedfordshire is one of very few authorities that still have Middle Schools.
- **Pupil Attainment Data** – there was disagreement between schools about the validity of some test results (including the significance of Y4 tests at the point of transfer between Lower and Middle Schools). There was also an apparent lack of effective use of pupil data to inform target setting within schools, and inconsistency in the effectiveness of data transfer between schools.
- **Pupil Transfers** – the three-tier structure determines how often pupils must change school, and when they must change school.
 - Some schools felt that changing twice (rather than once at age 11) impacts upon pupil attainment.
 - Some schools felt that the time of transfers – at ages that do not align with the National Curriculum Key Stages – makes it more difficult to ensure effective continuity of learning as pupils start at their new school.
 - All schools agreed that the structure of schools did not impact upon the effectiveness of the transfer arrangements, and that there was the opportunity to learn and create best practice in this area, which is nationally recognised to be a weakness.
- **Ownership of KS2/KS3 and ‘blame culture’** – responses from schools identified a lack of collective ownership for pupil performance at KS2 and KS3. This could be linked to the structure of schools, whereby pupils are taught in Lower/Middle Schools for KS2 and Middle/Upper Schools for KS3. There was evidence of schools ‘blaming’ other schools who had previously educated the children.
- **Teacher Quality** – schools agreed that effective teachers must be retained, and poor teachers supported to improve performance; several believed that the latter was not always effectively managed.
- **LA leadership, school support** – there was a feeling that the Local Authority needed to demonstrate clearer leadership of the Education service, and provide more targeted and effective challenge to schools. This was discussed within the context of the current reorganisation within Bedfordshire County Council.

Do respondents feel that the structure of schools is important in these barriers?

- **The structure determines the number, and timing, of pupil transfers...**but it does not determine the effectiveness of pupil transition (including the educational and social impact upon individual pupils)
- **The structure should have little impact on whether schools use and transfer pupil attainment data effectively.** However, the structure is directly responsible for the significance placed upon the Y4 tests in particular since these are used as part of the transfer process between Lower and Middle Schools.
- **The structure could have a significant impact on recruitment/retention** – and many schools agreed that the three-tier system could deter staff from other areas applying for jobs in Bedfordshire
- **The structure is not a significant factor in the perceived lack of LA leadership**
- Schools, parents, and the Council need to have confidence in the system for any place planning reorganisations which recognise the changing demographics
- **The structure does directly impact upon school perceptions of their responsibilities** for pupil attainment, due to the school structure not matching National Curriculum Key Stages and therefore reducing accountability of schools for Key Stage results – there is always someone else to blame

What ideas have people had for how the current three-tier system could be improved to overcome these barriers?

- **Learning Communities** – these were generally agreed to be a positive step forward, and offer potential for future development. Specific ideas about how they could be developed in practice were:
 - More effective sharing of best practice
 - Learning Communities could employ staff to support more effective co-ordination and pupil transition – for instance, a science teacher could work in a Middle School and an Upper School, or a class teacher could link between Year 4 in a Lower School and Year 5 in a Middle School
- **Accelerate KS3** to the end of Y8 (from the end of Y9) – this had the support of most Middle and some Upper Schools. Some positives and issues for consideration could be:
 - Improves accountability - Middle Schools fully accountable for KS3
 - Allows Upper Schools a dedicated three year programme for GCSE - possibility for fuller curriculum, other opportunities, vocational improvements etc
 - How and when would pupils select their GCSE options?
 - Accelerating KS3 does not resolve the issue about split accountability for KS2



- In national comparisons, would Bedfordshire be disadvantaged because it sat the KS3 tests earlier than everywhere else? 50 schools in England are piloting some KS3 tests in Y8, but few if any other councils are considering requiring their pupils to sit national assessments a year early.
- **Improve the effective use of pupil attainment data** by schools and the Local Authority – this could help improve transition between schools, support work to improve pupil attainment, and support Performance Management for schools and teachers.
- **14-19 and vocational opportunities** – some schools felt that the current system could fit the proposed 14-19 curriculum for the future effectively, although this view was not shared by all respondents.

What issues have people raised about the future?

- The future role of Learning Communities, whether within the current structure (if it is retained), or any future alternative structure.
- The capacity for improvement – if the decision is taken not to change structure, schools and the County Council must identify and implement other programmes to raise attainment; if the decision is taken to change structure the reorganisation will require leadership, capacity and capability within the Council and schools to ensure that it is managed effectively.
- Should there be the same school system across the whole of Bedfordshire, or could there be several systems in different parts of the County?
- How to ensure that there is collective school responsibility for the performance of pupils, and that the County Council offers schools effective support and challenge.

Responses to the consultation leaflet and discussion document have provided valuable information, and adopted different perspectives. It is too early in the process, however, to draw inferences from the public consultation information; this is especially true of the Consultation Leaflets which reached schools the week after half-term and therefore are currently being returned to Four S.

What happens next?

During March the following will take place:

<p>Stage 2: Way Forward</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Headteachers: 7 cross-phase workshops (one per Learning Community) – all headteachers invited ▪ Governors: 3 workshops – randomly selected schools invited ▪ Teachers: 2 workshops – randomly selected schools invited ▪ Support Staff: 2 workshops – randomly selected schools invited ▪ Town and Parish Councils: 3 workshops – all invited ▪ Pupils: 2 workshops – working with Student ‘Super Councils’ ▪ Other agencies, Unions/Prof Associations, FE Colleges etc: Attend workshop ▪ Community: 7 public meetings across the County (one per Learning Community) ▪ Community: Consultation Leaflet and online questionnaire continue
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The consultation runs until **Tuesday April 4, 2006**.

How can I get involved?

- Online Questionnaire – www.fours.co.uk/bedfordshire
- Consultation Leaflet – copies are available at schools, libraries, medical centres, and Bedfordshire County Council offices
- Respond to the full Consultation Discussion Paper – a Consultation Response Form is available on the Four S website if you wish to complete it electronically, or email/post/fax any comments to Four S
- Attend a public meeting – details are available on the Four S website

Ways of contacting Four S:

- Website: www.fours.co.uk/bedfordshire
- Email: bedfordshire@fours.co.uk
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