

The aim of this letter is to open up more communication around strategic questions which our governing body looks at.

National and local Context

The aim of this section is to describe the responsibilities we have as governors, and changes and anticipated changes to the climate in which we are working.

The two main concerns of all maintained schools' governing bodies are financial regularity and standards of education.

Context - financial

The medium term financial picture is that we will go into deficit as a stand-alone school if we do not find ways of saving resources by working with other schools. Over the past three years, we have managed to arrive at a balanced budget by having staff in the school work in other schools for part of the time, and over the last two terms, by having Mrs West act as Executive Head of other schools.

Over the past three years, our school's budget allocation has not been increased, but our costs (primarily staffing) have risen.

From what we can see locally and nationally, we feel that we need to plan for the event that we will in real terms have less money than we have had previously. This is due to conversations at local events with other Headteachers and governors. Nationally, The Institute of Fiscal Studies has produced a report that forecasts that, after a real terms growth of 3% in national spending between 2011 and 2015, there will be a real terms drop of 8% in funding between 2014 and 2020 (<https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8027>). In 2015, the National Association of Head Teachers surveyed school leaders and found that of 1069 responses:

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- Almost half of school leaders (45 per cent) thought their budget would be untenable on current projections within two years
- Two thirds (67 per cent) said they would not be able to balance the books in four years' time
- Seven per cent of those surveyed were already running a deficit”

The NAHT cited contributing examples such as employer costs for national insurance and teachers' pensions will increase by over 5 % from this school year.

Q. We are sometimes asked whether we think that the financial climate will change in the near future, and whether it would be better for us to continue to plan for a future as a stand-alone school in case this happens.

A. We feel that all local and national evidence points towards a further tightening of the financial position, and that there is no evidence to say that there will be an improvement.

Context – educational standards

The central reason for governors to exist is to promote a high standard of education for all pupils. Therefore the financial context is important to us mainly in terms of a constraint which we are constantly trying to maximise in order to provide the best education that we can for our pupils. We

also have a responsibility to spend tax payers' money in a way that will give us good educational value for money, based on the evidence that we have available.

Laughton's recent history

The aim of this section is to explain how our experiences and self evaluation as a school have led to us following the medium to long term strategies that we currently pursue, and to describe what these strategies are.

Historically (before 2010), our KS2 classes suffered from high teacher turnover and staff sickness. Teacher turmoil was mentioned in our April 2009 OFSTED report as an explanation for a dip in 2008 KS2 results. Although the OFSTED report mitigated this by saying that in-school data predicted that this would be reversed in the impending 2009 results, the actual 2009 results in fact showed quite a large drop on 2008 and fell again slightly in 2010.

Mrs West implemented three significant things on her arrival:

- a) Consistent behaviour policy promoting positive behaviours (which has culminated in our school vision)
- b) More consistent management (including support) of staff, with goal of upskilling and retention
- c) Annual school development plan broken down into steps, with clear success criteria and

It takes a great deal of consistency, over several years, to change the culture of a school, as older year groups, who are used to certain behaviours, move on and are replaced by pupils who have had a more consistent experience. We do feel that we have seen benefits of a) in teacher observations and in governor observations of pupils' ability to talk about their own responsibility for their behaviour and learning, as well as pupils' ability to listen to others.

Similarly, it has taken a while for us to eliminate gaps in learning that pupils have had from less organised curriculum schemes, by using c) and from staff absence or change by using b).

b) is aimed at improving pupils' education, but we also favour staff retention and stability, based on past negative experiences of staff instability and on the awareness that there are national concerns around teacher shortages, as illustrated for example by a survey this year of 4450 teachers by The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/mar/22/teachers-plan-leave-five-years-survey-workload-england>

The 2016 Guardian survey included the following findings:

"In England 43% of the state school teachers polled said they were planning to leave the profession in the next five years... 79% of schools say they are struggling to recruit or retain teachers and 88% predict things are going to get worse and that this will severely affect students."

Also "More than three-quarters are working between 49 and 65 hours a week. Nearly three-quarters – 73% – say their workload is having a serious impact on their physical health and 75% on their mental health."

Increased management or leadership responsibility for staff, whether within Laughton school or outside of it, leads to teachers having to spend more time out of the classroom, which is a cause of contention.

Q. I have been asked why it is necessary for us to have so many subject leaders, and why teachers need to take so much time in planning.

A. This is because there are often new developments in the curriculum or in teaching it and having subject leaders means that important subject developments can be communicated to all teachers through one person attending a training event or conference. Primary schools had a completely new curriculum in 2015-2016 and the size of the change means that teachers nationally are still consolidating methods of teaching the new curriculum. Additionally, planning is necessary that teachers agree on methods of teaching particular skills so that pupils can build on the skills they already have, and are not confused by new and different methods every time they change class.

Q. A question from the Parent forum was whether it was better to have a less expensive teacher all the time, or a more expensive teacher for some of the time.

A. We have on occasions had experiences with supply or student teachers which illustrated what can happen when the teacher was not as good as we had hoped they would be on appointment. Not only do our pupils suffer when this happens, but additional leadership time is taken up trying to support the teacher who is having problems, with an often less than satisfactory result even after considerable extra input.

Less expensive teachers are not automatically less good. However, governors and leaders who are on appointment panels are naturally anxious to provide as good an education as they can for pupils. Additionally, experiences we have had with inexperienced teachers make us even more wary of appointing teachers we are unsure of. Although it would be a strategy to aim for “quotas” of cheaper teachers, this is not something that we feel that we could deliberately seek at this moment in time. We feel that we need to continue to seek the best teachers for our classes that we can.

Our School Development Plan documents our current and ongoing plans in detail and is available to view for anyone who would like a copy. It is always an ambitious and extensive plan, which goes into detail about how we are going to implement improvements to our school. However, our main strategy can be summed up as follows:

- 1) Continued implementation of the new national curriculum introduced in 2015, adapting teaching methods and assessment where necessary.
- 2) Staff stability and distributed leadership to provide sustainable planning and teaching for pupils.
- 3) Improved pupil engagement and happiness through embedding our school vision.

Laughton's options going forwards

Parents at the forum wanted more information on what the school's long term plans were. We have sought to be an outward facing school, as a staff and as governors, in order to be aware of and make the most of any beneficial opportunities to work with other schools.

Central Government has been wanting schools to collaborate more closely for several years, incentivising them by making collaboration a desirable thing in terms of OFSTED criteria, and by withdrawing financial support from local government education departments, forcing schools to

obtain more support from each other. However, because this happened to all schools at the same time, it has been difficult to form a clear picture of the best way of doing this by looking for best practice.

More pressure has come from central government in the last year or so for smaller schools to form larger units. Government plans became explicit with the original plans for forced academisation of all schools by 2020. Although this explicit aim has been withdrawn, the right remains for the government to force all schools in any given local authority to become academies if that local authority is deemed to be underperforming. Given the tightening of educational funding to local authorities, it will not be surprising if this starts to happen.

In anticipation of this, schools around us have started to think more about forming or joining MATs.

The options currently available to us are:

- 1) To work more closely with schools within our Alliance, with the aim of becoming a self-contained MAT if preliminary arrangements worked well.
- 2) To explore joining Kings Academy Group.
- 3) To see how the proposed Teaching School Alliance (based at Newick) develops and join that.

Advantages to Option 1:

- We will have good control over our direction.
- Our Alliance schools already to an extent share ethos and assessment methods, and Heads already work together well.

Disadvantages to Option 1:

- The total number of pupils may not be enough to make bulk buying of services, in the anticipated absence of Local Authority service provision, cost effective.

Advantages to Option 2:

- Proven track record of Kings Academy Group personnel in the area of school improvement.
- Financial resource

Disadvantages to Option 2:

- Lack of experience of Kings Academy personnel in the primary sector.
- Possible imposition of Kings values or decisions upon schools within the chain.

Advantages to Option 3:

- Schools already work together through Alliance-type working.
- Total number of pupils should be sufficient to bulk buy services.
- Vacant staff roles could be temporarily filled by staff from other schools in the Teaching School MAT if there were a short term problem recruiting, leading to more staff stability across all schools.

Disadvantages to Option 3:

- Large number of schools will be difficult to organise into a coherent whole. It is almost certain that a central co-ordinator will need to be employed to run the logistics, which will to some extent negate the bulk buying advantages.

These are just some of the advantages and disadvantages of the options we are exploring and it is likely that we will write further about these issues when there are developments.

Another important development for us as a school leadership team and governing body is that we are working on a “confidence framework”, which will give us a system where we can explore how pupils are feeling about their learning, and making sure that pupils feel happy about being in school. We feel that this is an important measure of how well we are doing as a school and will help us when we have to make decisions to know whether or not we are doing the right thing.

I would be happy to discuss any of these issues further with you, or to answer any questions. Please contact me on dkong@laughton.e-sussex.sch.uk or leave a note at the Office for me.

We will be spending the next few terms developing our ideas as a governing body regarding how we feel about these ideas. We will also continue to talk to other schools in the area to see how they feel about the options, and we hope, with Anthony Lilley’s help, to form a Parent Network/group to consult on and have discussion around the strategic implications.

