



UNITYCOLLEGE
NORTHAMPTON CHURCH OF ENGLAND SECONDARY SCHOOL

Proposed Academy to replace Unity College

Statement of Unity College Governing Body, January 22nd, 2009

At an additional, full Governing Body meeting held at Unity College on the evening of Thursday, January 22nd, the following proposal was agreed:

“After a period of intensive consultation with staff, students and parents, the Governing Body rejects the proposal to convert Unity College to an academy in September 2009 for the following reasons:

- 1. The Sponsors’ poor communication and consultation;**
- 2. The Sponsors’ inability to demonstrate how becoming an academy will be of benefit to the students and staff of Unity College;**
- 3. The erosion of trust between the Unity College community and the Sponsors;**
- 4. The pursuit of the fast-track process will continue to be detrimental to students because of the lack of continuity and stability with relation to curriculum provision;**
- 5. The fast-track process is having a negative impact on staff morale, recruitment and retention.**

We believe the best approach for the Unity College community is to develop the college under its present governance for the next three years, whilst exploring the options of a properly-managed move to trust or academy status.

Governors are committed to promote and uphold the Christian values, ethos and practice upon which the college is founded. This will include embracing and respecting other faiths within the community and fully supporting those of no faith.

We wish to engage actively with parents, the community and the local authority to continue to raise standards in an already improving college.”

Voting on the proposal was as follows:

Approved 12

Against 0

Abstained 2 (due to conflict of interest)

Absent 3

Two Associate Governors also present do not have voting rights.

1. Poor communication and consultation

It is evident that the academy sponsors had a very poor strategy to communicate their proposals to parents and the community prior to consultation. The hostility seen at the meetings for parents and the community from councillors, members of the community and parents, indicates how negligent the sponsors have been in nurturing public opinion before launching their proposal on an unsuspecting public.

Governors have experienced poor communication. In September, having heard an initial presentation at an early stage of development, governors agreed in good faith and without commitment that the proposal should be worked up into an Expression of Interest and consultation. They did this believing that this would be an iterative, transparent, process leading to an open and wide consultation. Two foundation governors offered to liaise with the sponsors, but this offer was only taken up on one occasion when the state of current College finances was reviewed.

At no stage were governors provided with timelines for the consultation or the appointment of a principal designate. Governors are dismayed that the sponsor's consultation has taken place concurrently with a Local Authority consultation to close the College. Governors feel their goodwill has been abused and that they have been manipulated. The Diocesan Director failed to up-date governors on procedures at meetings of the Governing Body and this is to be greatly regretted.

The sponsor's consultation has been managed incompetently. Newsletter 1, containing the date of the first meeting with parents and community was issued only two working days prior to the event (some parents had even less notice). Unsurprisingly, few attended a poorly organised meeting to which representatives of two sponsors failed to attend.

The Governing Body is deeply concerned that Newsletter 1 seriously misrepresented their position. A parent or community member would read the document believing that governors supported the proposed academy proposal when governors had only supported a proposal for a consultation.

The sponsor's were requested by the Governing Body to extend the consultation period beyond 16th January due to the slippage caused by inadequate notification of meetings, but they declined.

A Drop-in Meeting advertised for 7th January, which then became a formal presentation. The Drop-in Meeting was not re-instated, so parents or community members have not had an opportunity a one-to-one 'surgery' that had been publicly advertised, thus denying them the chance to raise issues and enquiries on a personal basis.

Sponsors failed to inform maintained primary schools in the locality about the consultation or Year 6 parents who have expressed a choice of Unity College for entry in September 2009.

The Local Authority consultation pamphlet on Closure of Unity College was posted to parents on 22nd December, contrary to DCSF guidance which precludes conducting a consultation during a school holiday. The pamphlet advertised the meeting on 15th December, but this had already taken place seven days earlier. However, the Local Authority unlike the sponsors did agree to extend the period for responses as requested by the governors.

Whilst individual governors received both consultation pamphlets in the post to their homes on 23rd December the Governing Body as a corporate entity has not at any stage received an invitation to respond to either consultations.

Summary

The process of communication and consultation has been deeply damaging to the reputation of the sponsors. It has resulted in a lack of confidence of the sponsor's competence in being able to effectively govern an academy.

2. Sponsor's inability to demonstrate how becoming an academy will be of benefit to students and staff of Unity College

The sponsors have failed to provide a convincing case that their proposals will make a significant impact on improving attainment. Academies are premised on assertion that they provide radical actions that are beyond the scope of schools working under the constraints of the National Curriculum and local authority policies. The consultation documentation and presentations have failed to provide a convincing case that what is proposed cannot be delivered under Unity College's current governance as a Foundation College.

The College already works in collaboration with all four sponsors, which begs the question, 'Why have they failed to make a stronger impact in supporting the College's needs in the past?'

Sponsor: Bishop Stopford School

The contrast between Bishop Stopford and Unity College is stark. Bishop Stopford is high achieving school serving students, mainly from favourable backgrounds, with attainment above the national average on entry. Compared with Unity College it has very low proportion of students who are socially disadvantaged, of a different cultural heritage or with special educational needs.

As a sponsor the school offers little beyond management and curricular advice, albeit from very different context. The headteacher has ruled out strategies that would spread its excellent teaching through shared teaching, co-located teaching or secondments because 'It does not work'. This rejects a key strategy that is a central feature of nationally acclaimed Manchester Challenge, which has been shown to very effective. The proposal to share the Year 7 Citizenship course could be beneficial, but this can take place within existing partnership arrangements.

Overall, governors believe that the sponsorship offer by Bishop Stopford is weak.

Recent partnerships involvement between Bishop Stopford School and Unity College through the Leading Edge programme has made a limited impact on raising standards.

The current admissions policy of the Bishop Stopford School is a major impediment to a genuine partnership. Drawing students from primary schools within natural area of influence of Unity College (families living in Northampton and Moulton) deprives Unity College of young people from aspiring, church families. This policy directly contradicts the sponsor's aim of achieving a more balanced intake at Unity College. It is noted that governors of Bishop Stopford are currently consulting on admissions arrangements for September 2010, which would perpetuate this practice.

Sponsor: Moulton College

The College has a very good reputation for the delivery of its vocational link courses. These provide broader provision to Key Stage 4 students than would be possible from a school's own resources. A small number of Unity College students currently benefit from this link. Moulton College states that it wishes to develop further link programmes with the Unity College, although the range and levels anticipated are not specified in the documentation.

The first presentation to staff outlined the possibility of developing a vocational centre on the Unity College site, where students would be co-taught by staff from Unity College and Moulton College. This initiative, which has interesting possibilities, was not part of the consultation documentation or the Principal's presentation on January 7th. It is noted that as an incorporated institution Moulton College can raise finance through loans for the development of provision. There is no indication in the proposal whether or not Moulton College intends to invest financially on the Unity College site or what governance and financial arrangements any joint facility might entail.

Overall, governors regard the Moulton College involvement as the strongest aspect of the Academy proposal. Students who find a multiple subject-based curriculum de-motivating could be provided with vocational learning that engages their commitment and provides the skills needed to achieve economic well-being. Many questions remain about the levels and range of intended provision, how this fits into the Northamptonshire 14-19 Partnership diploma delivery plan, access to courses by other local schools, charging policies and governance implications of a possible shared facility.

It has not been demonstrated in the consultation why the development of vocational courses is dependent on academy status. The growth of vocational programmes at other local schools has not required a change of their status. Governors believe that joint Unity College/Moulton College programmes are highly desirable and possible irrespective of the future status of the College.

Sponsor: Northamptonshire County Council

Governors of Unity College value being part of a family of schools within a supportive local authority framework. Publications produced by the DCSF Academies Division make a virtue of academies gaining their independence from local authorities. Governors are pleased that the Local Authority decided to become a sponsor of the proposed Academy because it demonstrates a commitment to the local authority retaining a strategic overview of education in Northampton.

Strategies adopted by the local authority to improving standards at Unity College have had mixed outcomes. Ofsted has judged the effectiveness of the Local Authority's school improvement inputs as 'satisfactory' but there have been criticisms. Unity has benefited from a very experienced School Improvement Partner. Whilst other advisory inputs have supported the teaching of mathematics, science and information technology, the outcomes from these subjects remain key weaknesses. The College has been disappointed in the failure of the Local Authority to deploy Advanced Skills Teachers they manage, as has been requested. The National Challenge should massively increase Local Authority provision of curricular support and resources over the next two and a half years. This will reduce any cost advantage an academy might bring compared with other maintained schools.

Financial monitoring and advice by the Local Authority has been a weakness. It failed to predict the large current budget

overspend or warn governors of impending difficulties.

Overall, governors can foresee little difference in the level or involvement of curricular support under Local Authority or academy arrangements. Under the Local Authority support would be enhanced because it is provided in the context of a planned town and county strategy. Governors foresee the potential impact this aspect of the proposal as being broadly neutral.

Sponsor: The Peterborough Diocese

Governors assert that as the main sponsor for the Academy proposal the Diocese must take responsibility for the poor management of communication and consultation over recent months.

The Diocese of Peterborough does not give financial support to the Diocesan Board of Education to enable it to offer the appropriate and necessary level of input. The present Diocesan Director has been the lead player in the establishment and building of Unity College and this has been an outstanding achievement. However, with over 100 schools to support in the Diocese and with a budget which has been cut significantly in each of the recent years the Board does not have the funds to ensure the required level of input which being the lead sponsor requires.

The Governing Body thus cannot have the confidence that the Diocesan Education Board can command the resources to enable it to take the lead role in governance of the proposed academy and then be in a position to continue to the high level of support which will be necessary.

Summary

The sponsor's collective proposals could be implemented effectively under current governance arrangements.

The Governing Body would consider offering Associate Governor places to the headteacher of Bishop Stopford School and the principal of Moulton College, or their nominees, if they wish to remain as serious partners of Unity College.

3. Erosion of trust between the Unity College community and the Sponsors

The erosion of trust is a function of the poor communication and consultation referred to above.

There is a strong feeling that the College community has been rushed into a scenario which has a momentum driven by the DCSF rather than the sponsors. The benefit to the students and community seems to have been subsumed to a bureaucratic machine.

The 'Fast-track process' has meant that sponsors have failed to nurture stakeholders over a sufficient period in order to gain consent to their proposals. The result has been a perception in the local community that this is an imposed solution by outsiders 'who know best'.

Parents state that trust has been diminished by the arrogant attitude of the lead sponsor's representatives at the public meetings for parents and the community, their misleading use of data, their evasiveness in answer questions with transparently and by their walking out of the second public meeting whilst it was still in progress.

Local councillors have made it clear that they believe that the sponsors are attempting to impose an unwanted solution on an unwilling community.

Local church leaders from different denominations have expressed concern that their mission in the community has been damaged by the sponsor's failure to listen and their uncaring public posture.

The appointment of a principal-designate could not have had more disastrous timing. For the first time in many years parents and the community are convinced that the College is improving under the leadership of their recently appointed Principal. This one act has fatally undermined confidence in the judgement of the sponsor's. Large numbers have complained the appointment is 'unfair' to the current principal and many with religious convictions feel it is un-Christian.

Many parents who selected Unity College are dismayed because the principal-designate appears unable to provide an assurance that she is a committed, practicing Christian.

The low esteem in which the sponsors are regarded by parents is demonstrated in the response to the governor's survey in which 67% of parents responding stated that are not 'confident that sponsors have understood their views and will act upon them'.

Summary

Governors believe that the sponsors should withdraw their proposal. A period of calm and reflection is now required in the best interests of the students and staff of Unity College so that they can concentrate on achieving the best outcomes possible in the forthcoming examinations.

The Governing Body will support a healing process that can lead eventually to a restoration of trust. It is under no illusion of the extent of the damage caused to reputations during recent weeks.

4. The pursuit of the fast track process will continue to be detrimental to students because of the lack of continuity and stability in relation to curriculum provision.

The academy debate has delayed the options process for Unity College cohorts entering Year 10 and Year 12 in September 2009. Normally course prospectuses would have already been published and guidance offered to students and parents. The Curriculum Committee of the Governing Body has instructed College managers to prepare course programmes for September and recruit students to courses irrespective of the outcome of the academy proposal. It must be a firm expectation that the proposed academy management would honour agreements with students and college providers, should the proposal to go ahead.

The College would normally roll forward the timetable for the next academic year into Term 6, as this is a proven opportunity to raise standards. Timetable preparation has been delayed because of the uncertainty of who will be managing the College from September 2009 and the possibility of further disruption to learning and the lives of students.

Schools and colleges need to plan ahead and book provision at local colleges of further education now to secure course places for September 2009. This is being done against a background of instability. Other schools are uncertain that link arrangements will be honoured.

The model proposed by the sponsors in Year 7 for PSHE and Citizenship would require a different form of timetable planning from the current provision, which leads to further uncertainty in planning for 2009-10.

Summary

The uncertainty of who will manage Unity College from September 2009 has disrupted planning, held back decision making and creates uncertainty for key partners.

5. The fast-track process is having a negative impact on staff morale, recruitment and retention.

Having generated considerable enthusiasm for tackling the challenges faced by Unity College and, having received a positive Ofsted monitoring report on process initiated to raise standards, the principal and senior management are now faced with a staff that has low morale. This is due to the uncertainty created by the proposed academy and staff lack of confidence in the competence of the sponsors.

Governors had strong expectations that the positive Autumn term report by Ofsted on the effectiveness of process initiated to raise standards would be repeated at the Spring term monitoring visit, due shortly. The low staff morale and feeling of instability resulting from the academy proposal now places this at risk.

Applications for vacant teaching posts are now likely to be very low due to the blight of the academy proposal. A tiny number of applications were received for the post of Assistant Principal towards the end of last term.

Many staff are now openly hostile to the academy proposal due to the poor communication about any possible benefits to students and concerns about staff security. A considerable number have indicated to the management team that they hope to gain jobs in other schools, including all members of one core subject.

There is a great risk to the students at Unity College that staff who leave for other posts will not be replaced in time for September 2009. This is a real possibility as the timeline for a final decision may be as late as the end of May or mid-June.

Overall Summary

Governors urge that the uncertainty created by the academy proposal is removed by the sponsor's acceptance of the principles set out in the statement issued by the Governing Body dated 22nd January 2009.
