

What you need to know about Unity College

The information below sets out a history of Unity College and the events around the proposed academy. We have no interest in putting a spin on our reporting, there is no need. All we have done is said what happened and who did what, it speaks for itself.

Unity College background

Unity College is a Church of England secondary school in Northampton. It is under the control of The Diocese of Peterborough and Northants County Council. Since it opened 4.5 year ago under the headship of Sharon Goode Unity has struggled, it was put into notice to improve almost immediately it opened, failed to get any better and was put into special measures in early 2008. Parents applauded that unacceptable standards had been finally recognised by OFSTED if not by the Diocese.

Principal Sharon Goode resigns after continual poor performance.

Head teacher Sharon Goode resigns in January before the March OFSTED inspection, but after a damning Local Authority (LA) report into her financial (mis)management of the school. This report is also a direct reflection on the oversight of the Diocese Directorate of Education and the Local Authority.

The original leadership team adds to Unity's financial problems.

Parents are very disaffected with the continuous poor performance of the school. There have been attempts to improve the school by replacing the senior leadership team at the school wholesale. However under Sharon Goode's headship the new leadership team have not been able to make the impact promised to parents.

Note: the original leadership team are not made redundant, rather they are found (created) other positions, remaining on their existing significant salaries. This is a major financial burden that the school is still carrying. On resignation Sharon Goode is found a job working for the Diocese of Peterborough, however Unity college still fund her salary for a considerable time, which adds to the deficit.

Head suddenly leaves troubled secondary

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/Head-suddenly-leaves-troubled-secondary.3854611.jp>

Struggling school put into special measures

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/Struggling-school-put-into-special.3925421.jp>

3rd April - Diocese Director of Education Stephen Partridge installs himself as Chairman of Unity College Governing Body

Existing Chairman of Governors Ray Hutchins resigns and Stephen Partridge (Diocese Director of Education) installs himself as the new Chairman. There is no challenge to this as most of the school governors are either Diocese or LA appointments. No-one else felt comfortable to take the position. Parents are not happy with this potential for 'conflict of interest'.

23rd April - Post special measures meeting - Parents challenge Stephen Partridge and the local authority.

At a meeting to discuss the OFSTED special measures report Stephen Partridge tries to instruct the parents on how school will improve, this does not go down well. Parents are very frustrated that he fails to acknowledge that the Diocese Directorate of Education has any responsibility for the chronic poor performance and the position Unity finds itself in.

Parents challenge Stephen Partridge on a letter he has sent to all of them stating that the school will move to be an Academy as soon as possible - he denies this is what the letter means. This is despite the letter being read back to him in public and parents berating him for his denial.

Parents urge that the appointment of a new Principal is made as soon as possible, even if the Diocese has to ask for the person to be released early from their contract at another school. **It is made very clear to Stephen Partridge that parents do not want any consideration of an academy, they want Unity to be given proper time for the new Principal (Mrs Gwynne) to improve the school.**

June - New Principal for Unity College - Margaret Gwynne

Margaret Gwynne is appointed on a permanent contract as new principal of Unity College. She makes a huge, positive impression on even the fiercest parent critics and for the first time ever Unity feels like a school that is there to educate rather than a church outreach project.

June - New governors

New parent governors are elected to Governing Body (GB), although not invited by Stephen Partridge to attend meetings until Sept 2008.

Sept 4th - New principal sets standards

School sends pupils home over uniforms

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news?articleid=4457131>

September 14th - Stephen Partridge calls GB meeting to discuss Academy

This is the first time Governors have been made aware of the proposition to consider an academy.

A presentation is made to the Unity College Governing Body (GB) by proposed Academy Sponsors, Diocese of Peterborough, Northants County Council (LA), Moulton College and Bishop Stopford School (highly selective Diocese School, Kettering).

The Diocese is represented by Archdeacon Christine Allsopp as Stephen Partridge is Chairman of Governors and would have a 'conflict of interest'. Presentation is very poor and vague as though GB approval is a foregone conclusion or unimportant.

Following the presentation Stephen Partridge asks Governors to support 'consultation' about becoming an Academy. The GB agree to this on the basis that they are just consulting and that this will not automatically lead on to anything else.

When asked Stephen Partridge cannot confirm if the Diocese instigated the drive to Academy status he replies citing 'the Government' as the reason it is being considered.

There is significant reticence amongst Governors, but clearly believing they are only supporting a consultation/investigation into whether an Academy is feasible and wanted by parents, students, staff and community they agree to support consultation. At no point did the Governing Body (GB) agree to the signing of the Expression of Interest (EOI) submitted to the DCSF. At this point the GB had not seen the EOI.

Following this point there is no further information on the academy for the GB until 12.12.08

September - Margaret Gwynne starts enormous task of restructuring school

There is acceptance amongst Governors that if consultation is positive and Unity College becomes an Academy then Margaret Gwynne will (almost certainly) be principal.

The GB support her in the major re-structuring of the staffing of the school. She also undertakes significant steps to improve the standard of teaching, discipline and communication with parents. The poor financial practices followed under Sharon Goode are all eliminated.

This is against the background of no financial support forthcoming from either the LA or central Government to help improve the school and get it out of special measures. This is despite Jim Knight MP clearly stating in the local paper that the money and support is available as Unity is a National Challenge School.

Unity has second OFSTED inspection only weeks into Margaret Gwynne's headship

Margaret Gwynne reports to Governors that progress since the last inspection had not been great enough to lift school out of special measures, however she had agreed with Stephen Partridge that it was crucial to sort out the underlying causes of the problems first and that her reforms had not had time to take any effect. Both the OFSTED inspector and GB acknowledged this.

Progress at Unity College inadequate, say OFSTED inspectors

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/education/Progress-at-Unity-College-inadequate.4712418.jp>

October - parents of year 6 students choose schools for their children to join in Sept 09

Parents were not informed that the school may become an academy with a different Principal. Many prospective parents were very impressed with Mrs Gwynne and have cited that as a reason for choosing Unity College. They are dismayed at the prospect of not getting the school they chose.

25th November - Official joint consultation on becoming an academy begins and closing Unity College begins

Parents, students, staff and community are not aware of this.

4th December Stephen Partridge steps down as Chairman of Governors

At scheduled GB meeting Stephen Partridge suddenly resigns as Chairman with immediate effect. This comes as a considerable shock to GB, no-one is prepared for this and no-one offers to take on this role at such short notice without any specification for the role. Stephen Partridge refuses to give the GB time to understand the scope of the position and consider a replacement.

At the last moment Phil Mason is suggested and he stoically agrees to take on the role to support the school.

The GB are still unaware of any consultation around the academy or closing Unity College.

11th December - Public notice of Academy consultation

An advert appears from Academy Sponsors in the local press (Chronicle and Echo) giving dates for consultation meetings with parents & wider community. 15th December and 7th January.

The vast majority of parents, students and staff are not aware of the existence of this advert.

Some parents receive Newsletter Issue 1 by pupil post.

Governors are still unaware of consultation and do not receive any notice until 12th December by email. This email only mentions the consultation about becoming an academy. Not the concurrent consultation to close the Unity College.

Parents, students, staff and Governors get a maximum of 2 working days notice for the first 'consultation' meeting. Notice on Friday - meeting on Monday.

This gives parents and Governors a maximum of 2 working days notice of the first parents 'consultation' meeting. There is no mention that the consultation period officially began on the 25th November, 11 working days before the parents were made aware. The school term ended 4 days after the first consultation meeting. The second meeting is 2 days into the new term following Christmas. Parents had 6 working days to debate or respond to the 'consultation'.

25th Nov - consultation period begins unknown to parents, unions etc

11th Dec - public notice in newspaper, some parents receive leaflets by pupil post

12th Dec - governors informed

15th Dec - parents consultation meeting

19th Dec - term ends

5th Jan - new term starts

7th Jan - final consultation meeting

9th Jan - consultation finishes

note: consultation was extended until 16th Jan at the request of the parents and governors at the first (15th Dec) meeting. This was extended to 13th Feb with no explanation or announcement from the sponsors. (We know this from New Academies Officer Neil Flint . We will be telling him that the sponsors have failed to pass this information on to parents etc)

<http://www.pcaaun.org>

11th -12th December interviews for post of Principal Designate 'Unity' Academy

Stephen Partridge, Venerable Christine Allsopp (Diocese), Duncan Mills (LA), Chris Moody (Principal Moulton College) and Margaret Holman (Principal Bishop Stopford) lead interview panels for candidates including Margaret Gwynne. After two days they defer making a decision until after the weekend.

15th December - staff told of Principal Designate

Staff at Unity are told in the afternoon that Margaret Gwynne she has not been successful and that Vanessa Ray has been appointed.

15th December - Sponsors first meeting for parents and community

At the first sponsors meeting with parents and community there is a very low turnout of parents, nearly all complained that they had only heard of the meeting by word of mouth and that would explain the poor attendance.

Two of the sponsors, Moulton College and Bishop Stopford failed to send any representative. Bishop Stopford because it was their Carol Concert that evening.

The Venerable Christine Allsopp chaired the meeting and was unresponsive and dismissive of parents concerns about the proposed academy, as was Stephen Partridge, who gave a pro academy presentation in his role as one of the sponsors. Both spoke to parents as though they had a right to know best. This did not go down well.

The few parents present were bemused as to why they were only being given one pro academy choice. Parents were visibly upset at what they saw not as 'consultation' but as a 'done deal' they had no say in.

During the meeting the audience broke up into smaller groups and was given the opportunity to address questions to the individuals representing the sponsors. Duncan Mills (LA), Stephen Partridge and Christine Allsopp (Diocese). Each small group of parents separately asked the same question. Has Mrs Gwynne been appointed Principal of the proposed academy? Duncan Mills confirmed that she had not been appointed. Christine Allsopp refused to either deny or confirm, saying that sponsors were awaiting acceptance. Stephen Partridge denied any decision to appoint had been made.

When the groups re-convened the parents pressed The Venerable Christine Allsopp on who the new head might be, she refused to confirm or deny whether Margaret Gwynne had got the post. This caused considerable dismay and anger amongst the parents when they guessed she had not been given the job. Note: the staff were told at 4pm earlier that day that Margaret Gwynne had not been successful.

Chairman of GB, Phil Mason asked the sponsors for the consultation period to be extended a further week as it was obvious so many parents were unaware of what was happening. Parents demanded that full details be sent by post to the household of every child at the school before the next meeting on the 7th Jan.

This meeting was the first time that Unity College Governors learned that there was a consultation about closing Unity College.

20th December - Parents get information during the school holidays, nearly a month after consultation started. Parents have only one meeting and days to make their thoughts known.

Parents receive via post, in the same envelope, a brochure from Sponsors (inc LA) about what a good thing the new academy will be together with a brochure from the LA about consultation on closing the school. This brochure barely mentions Unity Closing and looks like a pro academy leaflet. We are told this is currently the subject of a formal complaint.

Parents are dismayed and disgusted with the treatment of Margaret Gwynne and have no faith in academy plan so they form an action group

Parent and staff are dismayed at what they see as yet more misdirection and incompetence from the Diocese and the LA. Parents form a group to fight the academy and keep the continuity and progress they have already seen and believe in under Margaret Gwynne.

<http://www.saveunitycollege.org>

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/Parents-unhappy-with-academy-plan.4816189.jp>

Unease in Church of England because Academy principal designate is not practising christian

Questions are asked by parents about how appropriate the principal designate is as she has no real sustained experience of improving standards at a school like Unity. Previously she has a glittering CV working almost exclusively at middle class, selective schools. She has left her most recent post after just over a year - a challenging school not unlike Unity. Questions are also being asked throughout the Church of England about the validity of her appointment because she is not a practising christian and the omission of this as a requirement in the personal part of the job specification.

'£125,000-a-year' headteacher vows to turn around school

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/Head-returns-to-rescue-ailing.4811023.jp>

Vanessa Ray leaves her post in Peckham early

Is she working for the sponsors already? Have you asked the question? Read the comments.

<http://www.southlondon-today.co.uk/tn/news.cfm?id=862&searchword=Vanessa%20Ray>

24th Dec 3.30pm Unity College GB informed of name of Principal Designate

The Governing body are informed by Christine Allsopp at 3.30pm by email of the appointment of Vanessa Ray as Principal Designate of the proposed academy. Nine days after the school staff were informed.

Jan 5th 2009 - Unity College GB hold extraordinary meeting to discuss academy proposal

The GB of Unity College held an extraordinary meeting on the first day back after the Christmas Holiday. Members were lobbied by parents unhappy as they arrived for the meeting. This was the first meeting chaired by Philip Mason. At the start of the meeting Margaret Gwynne read out a personal statement that

is now confidential. Both Margaret Gwynne and Stephen Partridge were asked to leave the meeting by as it was considered they both had a conflict of interest. We assume because Margaret Gwynne was an unsuccessful applicant to the post of Academy Principal Designate and Stephen Partridge is chief officer of the lead academy sponsor.

During this meeting the GB were presented with the Expression of Interest Document by one of their members who had found it on the internet. The GB were very surprised as they had never seen this document before. There was considerable disquiet as to the integrity of some of the content of this document and at the handling of the process by the Diocesan Directorate of Education.

The GB resolved to consult as soon as possible with parents, students and staff to determine their thoughts and feelings to the academy proposal in order to determine an accurate, reflective response.

Jan 7th - Second academy sponsors 'drop in' evening for parents and community

Over 120 parents, students, staff and local councillors turned up for this meeting at 6pm. They all listened politely to presentations from the LA, Moulton College, Bishop Stopford and the Diocese. Then the academy sponsors took questions and statements from the audience.

There was not one question or statement that was pro-academy. The only thing anyone could see any benefit from was the potential input of Moulton College and to a lesser degree Bishop Stopford School, however all these comments included the words 'without becoming an academy'.

Frustration grew throughout the meeting as it was clear that the audience was not being listened to by the sponsors. At one point a parent asked for a show of hands for everyone who did not want Unity College to close and did not want this academy. Virtually every hand in the room went up. No-one dissented. The audience said over and over again they did not want an academy and that Unity College should be given the opportunity to continue to improve under the leadership of Margaret Gwynne.

Unity College GB were challenged on their position, with nearly all parents believing that Stephen Partridge was still Chairman of Governors. It was a surprise when the new Chairman Philip Mason stood up and read out a statement clarifying the Unity College GB's position.

Statement of Unity College GB read out at meeting 7th Jan

<http://www.unity.northants.sch.uk/07/documents/7thJanUnityGovernors.pdf>

As the meeting finished, Margaret Gwynne entered the room unobserved. As she made her way to the back of the room she was spotted by parents who began to applaud her. This rippled across the room until virtually the whole room were on their feet applauding. She responded by saying thank you to everyone for their support. At this moment the sponsors stood up behind her and headed out the door. Spontaneous booing and heckling broke out all across the room directed at the sponsors, including The Archdeacon and Stephen Partridge.

Parents rallied to the parents group and vowed to join the fight to stop Unity College becoming an academy.

<http://www.saveunitycollege.org/>

Parents voice their objections and complaints

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/your-letters/January-9-New-school-scheme.4862200.jp>

Jan 9th - Archdeacon issues apology for a consultation process that is too complicated for parents to understand.

Parents are rightly insulted by this comment and Councillor Kirkbride later publicly disassociates herself with the statement.

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/Big-academy-row-Apology-to.4859298.jp>

Unity College GB consult with parents, staff and students

Three separate written consultations were carried out with parents, staff and students. All three carried the core question. Do you want Unity College to close to become an Academy? The written responses also allowed the responders to add comments of their own. In addition to written responses separate meetings were held with the staff and parents. At the parents meeting over 80 people attended and in a show of hands unanimously rejected the academy in addition to the written rejection. The staff vote was equally clear. The consultation with the pupils was handled via the teaching staff in the classroom. Great care was taken to make sure that the children had opposing views presented to inform them. The result of the students consultation was the academy being rejected.

SaveUnityCollege publish a vision for the future of Unity College

This vision has been widely circulated to the GB, parents, staff and the Local Authority. Nationally, as part of an ongoing campaign it has been sent to, and read, by Diocesan Bishops, Diocesan Directors of Education, The National Society, senior figures at Church House, Government Ministers at the DCSF and the media. All of these people are well aware of Unity College and the parental objection to this academy. Unity College is very much a national issue.

<http://www.saveunitycollege.org/docs/UnityCollegeaREALvision.pdf>

Parents put their faith in the Northampton Deanery Synod and are disappointed

Many parents chose to follow their route of complaint and rejection through their local churches. They hoped to have a voice and a debate at the Northampton Deanery Synod. They came away very disillusioned when all that was allowed was statements and no debate - 'because there was not enough time!' These parents have now joined with SaveUnityCollege.

Jan 15th - Staff morale is at rock bottom.

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/Staff-morale-at-town-school.4877611.jp>

Jan 22nd - The Archbishop will here of this!

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/Register.aspx?ReturnURL=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.northamptonchron.co.uk%2Fyour-letters%2FJanuary-22-The-Archbishop-will.4905774.jp>

Jan 22nd - Unity College GB hold second extraordinary meeting to discuss findings of consultation and determine their position on the academy proposal.

The GB issued the following statement, which is available to download from SaveUnityCollege.

<http://www.saveunitycollege.org/docs/UnityGBstatement.pdf>

Votes against plan for academy in Northampton

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/Register.aspx?ReturnURL=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.northamptonchron.co.uk%2Fnews%2Fvotes-against-plan-for-academy.4909971.jp>

Jan 22nd - Councillor Joan Kirkbride denounces the academy sponsors consultation process.

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/Public-consultation-on-academy-rapped.4901025.jp>

Jan 26th - Unity College GB meet with Councillor Joan Kirkbride and Director Paul Burnett

We don't know what was said, but we understand it was very frank meeting and concerned the way the Diocese had conducted the process and the integrity of information supplied to the LA.

Jan 28th - Councillor Kirkbride issues notice to close Unity College and promises to consult with parents on what they DO want.

Despite a concerted letter writing campaign and personal addresses to Councillor Kirkbride from parents, governors and local councillors at the meeting, she serves notice to close Unity College.

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/education/School39s-academy-process-to-start.4924513.jp>

This is our corrected version of the council report (it is 2mb so takes a little time to download)
<http://www.saveunitycollege.org/docs/UnityCollegeReportResponse.pdf>

Feb 13th - Councillor Kirkbride is challenged at council scrutiny committee over report that stated no alternative to an academy had been considered

Councillor Kirkbride claimed the omission was 'a technical matter' and that a realistic evaluation of alternatives had been carried out. At a meeting with parents on 23rd Feb Councillor Kirkbride and Director Paul Burnett were pushed to name the alternative that had been considered. The eventual answer was that the choices were either an academy or for the school to remain as it is. With the school to remain as it is not being an option!

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/education/Academy-consultation-begins.4976925.jp>

Councillor Kirkbride made it very clear that she wants 'proper consultation' on what parents want and is prepared to find a solution that responds to that consultation. We have made it very clear to her that we have kept the DCSF and Government ministers very abreast of everything that has happened so far. Ministers are all very clear on our objections, our complaints, our views on the Diocese, our lack of faith and the fact that we won't go away.

Feb 13th - OFSTED confirm that Unity is making progress

We acknowledge that this report paints a picture of a school with a long climb of improvement ahead of it. This is testament to just how far the Diocese and Local Authority had allowed the school to fall prior to Mrs Gwynne being appointed. The progress reported is the the first the school has ever shown, we want this to continue under Mrs Gwynne. We think this is a very fair and accurate report, which makes clear the new found strength of leadership and competence to drive the school upwards. We the parents like special measures, we know where we are and there is nowhere for the Diocese to hide!

[http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_reports/download/\(id\)/105086/\(as\)/133733_332290.pdf](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_reports/download/(id)/105086/(as)/133733_332290.pdf)

Feb 23rd - Councillor Kirkbride and Director Paul Burnett lead 'consultation' meeting with parents.

Faced with a considerable turnout of parents, at an ill tempered and confrontational meeting Cllr Kirkbride and Paul Burnett are left in no doubt that parents do not want this academy. Parents are disgusted with the treatment of Margaret Gwynne and continually confirm their support for her leadership. Archdeacon Allsopp and Stephen Partridge fail to attend. Diocesan Secretary Richard Pestell representing the Diocese is harangued off the stage. Neither Bishop Stopford or Moulton College were prepared to face the parents. At the end of the evening parents vote by unanimous show of hands to reject the academy and show no faith in the Diocese.

Mar 6th - Year 6 parents find out for the first time their children may not joining Unity College the school they chose in October 2008

Parents are dismayed that they were not informed about the academy proposal when asked to make a choice for their children's future. This is despite the fact that the Diocese and Local Authority had submitted an Expression of Interest to form an academy in September 2008. (note: we believe 'researched and informed' in the comments to be a representative or consultant of the academy sponsors)

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/Parents-are-told-Northampton-secondary.5045462.jp>

Mar 6th - Councillor Kirkbride and Director Paul Burnett challenged at a staff 'consultation' meeing about an Academy Deputy Principal job advert in Times Educational Supplement (TES)

This advert was spotted by staff (including the current deputy head) and clearly showed minor sponsor Moulton College's logo. The logo was later removed. Neither Cllr Kirkbride or Paul Burnett knew anything about the placement of the advert, despite the fact that as the Local Authority they are academy sponsors. Staff want to know if their jobs are going to be advertised too despite all the claims by sponsors about the integrity of the TUPE process.

Mar 7th - Diocesan Synod is lobbied by SaveUnityCollege

<http://www.saveunitycollege.org/>

Mar 7th - At the Diocesan Synod, Archdeacon Allsopp as lead representative of the major academy sponsor is confronted about the Deputy Principal advert.

She knows nothing about it! Governors are appalled at what is yet more malicious incompetence that is causing untold upset and disruption at Unity College before any decision has been made. Parents are furious at the lack of concern for the ongoing education of their children.

http://www.saveunitycollege.org/docs/Academy_Vice_Principal.jpg

Mar 18th - Sponsors announce name of the proposed academy before ANY decision has been made to close Unity College or fund the academy

Parents greet this news with horror. The announcement is the cause of great disruption and distress amongst parents, students and staff, many of whom cannot believe the Diocese can behave in such an ignorant manner. Read the 4 pages of comments.

<http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/education/School-to-be-renamed-Bishop.5081160.jp>

We are under no illusions that the school needs to make significant improvements but what do we want? We want this academy stopped now. We want the Bishops to talk to us and stop hiding behind the smokescreen created by their officers and consultants. The Diocese needs to act upon their complete failure of engagement with parents, students and staff. The Diocese needs to acknowledge that parents, students and staff have absolutely no faith in the sponsors or their choice of Principal Designate. All we have seen is gross incompetence and malevolent ignorance. Right now we are asking the DCSF how a Diocese that has failed the school since it opened be a proper choice as lead sponsor of an academy?

We demand that the Diocese withdraws its proposal and joins with the Local Authority and DCSF to find a future for Unity College that has the support of parents, students and staff.

Or does the Diocese want a failing academy that is taken away from the church? We make no apologies if you found the content of this upsetting - we are not happy either! If you have concerns about this academy then please do something about it! We have an excellent christian Principal who is already improving the school, it is people who count not change for the sake of change!

Have you seen Richard Rose Academy?

Both Moulton College and Bishop Stopford School have told the staff they don't want to work with a school in special measures. If this academy goes ahead against the wishes of everyone we will make sure that OFSTED puts it straight into special measures!

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7858791.stm>