



Bedfordshire Education Service

Eversholt Lower School

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4th May 2011

Dear Parents,

Consultation on conversion to Academy Status

At the end of January I wrote to you discussing the work we have been doing on a 5 Year Strategy for the school, and to inform you that we had formalised our interest in looking at conversion to Academy status. Since then we have been doing a great deal of work looking at the opportunities presented by Academy status, and we are now at the stage where we need for formerly consult with parents about a possible move to become an Academy.

Following on from our January Governors meeting, on 2nd March we took the next step in the process by applying to the Secretary of State for Education for an Academy Order. The Order is a formal permission from the Department for Education for a school to start the process of converting to an Academy. This process requires extensive consultation with staff, parents, the local community and Central Beds Council. The Secretary of State's decision is awaited, but we hope to hear the outcome very shortly. To be clear, that granting of the Academy Order is not in any way a final or binding decision to become an Academy, but merely the next step for us towards making such a commitment.

We are not alone in taking this step. We have been working closely with our colleagues at the other schools in the Harlington pyramid (the 13 Lovers and 2 Middle Schools that feed into Harlington Upper). A consensus has been building within the pyramid schools about a move to Academy status, and many local schools have now either applied or are considering applications for Academy Orders.

The consultation we are now undertaking is critical to informing the decision we will take. We are keen to consult with as many stakeholders as possible on the transfer, which will help the Governors in their final decision. The school staff are being consulted and we now need to hear the views of the parent body. We plan to hold a public meeting on **Thursday 19th May at 8pm at Eversholt Village Hall** where we will present our plans to become an independent Academy and take questions and feedback.

Attached with this letter is some summary information on Academy Status. You can find further detailed information on Academies and the conversion process at the Department for Education website at www.education.gov.uk/academies. You can also see the view from the teaching unions at:

- www.teachers.org.uk/academies
- www.nasuwt.org.uk (Search for Academies)

We encourage you to be part of this consultation process. We are eager to receive your comments and questions in relation to Eversholt Lower School becoming an Academy either at our public meeting, by written communication to the school or directly to any of the school governors. We look forward to discussing this with you on the 19th May, if not before.

Best Wishes,

Rob Fraser
Chair of Governors
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Key Information on Academy Status

What is an Academy and why are they being established?

An Academy is an independent but state funded school separate from the Local Authority. Children's places at the school are funded by Central Government. The Academy is answerable directly to the Department for Education and not to the Local Authority.

The new Government has set a radical agenda for change in the way that education is delivered, which is coinciding with a period of widespread austerity in public services. They wish to see schools gain independence from Local Authority control, and have the freedom from bureaucracy to innovate and provide high quality learning under the control of the local people, parents and other stakeholders in their communities. They characterize it as an attempt to decentralize and encourage diversity in educational provision.

Why become an Academy?

Academy status grants a school independence and flexibility to pursue its vision and goals, and gives it complete control over how the school is run, how the curriculum is delivered, and how it spends its funds.

Which Schools can apply to convert to Academies?

At present only schools rated as "Outstanding" or "Good with Outstanding features" by Ofsted are allowed to apply directly. The reason for this is that as an independent school with greater freedoms, it is vital that the school has effective and sustainable leadership and a capacity to drive its own improvement. Any school can apply within a group application where outstanding schools within the group agree to provide guidance. All new schools and schools placed in special measures now have to become Academies.

What does the conversion process involve?

The process takes between 3 and 6 months. It starts formerly by the Secretary of State granting the school an Academy Order, which allows it to then make legal and business preparations for conversion and provides £25,000 to the school to fund the necessary work. The school has to use solicitors to set up the legal entity for the Academy, consult widely on the change with all stakeholders, transfer land leases and other assets to the new legal entity, set up insurance and buy in of key services, define all operational policies, appoint auditors for the schools accounts and register as an Independent School. It can be a complex process, and some schools appoint external project managers to assist in the process.

Who will be responsible for running an Academy?

At present the Local Authority has legal responsibility for the running of the school, but operationally almost all of these responsibilities are devolved to the Head Teacher and Governing Body. The Local Authority then performs a legal oversight role usually in the form of monitoring documentation that the school completes, or by data collected by schools and passed to the Authority.

An Academy takes on the legal responsibility of running of the school from the Local Authority by setting set up an Academy Trust, which would be a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. All land leases and assets of the school transfer to the Trust, and the staff become direct employees of the Academy Trust rather than the Local Authority. The legal documentation for the Trust also establishes a formal instrument of governance, which establishes the Governing Body. The role of the Governing Body is the same as at present.

The Board of the Trust and the School Governing Body would be made up of representatives of all stakeholders including Parents, Staff, Local Authority and the Community. As now, the Head Teacher will remain responsible for day to day running of the school.

Will we still get the support and guidance of the Local Authority?

No. While the Local Authority may take up seats on the Governing Body, it no longer provides any support or guidance to the Academy.

Who provides oversight of an Academy and how it is run?

At present oversight of the school is provided by Ofsted through periodic inspections, the Local Authority, and Governing Body acting in its legal role of ensuring that the school is held to account for its performance. For an Academy, the Local Authority is replaced by the Department for Education.

It is not clear yet what the extent of oversight from Department for Education will be. We hope and expect it to be a “light touch” regime as the principle for Academies is self improvement from a base of existing high standards.

How will academic standards and school improvement be assessed?

Assessment of achievement and progress will be unchanged, including continued inspection by Ofsted. What will change is that the Local Authority will no longer provide School Improvement services to the school. These services have been in the form of a School Improvement Partner (SIP) who is an experienced education professional who works with the school through the year to help focus efforts on areas of improvement. We are going to lose the SIP services next academic year in any case, as it is being withdrawn as a service from all Good and Outstanding schools due to budget cuts. At Eversholt we take the need for continuous school improvement very seriously, and have greatly valued the services of our current School Improvement Partner, John Carter. Dependent on available funds, we will potentially look to buy in SIP-like services for the school from independent providers. This would ensure we have external guidance on our progress and achievement in the years between Ofsted inspections.

How will the daily life of the school change?

The day to day life of the school will not change. Despite the wholesale freedoms granted to Academies, the Governors are clear that if we take the final step of converting to an Academy, we will continue to follow the Local Authority's procedures for Admissions, Exclusions and Special Educational Needs, we will not seek to change the length of the school day or amend term dates and we will not change the school uniform. We will still be called “Eversholt Lower School”, and we will remain a small village school focussed on meeting the needs of our community and each child as an individual.

We will still follow the National Curriculum?

Yes, but we will continue to develop and refine our “creativity” centred approach to the curriculum. We intend that children will leave us with exceptional standards in reading, writing, numeracy & science together with emerging skills in creative & critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, research, analysis & communication. We seek to foster self-motivation, excitement & love of learning. This is key to the aspirations we have for our school, and we have challenged ourselves to become recognized as a centre of excellence in the delivery of a creative curriculum.

What is the impact on our Staff?

Our staff will become direct employees of the Academy Trust rather than the Local Authority as is the case now. We take the prospect of becoming the direct employer for our staff very seriously. We would employ all staff under existing terms & conditions of service, and we will follow national standards on pay and terms and conditions of employment.

How will our relationships with other schools change and will we still be a feeder school to Parkfields?

This will not change. Admissions will still be coordinated by the Local Authority and existing catchment arrangements will be unchanged. Parkfields, along with many of the schools in the Harlington pyramid, are applying for Academy status, so it is likely that we would be part of cooperative group of local Academies.

Will the financial position of the school be better or worse as an Academy?

We would not be financially disadvantaged by the transfer, and we may end up better off. At present the Local Authority retains a proportion of our school budget to spend on educational services and support. An Academy is given these “top sliced” funds to spend as it sees fit, but the Local Authority no longer provides the school with same services that it currently does. Instead Academies choose what services to buy in from the Authority or elsewhere. This requires that school takes care of its own business administration including seeking best value when buying in services like human resources support, broadband, ground maintenance etc. These business administration skills are new to many small schools including ourselves.

What are the specific advantages to Eversholt Lower School in becoming an Academy?

We gain the flexibility to deliver an education that is best suited to our pupils and we will be able to use all our allocated school funds in ways that are best suited to us. But fundamentally as an independent school funded directly by central government we gain control of our own future. For small schools in rural setting there has been long term uncertainty around the future of the “village school”. As an independent school we would have greater control of our own future and be able to adapt to changing circumstances in ways that we choose, and not those imposed on us by a Local Authority.

What are the risks and how are they mitigated?

There are broadly three principle risks to be managed.

First, Academies will only thrive in the long run if they have strong, sustainable leadership and a capacity for self improvement. At Eversholt we have historically had very capable governors, an enthusiastic and supportive parent body and exceptional staff, but an Academy transfer would reinforce the need for staff support and succession planning, and the constant addition of new people and talent onto the Trust Board and Governing Body. For this reason it is important that we have support for the conversion from Staff, Parents and the wider Community.

Second, business management skills will clearly be required, though this would be true even without Academy conversion. It will come as no surprise to you that local authorities such as Central Beds and many government agencies are in desperate financial straits. Faced with severe spending constraints, Central Beds Council is cutting non-priority services and support to schools. This is not the Local Authorities fault – Central Beds has behaved in a commendable fashion as it has squared up to the budgetary challenges it faces, and they have taken an honest and open approach with schools throughout. Nevertheless, we already find ourselves fully managing our finances and the services we buy in, and other forms of administration are being devolved from the Local Authority to the School. So business & financial management capabilities are becoming a fact of life for all schools, irrespective of Academy status. One way in which we are mitigating this risk is by sharing experience, knowledge and skills with the other schools through a Shared Business Services project being run by Harlington Upper School.

The third risk is more subtle. As a newly independent school at a time of quite radical change in the way education is delivered there could be the temptation to turn inwards and become focussed solely on the “here and now” of running the school. As our School Improvement Partner has said, this is not a time to become isolated and internally focussed. It will be vital that we continue to be part of a wider educational establishment with a network of colleagues with which to share expertise and experience and from whom we can draw support.