

Estyn response to the proposal for a new joint faith based school for North Denbighshire

This report has been prepared by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education and Training in Wales.

Under the terms of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and its associated Code, proposers are required to send consultation documents to Estyn. However Estyn is not a body which is required to act in accordance with the Code and the Act places no statutory requirements on Estyn in respect of school organisation matters. Therefore as a body being consulted, Estyn will provide their opinion only on the overall merits of school organisation proposals.

Estyn has considered the educational aspects of the proposal and has produced the following response to the information provided by the proposer and other additional information such as data from Welsh Government and the views of the Regional Consortia which deliver school improvement services to the schools within the proposal.

Introduction

This consultation proposal is from Denbighshire County Council, the Catholic diocese of Wrexham and the Church in Wales Diocese of St Asaph.

The proposal is that:

- Denbighshire County Council would close Blessed Edward Jones Catholic high school and St Brigid's school on 31st August 2014; and
- the Catholic Diocese of Wrexham and the Church in Wales Diocese of St Asaph, in partnership with Denbighshire County Council, would establish a new Anglican & Catholic dual-faith voluntary-aided school serving the communities of Denbigh, Rhyl and surrounding areas opening on the 1st September 2014, using the existing sites.

The proposers will, at a later date, make a separate proposal to construct a new building to house the new dual-site faith school on a new site in the Bodelwyddan/Rhuddlan area. The location of this new site will be determined at a future date and will be the subject of a separate formal consultation with all stakeholders.

Summary/ Conclusion

Are the proposals likely to maintain or improve the standard of education provision in the area?

It is Estyn's opinion that this proposal is likely to at least maintain the present standards of education provision in the area.

Overall, pupil outcomes in both schools appear to be good, with both schools improving in the last three years.

It is likely that pupils would still be taught on the same site by the same teachers if this proposal goes ahead, the impact on outcomes is likely to be very limited. However this cannot be guaranteed as the new dual site school's governing body will ultimately decide who is appointed.

Pupil attendance also appears to be good at both schools.

What effect do the proposals have on other schools and educational institutions in the area?

The proposals are likely to have a limited immediate impact on other schools in the area unless a large number of parents wish to choose alternative provision in a dual-faith school. The informal consultation found that ...'a number of parents/guardians, particularly from the St Brigid's School community stated that they would not send their children to any successor school and would wish to choose alternative provision'. It would have been helpful for the proposal to clarify this 'number'. However, the proposal notes that there is a combined surplus capacity of over 950 places currently in the four other secondary schools that parents would be likely to consider, so schools are likely to be able to accommodate the wishes of parents.

Description and benefits

What are the expected benefits of the proposals and disadvantages when compared with the status quo as outlined in the report?

The expected benefits of the current proposal include the following:

- the development of leadership and management structures, across both schools, to provide increased opportunities for staff development and progression;
- greater opportunities for the two schools to work together to improve staff expertise; and
- a wider range of courses at key stage 4 to more effectively address the statutory requirements of the 14-19 Learning and Skills Measure.

However, the proposal lacks sufficient detail on how these aspects will be implemented.

The next stage of the development which will be subject to a separate proposal is intended to address issues around the suitability of the accommodation.

The proposers have not identified any specific disadvantages of the current proposal, although they have said that they will ensure that any disruption due to a transfer of pupils between premises is kept to a minimum and should not impact on the children's education.

- **How well has the proposer managed any risks associated with the proposals?**

The proposers have identified the relevant risks relating to maintaining the right ethos, admission arrangements and staffing and financial implications associated with the proposal. They have also identified how these risks will be managed. However, the proposers have not clearly identified how they will manage the risk of parents choosing alternative provision which would be likely to lead to a reduction in pupil numbers.

- **Has the proposer considered suitable alternatives and given good reasons as to why these have been discounted?**

The proposers have considered a range of alternative options which include maintaining the status quo, undertaking refurbishment works or rebuilding at both schools and building a new joint-faith school. They have appropriately shown the advantages and disadvantages of each option and the reasons for their preferred option.

- **What would be the impact of the changes on learner travel arrangements and on accessibility of provision?**

There should be no initial implications regarding transport for pupils arising from the current proposal. All pupils currently transported to Blessed Edward Jones Catholic High school and St Brigid's' school who qualify for 'home to school transport' would continue to be transported free of charge to the Rhyl and Denbigh sites of the new dual-site faith school; subject to parental preference.

- **Do the proposals effectively show how surplus places will be affected? If surplus places will be increased, does the proposer give adequate reasons for this?**

The council's forecast of future pupil rolls, based on current numbers for pupils in primary schools who normally transfer, suggests that a drop in future pupil numbers will occur at Blessed Edward Jones Catholic High school from 499 in 2013 to 394 in 2018. The capacity of the school building has been calculated at 659 pupils. As of January 2013 the school had 160 surplus (empty) places; equivalent to 24.3% of its total capacity.

The council's forecast suggests that pupil numbers in secondary at St Brigid's will decline slightly from 360 in 2013 to 350 in 2018. Its capacity is 367 pupils. This means that it currently has seven surplus places or 1.9%.

St Brigid's school currently has 130 pupils in its primary provision and a capacity of 121 pupils. This means it is overfilled by nine pupils. The proposers have not provided projected pupil numbers for primary provision in St Brigid's.

Educational aspects of the proposal

- **How well has the proposer considered the impact of the proposals on the quality of the outcomes, provision and leadership and management?**

The proposer has considered a wide range of appropriate data relating to performance against the averages for the family of schools, the local authority and Wales overall (some of this detailed data would have been better placed in an appendix). The proposer has also considered the judgements from the most recent inspection reports for each school.

It would have been helpful for the proposer to consider the performance of each school compared to similar schools based on the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals.

Overall, pupil outcomes in both schools appear to be good currently, with both schools improving in the last three years.

As pupils would still be taught on the same site by the same teachers if this proposal goes ahead, the impact on outcomes is likely to be very limited. However, there would potentially be a greater impact if a second proposal to move to a new single site goes ahead. Despite including a lot of data, the proposal offers only a brief evaluation of the impact of the proposal on outcomes, with the focus being on improved provision due to a variety of issues with the buildings and facilities at both schools. There is no consideration of the impact of a new single site on the areas of learning where the current provision is inadequate (PE, ICT, DT, 14-19 range).

The proposer has not included an evaluation on the current quality of teaching, although the proposal notes the potential for improved teaching as a result of combining the staff. The proposer suggests that joint lesson planning, standardised assessment and peer observations will improve teaching which will raise standards, but opportunities for joint working will be fairly limited while the school remains on two sites that are 10 miles apart (approximately 20 minutes travel time).

The proposer has not included an evaluation on the current quality of leadership and management of each school. The proposer notes that 'financial constraints limit the capacity of small secondary schools to implement senior and middle leadership structures that meet the requirements of teachers pay and conditions', but the

proposer has not made it clear whether or not the current situation in either school is in breach of the requirements. However, the proposer has appropriately noted that the development of leadership and management structures in the dual-site school would provide increased opportunities for staff development and progression.

- **How well has the proposer considered the likely impact of the proposals to ensure delivery of the full curriculum at the foundation phase and at each key stage?**

One of the key reasons for the proposal is to prepare the way for a future proposal to move to a single site in order to address the current concerns about the provision offered at each school. The current proposal, however, is likely to have a very limited impact on the delivery of the curriculum as the pupils will remain at their current site with the same staff and facilities. However, the caveat is that it for the school's governing body to ultimately decide which staff are appointed.

How well has the proposer considered the impact of the proposals on vulnerable groups, including children with Special Educational Needs?

The proposer notes that there is no immediate impact on children with Special educational needs, which seems a reasonable conclusion. The proposer has not considered the impact of the proposal for any other vulnerable group of learners, for example looked-after children or Gypsy Traveller children.

- **Where proposals involve the transfer of learners to alternative provision, how well has the proposer provided evidence that the alternative would deliver outcomes and offer provision at least equivalent to that which is currently available to those learners (including learners with SEN)? How well has the proposer ensured that the disruption to learners is minimised?**

This current proposal does not involve the transfer of any learners to alternative provision, although it prepares the way for a future proposal which would involve the transfer of all pupils to a new single site. The issues associated with such a move and any mitigating actions would be considered in that separate proposal.

Report prepared by Farrukh Khan HMI and Mark Campion HMI.

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