

Small British Schools: The will to survive

The British National Curriculum

Once again, the small school in Britain faces an uncertain future. Under the **Education Reform Act of 1988** a National Curriculum has been prescribed for all schools. It consists of ten foundation subjects. Three are called core subjects: English, math, and science. The others are technology (including design), history, geography, music, art, physical education, and for those aged 11 to 16, a modern foreign language. These are not the complete curriculum, which will include at certain stages such things as health education, personal and social education, and career guidance.

Attainment targets have been set, traversing the whole spectrum of knowledge, skills, and understanding which pupils should master as they progress through the school. There are four key-stages at ages 7, 9, 11, and 14, when *School Attainment Tests* will be set.

The question therefore is being asked, "How can small schools with two or three teachers possibly offer such a broad, differentiated curriculum?" Is not closure in favour of consolidation into larger units the only answer? Apparently, the small primary schools themselves do not think so, nor do their supporters. A few have closed their doors under local education authority re-organization. But, thus far, the great majority have stayed open for business and are very much alive, if still apprehensive. How do they do it? Where does their support come from?

Parent Power

One answer lies in the fact that the Local Education Authority (LEA) reflects a party political background. Though the rural constituencies where most of the small primary schools are to be found are Conservative, all County Councillors are sensitive to the voice of those who elect them. Those

voices are very much in favour of keeping "their" school in the heart of the local community. This identification of the school with the community has been further underlined by the creation of parent governors for all schools under the **Education (No. 2) Act of 1986**. These governors have a stake in the school: they have children in it. In fact, in one or two instances, where the LEA has planned closure, parents have applied for "opt-out" status, thereby relieving them of further LEA control in favour of "grant-maintained status," or direct funding from the government. The corollary, however, of this is that those self-same parents now have to ensure for the community in general that the school measures up to the requirements of the National Curriculum.

In general, the knowledge that their small school is about to be hanged (*pace* D'Johnson!) has clarified parents' thinking about what they can do to help in the education-process. They have become involved in the daily life of the school as never before. School handbooks emanating from the school provide not just the "familiar matter of today" but suggestions for parent cooperation (e.g., how they can help their children read and write). One school has a craft and design afternoon weekly, to which members of the local community are invited. There, they work with groups of children on activities in which they have particular expertise or interest. In another case parents act as teacher-aids with the infant classes on one set day a week. In other known cases, parents have helped with drama activities, including provision of a well-stocked wardrobe and other props. One school has been fortunate enough to have parents lay out and landscape a school garden complete with ornamental pool. Perhaps these activities reflect the changing texture of village-life. Many parents choose to come and live there. One survey concluded that 80% of English people would like to live in the country if they had the chance.

In short, the village school seems to have become more and more identified with the primitive heartbeat of the whole community. Not surprisingly, the school in turn happily reflects this attitude.

Small School Responses

Involvement in the life of the community has taken many forms. Invitations are sent out for all school events. The media are frequently invited. One school participates in the village anti-litter campaign. Another has strong ties with a local play group and holds joint performances. In one case, a local old folks home has been "adopted": concerts are presented there; and residents are regularly invited to school functions (including afternoon tea!). In another instance, a Victorian Harvest Festival is held annually for the "Over 60s Group."

Nevertheless, a creeping shadow falls over these small schools. A recent report by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools has pointed to the widening gap between large and small schools in terms of implementation of the National Curriculum. There are fewer teachers to share the work load.

“Can two or three teachers be expected to ‘cover’ all subjects equally well?” is fondly asked.

Clustering of Small Schools

In answer to this question, some schools are adopting a policy of clustering. Reasonably adjacent schools can thereby pool facilities, study-schemes, teacher strengths. In one such federation, regular exchange of teachers takes place so that all the children may get the equal benefit of being taught by teachers with appropriate expertise in the subject areas of the National Curriculum. Teacher-strengths can be pooled in joint projects such as study of the locality. Special topics may include a math day, a science day, an environmental day, a day for literary activities, a mini-olympics. In this particular federation, the fourth-year juniors of each of four schools meet together on one afternoon every week and work with one of the Heads in different areas of the curriculum. Resource materials are pooled by circulating them among the schools, e.g., physical education equipment such as hockey-sticks, or a volley-ball set; science-kits, labelled under the National Curriculum headings; specialized art equipment such as screen-printing or a kiln for pottery; supplementary reading material. All four schools have on occasion gathered at the local community hall to provide entertainment they have devised. Not all clusters are likely to be as dynamic as this one, which received a “Heart of the Community” award recently from the prestigious Royal Society of Arts. But it shows what can be done to endear the school to the locality. We live in an age of certification; and parents expect results.

The Role of the Local Education Authority

Traditionally, the LEAs have been responsible for maintaining educational standards throughout their catchment areas. The **Education Reform Act of 1988**, requiring them to bring in Local Management of Schools according to a set timetable, has not meant the abdication of such responsibility in the case of small schools. They still receive their budget, but the LEA is there to help the school with budget planning and management. It also provides certain centrally managed services (with a limit placed by the Act on their overall value). Procedure varies among the LEAs: the right to determine their own priorities has always been a zealously guarded one. But given the fact that grass-roots support for small primary schools runs so deep in rural areas, some LEAs at least have devised curriculum and organizational support for their small schools in several ways. A particularly helpful one in one LEA has been what is dubbed the “school top-up”, a most tangible way of recognizing the needs of the small school in relation to a National Curriculum. A single example may suffice. In this Authority’s area, the pupil-teacher ration is set at 1:23.75. Thus, a small school of 40 pupils would be entitled to 40/23.75 or 1.68 teachers (translated into one full-time teacher and one part-timer for a total of 3-1/2 days a week). But the top-up formula of 200-40 pupils/200 provides an additional .7 of a teacher, or a total teaching

strength of 2.38 (rounded off to two full-time teachers and a part-timer for two whole days or some permutation thereof). No one would argue that having **two** full-time teachers, plus the part-time help, does not enhance the prospect of the school measuring up to the formidable requirements of the National Curriculum!

Conclusion

The will to survive is very evident in small primary schools and the community in which they exist. But when all is said and done, the question of cost-effectiveness remains. It has been reliably estimated that it costs approximately twice as much to educate a child in a school of 30 as it does in a school of 130.

Money for state-education is in short supply these days. No longer is it the favoured child as it was after the end of World War II. Other local community services are pressing their case for more funding: hospitals, the fire service, the police. Larger primary schools may cease to be accepting of the preferential treatment thus far afforded small ones. Yet if the demands of the National Curriculum are to be met, these need more of a share, not less, of the resources available.

In a steady stream of research publications over the last two decades, the viability of the small school educationally has been extolled. Maybe a more definitive judgment will soon be forthcoming. In the summer of 1991, *School Attainment Tests* in the three core-curriculum areas of science, English, and math will be held in all primary schools for children aged 7 years. Many parents and teachers will be watching anxiously for the results, to see how the small primary schools have performed, *vis-à-vis* their bigger cousins.

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