TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

October 21st 2015

AN OPINION ON THE EDUCATIONAL VIABILITY OF EMBLETON VINCENT EDWARDS CHURCH OF ENGLAND AIDED SCHOOL IN NORTHUMBERLAND AS AN ALL THROUGH PRIMARY SCHOOL.

[Signature]

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I was invited to give an expert opinion of the viability of Embleton Vincent Edwards CoE School by the Embleton Community and Parent Action Group in response to their expressed concerns over the proposed closure of their local school.

I have experience in both curriculum and school organisation matters.

I spent time at the National Curriculum Council as a lead professional officer co-authoring the non-statutory guidance advising schools on the implementation of the National Curriculum. I led the project on exemplifying standards for use in primary schools and then led on the first National Curriculum review. With Ecarda I have acted as education consultant to a major Academy Trust, designing curriculum models across all phases, including one all-age (3-19) academy. With a group of primary schools I developed what we called “A curriculum for Learning”, which looked at progression through domains other than subject content and was consequently adopted by schools in other areas of the UK. My most recent work is on developing measures of progress in a National Curriculum without levels which has led to a partnership with a large national web-based school management systems provider.

As a deputy director of education I led on the re-organisation of schools across a local authority, driven then by the need to reduce surplus places. I was author of the strategy “Better Schools: a Better Tomorrow”, which informed the reorganisation and received national commendation. At the point of implementation the project received full support from local communities, churches and business.

As Managing Director of Ecarda, I continue to provide education consultancy services to national bodies, local authorities, multi-academy trusts and individual schools and academies.

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The Education Case for a small primary school at Embleton

1. It is recognised that the decision on the future of Embleton Vincent Edward, as a Church of England Voluntary Aided School, will ultimately be decided by the Diocesan Board. It owns the school, employs the staff and has a majority representation on the governing body.

2. Whilst the local authority may have a view on the future of Embleton Vincent Edward because of its statutory and strategic responsibility to ensure a sufficient number of school places, the Diocesan Board is likely to have a different perspective because of its mission to serve the communities in its own parishes.

3. There are 2144 small primary schools (fewer than 100 pupils) in England (DfE SFR-16-2015 Table 2e) and an estimated 630 very small primary schools (fewer than 50 pupils).

4. Nationally there has been a year on year rise in primary pupil numbers and this shows no sign of abating.

5. Performance data from small schools, often suppressed in league tables, but available on request from DfE, show many small schools outperforming larger schools and the quality of provision, as judged by Ofsted, shows many small schools offering a better quality than their larger counterparts.

   In 1999, after inspecting every primary school in England, Ofsted reported on the comparative performance of small schools, which it defined as those with fewer than 100 pupils. It found that small primary schools achieved markedly better test results, but after adjusting for socio-economic factors, the differences were marginal.

   However, there was much else that was positive for small schools. Ofsted argued “the quality of teaching in small schools is generally better than in larger schools”. Inspectors concluded that their “positive ethos” and “important place in the community” meant there was “a good case” for small schools. In short, they tick all the Every Child Matters boxes.

   As Ofsted reported, small schools have a positive ethos that fosters "a family atmosphere", "good standards of behaviour" and "close links with parents and the community". That sounds like a recipe for solving many current problems, not only in rural areas but also, perhaps especially, in urban areas too.

   “Recognising the good of small schools” Mike Baker, The Guardian, 2008

6. From this it may be inferred that educational quality is not determined by school size.
7. Key determinants to educational outcomes are the quality of teaching and the quality of leadership which deploys its resources to best effect. Necessarily, in small schools, this deployment of resources involves partnerships and collaborative arrangements beyond the school.

8. The two Headteachers at Embleton, Swansfield Park and Whittingham have signalled their intention to work together as a collaborative partnership in order to sustain each other and offer a full, broad and balanced curriculum to all the children in their schools.

9. This intention should be formalised after the organisation of schools in the area has been settled in order to secure the viability of primary phase educational provision at Embleton.

10. Paragraph 4.7 in the document “Alnwick Partnership: Further Consultation” reference is made to the possibility of Embleton school not remaining viable as a First school. There is no intention of remaining as a First school.

11. Paragraph 4.5 in the document referred to above states that consultation respondents claim that small first schools would find it difficult to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for children in Years 5 and 6. There is no reason to suggest that such provision is any more challenging for any year group. Indeed, arguably the most complex curriculum provision is at Foundation Stage which sets expectations across the affect, process and concept domains whilst the National Curriculum expectations are framed predominantly in the concept domain.

12. Also in paragraph 4.5 references to the changed expectations of Ofsted increasing difficulties is a universal point and not specific to a school whose number of Key Stages (three) would not change. It therefore has no bearing on the argument.

13. The “workability” of small schools collaborating in partnership is well documented. Indeed, Northumberland were contributors to the paper “Better Together – Exploratory Case Studies of Formal Collaborations between small Rural Primary Schools”, Todman et al. Research report DCSF-RR162, 2009, in which both the Diocesan Board and the Local Authority are quoted as supporting collaboration and shared headships across both community and church schools in order to enable sustainability and success in very small schools.

14. The Norfolk Local Authority strategy for small schools actively encourages very small schools to collaborate and then, where possible, federate. Internet searches failed to find a similar Northumberland Local Authority small schools strategy, though their support to them is evident.

15. Two full time teachers, an appropriately qualified adult for nursery, a one-day leased headteacher, a small number of support staff and collaborations with Swansfield Park and Whittingham could offer the full curriculum to the full primary age-range at Embleton. Organisationally, one teacher would teach the pupils of Key Stage 2 whilst the other would have responsibility for Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. The school
currently has the space to offer this provision to up to 75 pupils (LA school capacity assessment).

16. Given that Embleton in judged by Ofsted as good, Swansfield Park is outstanding and Whittingham is good, there is the real possibility of sharing successful practices in order to achieve a triple of ‘outstandings’ across the group. For example, Studham C of E Village School in Bedfordshire moved from good to outstanding between 2009 and 2014 with Ofsted citing effective partnership working as a contributory factor. Over the same period its numbers grew from 43 to 64.

17. First schools that have been working with age-related expectations, expressed as early learning goals in Foundation Stage 2, are well placed to introduce the new National Curriculum up to the end of Year 6 because, for Reading, Writing and Mathematics, the old National Curriculum levels have been replaced with new age-related expectations for the end of each year group. This assists in planning bespoke age-related learning routes in classes of mixed age ensuring work is pitched towards achieving what is expected nationally of each in relation to their age. In this sense, Embleton already has the necessary know-how in order to plan and track individual pupil progress through to the age of 11 years. This refutes the point made in paragraph 4.5 that changes to curricular structures would have a particularly deleterious impact on a small all-through primary school.

18. Any teacher qualified to teach in a primary school is qualified to teach the full primary age range which includes Years 5 and 6 in Key Stage 2. Their initial training will have normally included training across Foundation Stage 2, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Thus, existing teachers at Embleton will be qualified to teach the full age range. Where teachers are redeployed within a school to teach in a key stage in which they have no recent experience it is common practice for those teachers to receive refresher and update training.

19. As a Church of England Aided School the Diocese should be content that a shared headteacher with another Church school assures the Christian character at Embleton, retaining, inter alia, its employment of staff and control over admissions.

20. The two headteachers from the three schools, Embleton, Swansfield Park and Whittingham are already working together on developing a common curriculum that matches the new National Curriculum across the whole of Key Stage 2. A common timetable, common curriculum themes, and common approaches to planning, measuring and reporting progress open the possibility of very small age groups coming together as one group for particular lessons and events. Swansfield has planned to deploy one member of staff to work up these intentions into practical plans once the future of the three schools is determined, but the aim to work in this collaborative fashion is already in place. The headteacher at Swansfield is keen that the new facilities being opened on the Swansfield site benefit learners across all three schools. Each school has its unique environment, for example the beaches at Embleton, and using these to benefit learners across all three schools for field studies and topic work
would be scripted into curriculum planning. Through a common and synchronised curriculum, school visits including residential trips, which enrich and enhance learning, would include children from all three schools.

21. By operating as a consortium, not only would a broad and balanced curriculum be assured but also children would have access to extra-curricular and sporting opportunities not afforded by working in isolation. For example, joint swimming coaching at the leisure centre and joint workshops with the local artist at Embleton.

22. Parents' associations and/or friends of the school groups are keen that the funds they raise are used to pay the necessary costs of transporting children across the three schools.

23. It appears that remarks made in paragraph 4.7 of the consultation document have not taken into any account the fact that Embleton could be part of a collaborative.

24. Evidence does suggest limited partnership working across schools in this area in the past but it appears things have changed. Two headteachers with track records of successful leadership, a single-mindedness to securing the best outcomes for children across all three schools and an open-mindedness to ways of achieving this have opened up possibilities never available before. Reciprocal membership on governing bodies further cements this relationship.

25. Trust, willingness and ability are key ingredients of successful partnership working which blend to create the partnership capacity that benefits each constituent partner. These ingredients are now evident.

26. Judgements on educational sustainability should be based on this new and current context rather than historic evidence.

27. Other evidence presented indicates that the Embleton community is sustainable and growing. A sustainable community warrants and deserves the regenerative asset of a sustainable school as each will benefit the other.