

The EA has now completed its Consultation Meetings with the governors, staff (teaching and non-teaching) and parents of Lurgan College.

As Headmaster of Lurgan College for almost 14 years, I now wish to make a public statement, as an educationalist, in relation to the EA Consultation on the future of Craigavon Senior High School.

I very much welcome the Education Authority's Pre-Consultation on the future of Craigavon Senior High School. There is universal agreement that the status quo is unacceptable and that a solution must be found to meet the educational needs of the young people who attend the Lurgan Campus of Craigavon Senior High School.

During the last Pre-Consultation exercise in 2011 my position was clear and remains unchanged: a commitment to the retention of the well tried and tested Dickson Plan model of education across the Craigavon area and the establishment of a strong Craigavon Senior High School which is educationally and financially viable.

Consultation with the community revealed an unsurprisingly high level of support for the retention of the Dickson Plan in 2014 and all attempts to re-define the Dickson Plan in a dishonest and disingenuous manner were exposed and ultimately defeated.

In 2016 the whole community breathed a huge sigh of relief when the Education Minister, Mr Peter Weir, guaranteed that all threats to the Dickson Plan would be lifted and that it would not be removed either directly or by stealth. In the absence of a Stormont administration, this remains Department policy until this day.

The preferred Option proposed by the Education Authority after months of meetings with the various stakeholders is the only option which retains the Dickson Plan model of education for all the pupils in the Lurgan area. While, of course, we would all seek to minimise pupil movement, the reality is that there is no other solution within the Dickson Plan model of education which will guarantee an appropriate educational provision for the children of Lurgan. An integral part of this option would be the provision of a brand new school and access to a full 14-19 curriculum offer in due course.

As part of the Consultation the EA chose to include a number of options which were rejected on educational grounds. One of the rejected options, Option 4, would see the closure of Lurgan Junior High School (with all staff re-applying for their jobs and positions) and the creation of a new non-selective 11-16 in Lurgan. While this would ensure that the current CSHS children continue to be educated in Lurgan, it would signal the end of the Dickson Plan model of education and would be in contravention both of the wishes of the majority of the community and of the Department of Education policy, based on Minister Weir's statement of 6 June 2016.

In 2011 this model was considered and rejected outright by all the key educational stakeholders (Lurgan College, Craigavon Senior High School and Lurgan Junior High School) during consultation. At a secret meeting on 6 November 2012 called by Lurgan Junior High School and Craigavon Senior High School with the Sinn Fein Education Minister, John O'Dowd, the Chairs and Principals of both these schools expressed an explicit preference for the creation of an all ability 11-19 school on the Junior High School site, encompassing Lurgan College, Craigavon Senior High School and Lurgan Junior High School (c.f. Paper entitled '*Meeting with the Education Minister (John O'Dowd), Stormont Buildings, Tuesday 6 November 2012*', secured through a 'Freedom of Information' request):

*'... a majority of the members of each Board of Governors would favour the creation of a single school on the junior high site'*.

The Chairs and Principals of Lurgan Junior High School and Craigavon Senior High School, including Mr McKay, current Chair of Lurgan Junior High School, also expressed to Mr O'Dowd their very grave reservations about a LJHS/CSHS amalgamation, as set out in Option 4 of the current consultation:

*'the two schools focus on different Key Stages. There would be no opportunity to rationalise courses and the cost of delivering the Entitlement Framework to such very small cohorts would continue to be prohibitive'.*

The Chairs and Principals, including Mr McKay, current Chair of Lurgan Junior High School, explicitly dismissed the 11-16 Option 4 as

*'the failed model now being abandoned by the Maintained Sector in Lurgan',* adding that

*'the JHS teachers are unfamiliar with KS4 provision'.*

Given that these were the views of these Chairs and Principals during the most recent consultation, I am utterly bemused that suddenly this seems to be the best 'educational' solution to the problem. Surely the children of our community do not deserve to be subjected to what the current Chairman of Lurgan Junior High School believes to be a 'failed model' of education.

The people of Lurgan deserve to be treated with honesty and dignity rather than be sold an alternative solution which might provide a short-term political, even ideological solution with longer-term disastrous educational consequences. A political/ideological wolf in educational sheep's clothing, to coin a phrase, must be exposed as all our children, from the most academically gifted to the most educationally challenged, will lose out.

Educationally the 11-16 model would provide for a dysfunctional school, the like of which does not exist anywhere else in the Province, the UK or the world. Its confusion over whether it is an all ability school (as in KS3) or a non-selective school (as in KS4) which would result in a flawed KS3/KS4 disconnect devoid of continuity, coherence and progression. All pupils, both the most vulnerable and the most able, would lose out in this worst of all forms of comprehensive education. The removal of the 115 most academically able pupils at the end of KS3 would be most detrimental to the well-being of the deflated less academically able pupils, literally, left behind. Gone would be the educational benefits of the current model: no more specialist KS3 expertise; no more opportunities for Y10 leadership – Head Boy, Head Girl, prefects, positions of responsibility; no more Dickson Plan trademark 'fresh start' for all pupils at age 14, which currently leads to enhanced motivation. Instead the prevailing ethos of the school would be 'non-selective' rather than 'all ability' with non-academic role models for the able KS3 pupils. As a result, parents would quite understandably seek other educational pathways for their pupils at age 11. In time, the loss of our most academically able pupils from the Craigavon area to Armagh, Banbridge and Lisburn would be disastrous for the cohesion of the local community in every way, not least of which, economically.

The impact of this unpopular 11-16 school, proposed in Option 4, would be felt keenly by our colleagues in all our local primary schools who would be forced into preparing large numbers of P7 pupils for the 11+ AQE examinations. This would have adverse effects on the upper primary years (Key Stage 2) caused by preparation for the transfer tests at age 10 or 11; surely the distorting of our Dickson Plan Primary Schools' curriculum would be an utterly retrograde step.

In addition, the impact of the 11-16 model's depriving Craigavon Senior High School of around one third of its pupil population would render the Portadown campus of Craigavon Senior High School unviable, both educationally and financially, and would, therefore, destabilise the whole Dickson Plan

across Craigavon, including Portadown and Tandragee. The inevitable collapse of the Dickson Plan in Lurgan, resulting from this ill-thought-out 11-16 solution, would quickly be followed by the inevitable collapse of the Dickson Plan across the whole borough.

Option 4 is not the Dickson Plan and this is evidenced by there being no mention of any 11-16 models in the Memorandum of Understanding drawn up by all the Principals of all 7 Dickson Plan schools but signed off by the Boards of Governors of only 6 of the 7 schools (Clounagh JHS, Craigavon Senior High School, Killicomaine JHS, Lurgan College, Portadown College and Tandragee JHS). Lurgan Junior High School do not currently feel in a position to sign up to the agreed Dickson Plan Memorandum of Understanding. I reiterate that the LHS-proposed 11-16 model is not the Dickson Plan. To argue otherwise is to mislead the community.

Much has been made of the impact of any movement of children on the most vulnerable. There is already a perfectly well tried and tested mechanism for catering for these children within the current Dickson Plan model. Both Clounagh JHS and Tandragee JHS include a Learning Support Centre for a very limited number of pupils who remain in the schools after KS3. The establishment of a Learning Support Centre in Lurgan JHS would address the exceptional needs of our most vulnerable pupils in an effective and appropriate manner.

It is, of course, up to every member of the community how they respond to the consultation. It is important, however, that they are afforded the courtesy of being appraised of the hard facts rather than harmful fiction. The question for the community is not primarily do you want the children to be transferred by bus to a single site or not; it is rather, do you want your children to avail of a top class education and, if so, how far are you literally willing to go and what are you willing to sacrifice in order to give it to them?

The single site option would be greatly enhanced with the provision of a brand new school in due course in a location which allows for effective collaborative links with the Southern Regional College, as agreed by all 7 Dickson Plan schools at the time of the last review of the system (Mulryne Report, 2007). Also included in that Report was the unanimous view of all 7 Dickson Plan schools that the provision of a Sixth Form, offering an appropriate range of academic, vocational and technical pathways for the pupils would also be desirable.

Support for the EA's preferred proposal to educate the CSHS children on a single site guarantees the future of the Dickson Plan and the provision of appropriate educational pathways in the non-selective sector; failure to do so will mortally wound the Dickson Plan, leading to its very destruction. While the latter may well be the misguided aspiration of a small number of people, the community of Lurgan made the correct call as regards their children's education during the last Dickson Plan consultation a few years ago, ensuring that the Dickson Plan would be there for generations to come; I have every confidence that they will do so again.