



Big Picnic for Education

On a warm sunny afternoon, parents, children, teachers and students gathered on Christchurch Green, Wanstead for the Big Picnic for Education “*Stand up for our schools – say NO to education cuts*”. Led by Victoria Baskerville, speakers told how cuts affecting their schools were damaging children’s education.

Helen Watson, representing Friends of Redbridge Music Service, made a plea on behalf of the arts, music and sports. Why was it, she asked, that private schools could offer a wide range of music activities when publicly funded schools were having to cut music provision to balance the budget? Lily, a sixth-former who had come directly from an AS exam, made an impassioned plea for solidarity over the issue of the cuts. Her school could lose up to ten teachers and this prospect was stressing her even more than the exams.

And all this at a time when the Education Secretary, Justine Greening, announces there is money for additional free schools, for the creation of new grammar schools and for the continuation of the academies programme.

An NUT rep. told of teaching assistant posts disappearing at her school and the recruitment of older more experienced teachers being seen as expensive while younger less experienced teachers were considered financially more attractive.

One speaker said it was not unknown for TAs to be asked to teach, thus undermining the professional status of teachers.

The head teacher of Gilbert Colvin Primary in Clayhall said her school was set to lose three teachers under the proposed cuts. This would result in increased class sizes and less time for the teacher to spend with each child.

Claire Downey, Chair of Governors Hatton School and Governor Representative on Redbridge Schools Funding Forum, reported that setting the budget at her school was becoming progressively harder. Councillor Elaine Norman, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, expressed her support, saying the Council was behind the Head Teachers in their efforts to achieve funding for their schools.

Wes Streeting, contesting Ilford North, paid a warm tribute to his teachers and to the education he had received, which had propelled him from a Stepney council estate to Cambridge and ultimately Parliament.

And still there were speakers, saying how the cuts were already affecting their children and their schools, testifying that class sizes had already grown exponentially and that parents had real power to persuade the wider community to think carefully when they cast their vote.

The last word goes, I think, to Jas, Head Teacher of Cranbrook Primary, who reminded us all of her school's motto, "Our children today, our future tomorrow". What better way to encapsulate today's message?

Maureen Henderson



You are Wanted

If you would like to continue your involvement in education in retirement and have a bit of time to spare, why not volunteer to help with your local Redbridge NUT Branch activities? Different roles available. For more information contact Bob Archer - 07956 656086 or bobarcher46@btinternet.com



Getting the local authority out of education – Part 2

My article in the previous edition of this Newsletter made the assertion that removing FE (Further Education) colleges from LA control in 1992 had led to an explosion of executive salaries and perks, as well as cases of financial mismanagement and corporate corruption. In this article, I shall put some ‘flesh on the bones’ of this assertion by providing some examples.

Colleges Under the Spotlight

So, let’s start back in April 1999, when Bilston College in the West Midlands helped to get the show on the road with a damning indictment, cited by BBC News: the college was branded as the worst in the sector, having apparently set up a web of businesses across the country resulting in a 9 million pound debt.

Later in 1999, Judith Cutler, writing for the Independent, wrote, in relation to Halton College, Cheshire, that “truth is stranger than fiction” and that “anyone working in FE during the last decade would have been able to predict fraud”. Cutler goes on to highlight the college that bought a night-club, the principal who had an office in the West Indies and communicated with his staff by email, and another who was alleged to have run a pub while on sick leave!

Fraud Then and Now

By 2002, The Guardian was able to report that the funding agency was investigating 33 cases of alleged fraud in the FE and post -16 training sector and that they were receiving on average 4 new complaints every month. Of the 33 cases under investigation, 51% involved funding over-claims, 24% falsifying student numbers, 10% breaches of financial regulations and 15% other allegations, including breach of corporate governance.

Fast forward to 2013 and BBC News reported that Barnfield College was being investigated over ‘grade massaging’ and that at Newham College, in our own neck of the woods, there were students who ‘never sat courses they passed’ and for which the college would have received funding. In addition, ITV News also reported in the same month that the “college is at the centre of allegations of homophobia, nepotism, corruption and mismanagement”.

And by 2014, FE Week carried the news that, in the funding agency’s annual report and accounts for 2013-14, 108 new allegations of financial irregularity were considered, compared to 52 the previous year.

So, with this multitude of corrupt shenanigans in post-incorporation FE, it would hardly take a genius to predict that removing schools from LA control, would, as sure as night follows day, lead to exactly the same unsavoury outcomes. In my final article in this series in the next edition of this newsletter, I shall cite some examples of these outcomes in the non-LA schools sector, as well as examining the motives behind academisation and ‘free’ schools.

Henry Tiller

Reflections on the Election

Great General Election result, which means I think we should take time to congratulate and applaud our Union for what has been an exemplary campaign during the general election - and by "our Union" I mean all of us, not just people in a building near Kings Cross.

We have been bold and ambitious and it has worked - the website and materials from HQ have been central to this but they are nothing without activity on the ground.

All over the country union members have risen to the challenge and responded, in whatever way they could, to make sure that education was highlighted as an election issue. And there have been some truly inspiring events and activities that have engaged a new layer of members and enabled us to make important links with parents.

This is not to be complacent; some things have worked better than others and we should think about what lessons can be drawn when considering how we take our campaigns forward - but that can wait.

For now we should acknowledge that our campaign has been second to none among trade unions and that it has had a real impact nationally and in local areas.

Whatever the outcome of the general election, there will be much to do and we have collectively put ourselves in a strong position for the next stages of the campaign and also ensured that we are going into the NEU in the best possible position, having established that this is the kind of union we want to be.

Well done everyone.

Alex Kenny (NUT Executive Member)

Beyond our borders...

As an antidote to the all too easy parochial focus on local Redbridge matters, the London network of retired teachers – encompassing both inner and outer boroughs – offers a wider and indeed often global perspective. Meetings, held several times a year at Hamilton House, provide an eclectic mix of talks and discussions on a range of subjects. Speakers with specific and personal experience or expertise introduce topics, followed by lively and controversial argument – sometimes, as in the run-up to last year's referendum, becoming quite heated! Domestic concerns such as education spending cuts, the hated testing and inspection regime, and the narrowing curriculum all feature, as do our troubled NHS, social care provision (or its lack) and pensions.

However, as well as these home-grown issues, international matters also feature. Recent meetings have addressed the situation in Greece, both economic and social; educationally, school funding has been cut to such an extent that secondary provision in the final years hardly exists apart from voluntary "after hours" schools. In Turkey, the repressive Erdogan regime has led to widespread dismissal of teachers and lecturers who have been too outspoken in their criticism of the government and in their calls for a more open curriculum. Imprisonment without prospect of an early trial has become the norm. Their struggle continues. In Palestinian refugee camps, education and social stability are hard-won and constantly under threat, creating a generation of troubled and disaffected teenagers. Volunteer teachers, many of them retired, work for varying lengths of time as supplementary staff in schools and report back on their experiences.

A creative partnership with Cuban teachers goes from strength to strength, with regular delegations and exchange programmes shining a light on an egalitarian education system. London retired teachers have raised funds to provide Braille machines for use in schools, thus revolutionising sight-impaired children's ability to participate in the world around them.

I come away from these occasions feeling I have gained an insight into circumstances and opinions beyond my normal sphere of interaction and with a sense of still having a role to play – often lost sight of in retirement.

Liz Dolan
