

New Schools in the East and west of Southampton

Summary

The City Council is currently deciding a competition between bidders vying to run two new secondary schools which will replace Grove Park, Millbrook, Oaklands and Woolston schools. It is a rather sad story and I would counsel against two pairs of proposals, those from the *Southampton Education Trust* and from the *United Learning Trust*. I would also suggest caution over the bids from *Oasis Community Learning*, although I believe they are unambiguously the best on offer.

Schools Background

Southampton's secondary schools are not very good. Perhaps the best up-to-date indicators are the number of 2006 school leavers who gained good (A-C) GCSEs in Maths and English—minimal skills for twenty-first century employment—and the percentage of leavers not in education, employment or training. The data¹ makes depressing reading:

	GCSE English & Maths 2006	NEET 2005
St Anne's Catholic School (girls)	70%	1%
Regents Park Community College (girls)	56%	7%
The Sholing Technology College (girls)	52%	5%
England Average	48.20%	
Southern Area Average		7%
Bitterne Park School	47%	10%
Cantell Maths and Computing College	47%	14%
St George Catholic School for Boys	35%	5%
Woolston School Language College	34%	10%
Bellemoor School (boys)	31%	8%
Redbridge Community School	30%	16%
Grove Park Business and Enterprise College (boys)	23%	11%
Chamberlayne Park School	19%	14%
Woodlands Community College	18%	19%
Oaklands Community School	17%	20%
Millbrook Community School	16%	21%

Parental confidence in the schools also tells its own story; I have calculated a popularity index by dividing the school capacities² by the number of 2006 first choice applications and have also calculated the current occupancy of each school:

	Applications per place	Percent full
Redbridge Community School	1.32	92%
St Anne's Catholic School (girls) ³	1.20	101%
Bitterne Park School ⁴	1.16	97%
Woolston School Language College	1.00	97%
The Sholing Technology College (girls)	0.85	101%
Oaklands Community School	0.72	89%
Regents Park Community College (girls)	0.62	87%
Woodlands Community College	0.53	65%
Cantell Maths and Computing College	0.53	81%
Chamberlayne Park School	0.50	89%
Grove Park Business and Enterprise College (boys)	0.47	56%
St George Catholic School for Boys	0.39	68%
Belle Moor School (boys)	0.36	66%
Millbrook Community School	0.34	61%

Note that the number of applications for St Anne's underestimates demand for this school. The application process ensured⁵ that children who fail to get into their first choice school would also fail to get into an oversubscribed second choice. As a result, non-Catholics living in the Redbridge or Bitterne Park catchments were probably best advised not to apply to St Anne's

To allow parents to exercise choice, it is normal to maintain about 10% spare places. In an ideal world, there would be 0.9 applicants per place and the schools would be 90% full. The figures above reveal two problems. There are too many places in total, partly because many parents choose to educate their children outside Southampton. . From the most recent Southampton figures, 229 parental first preferences were for schools outside Southampton, while only St Anne's attracts a significant number of children (40 of them) from outside the city school catchments. Within Southampton, there is a small number of oversubscribed schools and a set of unpopular schools which are being filled with children who did not get into their first choices: a sort of local postcode lottery.

Ofsted inspections tell much the same story. Only Bitterne Park, Regents Park and Redbridge fall into the top "outstanding" category; St George, Grove Park, Millbrook, Belle Moor and Cantell are in the lowest acceptable "satisfactory" category, with the last two just out of "special measures".

There is a clear need to reduce the number of surplus places. Arguments supporting possible increases in student numbers seem very weak; I would expect numbers in Southampton LEA schools to continue to decline because decreasing rolls in Hampshire will allow even more families in Southampton to exercise their preference for education outside the City and increasing

affluence⁶ will allow others to pay for private education or move out into Hampshire's most attractive catchments.

It has been claimed that Poles will fill our schools. We can make a quick calculation about East European migration, based on the Council's "Myth Buster". There are probably about 100 migrant children in Southampton secondary schools now; roughly half of these appear to be at St Anne's. The 12,000 or so migrants here are mainly Catholics of childbearing age and, according to recent reports, perhaps a third might be expected to settle; many of these will marry and have children. We might perhaps expect 1,000 families of two children, giving a peak of 2,000 extra secondary school children *in not less than twelve year's time*. They might perhaps save one school in the next-but-one round of closures, if these families all stay and educate their children in Southampton.

A quick fix

The main problem is obvious. Resources are being wasted on too many schools. The half-empty ones were obvious candidates for closure: Woodlands, Grove Park, St George, Bellemoor and Millbrook. Of these, Woodlands cannot be closed because it uses expensive PFI buildings with long-term commitments and St George is controlled by the Catholic Church. We needed two fewer schools, and the decision has been taken to close the worst performing of the remaining three: Grove Park and Millbrook. There is some further complication over sites and staff; the plan is to combine each closure with the closure of another nearby school, Oaklands and Woolston respectively, and the creation of a "new" school on one of the sites. In both cases the "new" school will be on the site furthest from the city centre although in Oaklands' case any new build would have to be on the "Five Acre Field" playing fields opposite. Closing the schools in pairs allows a little more flexibility in staffing and should improve access to future capital funding under tranche C of the *Building Schools for the Future* programme; we might get the money around 2015.

Girls will help Boys

There is another interesting twist. Back when we all took the 11+, girls consistently did better than boys. There were no more (and there were sometimes fewer) grammar school places for girls, so the girls were set a higher pass mark to get into one. Back then, the boys tended to catch up somewhat by the time they took GCEs. Now, the boys do consistently worse at 11 and at GCSE; 50.2% of girls get five good GCSEs including Maths and English, but only 41.6% of boys achieve the same.

In single sex schools, the girls do (even) better and the boys do (even) worse.

As Andrew Hind's paper for the Council Cabinet explains,

there is considerable evidence that boys in Southampton (as in the rest of the country) seriously under perform in school. The relative gap between boys' and girls' performance is greater in single sex schools than in mixed schools. There is an urgent need to take steps to improve boys' achievement. The underachievement of boys is an important contributory factor holding down the overall achievement of pupils in the city. Achievement at Bellemoor is likely to be higher if the school becomes mixed.

Regents Park has consistently delivered high standards. Both in terms of raw GCSE scores and value added, Regents Park is one of the best schools in the city. It has also been judged as "outstanding" by Ofsted. If the school goes mixed this could extend the opportunity to achieve higher outcomes to boys. An improvement in outcomes for boys should not be at the expense of girls' achievement. There are mixed schools in the city where girls achieve equivalent results.

Thus the Council proposes to make all four of its non-Catholic single-sex schools mixed, hoping that the boys will be dragged up further than the girls are dragged down. By the way, the last sentence ...*mixed schools in the city where girls achieve equivalent results* needs to be handled with caution; if GCSE results including English and Maths are calculated, St Anne's and Regent's Park have the best-performing girls in the City. If, however, we ignore English and Maths, Bitterne Park's score jumps by 20% to put it in second place.

Geography

A big problem with the current proposals is that they continue to move school places to the perimeter of the city, where they will be hard to fill and where attendance by city centre pupils will inevitably be worse. We have seen the collapse of a proposal for a new school on the old *La Sainte Union* site and the Council is unlikely to be able to purchase the Shirley Civil Service site for Regents Park school. The Woolston *Vosper-Thornycroft* site is another lost opportunity for a school with a maritime flavour. The current catchment for Woolston school extends across the city centre. Presumably these children would have to find their way to Grove Park under the new arrangements; there will not be room for them at Redbridge. This drift of schools out of the centre of the city was of particular concern to the Central Neighbourhood Partnership and should, I believe be restricted by retaining the Woolston and Millbrook sites until suitable sites nearer the centre become available.

Long Term Provision

Another serious problem is the likely decrease of flexibility in educational provision which new academies might bring. We already have three PFI

secondary school buildings (Cantell, Redbridge and Woodlands) and two religious schools (St Anne's and St George) all of which would be very expensive or difficult to close. Of these, St George and Woodlands might otherwise be likely candidates for closure in this round. Two new Academies would leave the Local Education Authority able to close or shrink only five out of the twelve City schools as numbers continue to fall.

The failure of COMART in Brighton gives an example of the cost of closing PFI schools: *The council...has to pay at least £4.5M to release itself from the PFI contract, which should have run for a further 22 years. "We still do not know what it is going to cost," says Keith Taylor, a Green councillor. "The council has no money, so it will have to borrow to pay it off."*⁷

Another expensive example was featured in BBC Radio 4's program *File on 4* on 12th June. Balmoral High School in Belfast will close in August 2008, although the PFI contract runs to 2027. The projected cost is £7.4M.

The School competition

Under the current rules, an open competition has to be held when any new school is created; this allows the LEA, independent trusts or Academy sponsors to bid to run the schools. Our LEA originally intended to bid itself, and seemed to expect to gain the approval of the Schools Adjudicator who would make the decision. It seems, however, that there has been rather more interest from Academy sponsors than the LEA envisaged. On 19th March, Andrew Hind, the LEA's Head of Strategic Planning had a proposal approved *that Southampton City Council does not make its own proposals for new secondary schools on the west and east of the City, thereby enabling it to determine the competitions*. Thus rather than enter and risk losing to an Academy, the Council decided⁸ to pull out from the competition and become the judge.

Further excitement followed. The ruling Liberal Democrat group on the Council lost four seats at the May elections and, after an additional defection from the Liberal ranks, a new Conservative administration was elected. The Liberals had something of a reputation for being officer-led; I expect our new leader Alec Samuels, well known in these pages, to be a more independent voice.

There are three bids to run both schools and I discuss each below. In addition, the *Centre for British Teachers Education Trust* has bid to run the *New School East*. They are one of three sponsors of St Mark's Church of England Academy in south London; they otherwise have no experience running UK secondary schools.

Southampton Education Trust

This bid is led by Roger Brown from Solent University. The bid is for trust status and is supported by both Solent and ourselves, by all the local further education colleges, and by a variety of other local businesses and services.

It is, I think, a rather thin proposal. I attended two of the Learning Futures public meetings and listened to the “pitch” from Roger Brown. The overwhelming impression given was one of complacency: that our schools are currently good and that local people, under the continuing guidance of the LEA, will keep things much as they are. It would be easy to form the impression that SET might have been constructed as a surrogate for the LEA, allowing the latter to retain its position as decision maker. This bid seems to be the major beneficiary of the decision by the Cabinet on 19th March *that the work done to date in relation to Southampton City Council’s proposals for new schools be published and shared with those organisations which have indicated that they will make proposals for the establishment of the new schools, and that advice and assistance be offered by officers to such organisations as requested.* Several City policies pad the proposal as appendices C, E and F. This continuation of the status quo simply will not do. Excessive places are by no means our only problem; most children leave the LEA’s schools unfit for modern work. Furthermore, if there really are close links between SET and the LEA, any award of schools to them by the Council might be open to legal challenge from Academy sponsors.

There is another major outstanding concern about SET. This is the degree of commitment by the named organisations to the success of the Trust. We are told that *There will be between eight and ten Trustees. These will be individuals nominated by organisations representative of the wide range of interests in the Trust and, The cost of establishing the Trust and making the proposal will be borne by the organisations concerned. The legal costs of establishing the Trust are currently estimated as being of the order of £4,000 to £5,000.* Thus the corporate responsibility of the listed organisations seems to be restricted to nominating individuals and finding a total sum of £5,000 between them. In return, as well as responsibility for the education of a couple of thousand children, *the Promoters understand that the freehold in the land and buildings of the existing schools will be transferred to the Trust.* Note that the two Universities associated with the trust would have little difficulty in making *educational use* of the transferred land themselves, either by relocating on to it and redeveloping their existing sites or by the more creative approach taken with the LSU site.

The trust is to be a stand-alone Limited Company with, it seems, no formal links to the nominating organisations. This setup presumably isolates the organisations from any liability for the Trust’s operation and also restricts the

trustees' personal liability. Is it a reasonable vehicle to hold substantial public assets and responsibility for a substantial public service? I have received confirmation from Roger Brown that *legal liability will be limited to £1 in the event of the company folding*.

The apparently fragile financial status of the Trust highlights another issue apparent from the meetings. To what degree is there even informal commitment by the supporting organisations? It was very noticeable that, in contrast to the Academy sponsors, Roger appeared to be alone at the meetings with no support from other representatives. How much could really be expected from them once the schools are established? He assures me that *their present commitment is in terms of senior staff time, the contribution of educational and organisational expertise, and goodwill*. On paper, however, there is not even a commitment that the trustees will be current employees of the sponsors.

United Learning Trust

The United Learning Trust are part of the United Church Schools Trust (UCST). They run a number of private schools including the local Hampshire Collegiate School and are now a major sponsor of Academies. Alone among the bidders, their academies have been running long enough to have received Ofsted inspections. The result is not very encouraging; Lambeth (monitoring visit) Manchester and Northampton were all rated “satisfactory”, the worst passing grade and equal to the worst two of the closing Southampton schools.

My view of the United Learning Trust is coloured by our experience visiting the Atherley school in 2004—5. They had moved out of the city to a new and very attractive site in Nursling; their Head wrote an enticing prospectus about her vision for girls' education. The website read:

There is an exciting and vibrant atmosphere in The Atherley School as our girls discover the many opportunities open to them. The Atherley is the only independent girls 11-18 school in the Southampton region and we are firmly committed to the benefits of single-sex education at secondary level.

Maureen Bradley, Head

To our dismay, within months, the parent trust announced it had bought Embley Park school and that the two schools would merge on the latter's site. Embley Park was both much weaker (72% on the 2005 GCSE scores, compared to Atherley's 95%) and more expensive than the Atherley, which had long been regarded locally as the girls' King Edward's. It seems I was not the only one shocked by this apparently high-handed decision; while there was no public dissent, the Atherley's local governing body did not sign the merger prospectus. At the open day, the only reason we were given to send a child there was that it would be cheaper than direct admission to the existing Embley Park. After this centralised decision to completely change the

character of a successful school, I do not trust ULT to take local needs seriously in the new schools.

There is another issue I find worrying. This concerns the relationship between the proposed Academies and the existing Hampshire Collegiate School (formerly Atherley and Embley Park) which shares a catchment with *New School West*. Both Academies are to be *federated with UCST's Hampshire Collegiate School* and in addition, for the West academy only, *we have had informal signals that Winchester College would be interested in holding discussions about partnership*. The proposals go on to give a few examples of *the day-to-day sharing of best practice across the Schools and Academies*.

What will be the distinctions in ethos and product between the HCS and East/West Academy "brands"? Would we expect parents of current students at HCS to switch to the West Academy? To what extent would the local facilities of the three federated schools be shared? With strong federation to HCS, what additional purpose will be served by the possible partnership with Winchester College? Overall, how will ULT set about protecting its lucrative HCS brand while setting up a free competitor? Or is ULT intending to build a substantial class divide in its Southampton offerings?

Perhaps clear evidence of the driving force behind UCST's enthusiasm for Academies is found in their brochure "A new future for Embley Park and the Atherley Schools":

Through its new subsidiary, the United Learning Trust, UCST has committed itself to assist children in some of the most disadvantaged areas in the country using the Government's City Academy programme... The Academies are financed separately by the Government through a contract with ULT and do not receive any subsidy from UCST... central office handles the administration of both the Academies and the schools, thereby reducing the unit administration cost per pupil... In any future review of charitable status involving UCST and its schools, this activity is likely to make a major contribution to any interpretation of public benefit.

To put it bluntly, the Academies get the Charity Commissioners off UCST's back and save a little money to boot.

A final sting in the tail is found in ULT's brochure "The educational challenge". As noted above, no funding for the ULT Academies comes from UCST; their funds are used only for the private schools. Instead, ULT relies on outside benefactors to give the £1.5M needed for each Academy. This is a useful bulk discount; a benefactor acting alone would need to find £2M. Current ULT Academy benefactors include the Khayami Foundation⁹, Vodafone, Honda and the Entertainment Software Charity¹⁰. We have not

been told who will be the benefactors for the Southampton Academies although ULT give these individuals or companies a substantial stake in controlling the schools: *the main benefactor to the Academy may wish to be the Chair or may wish to remain anonymous or have a lower profile role on the LGB and benefactors can then play as active a role as they wish.* ULT are offering to act as a “cut-out” allowing the identity of a controlling hand in the Academy to be kept secret from parents and children.

Oasis Community Learning

Oasis Community Learning was founded by Steve Chalke, a well-known Baptist minister and broadcaster. Their first academies, in north London, Grimsby and Immingham will open in September. The bid is strongly supported by the *New Community Church* which was founded in the 1970s by some of our students and is now based in the old Methodist Central Hall in St Mary Street. Friends of mine from the church run the local (nondenominational) Highfield Scout Group; they do a good job.

I find this bid rather attractive. Within the Evangelical movement, Steve Chalke represents a voice of love¹¹ and reasonableness. Oasis has reached agreements with the teaching unions and scrupulously follows LEA admission policies. If we are to have a religious school, I would trust Steve and his team to do their very best for our children. That leaves two outstanding matters for caution:

1. This is very much Steve Chalke’s personal enterprise. He seems to be a man of boundless energy and commitment who has even managed to fund his Academies by raising millions of pounds from sponsored runs. Can we safely build our future school strategy on the personal strength of one man?
2. *Oasis, Faithworks* and *church.co.uk* have a strong corporate and theological commitment to inclusiveness. Nevertheless, will our Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities, and those with no religion, really feel truly equal in the City’s provision if it is controlled and led by a Baptist organisation? There is a more difficult issue. Progressive religious communities find it rather easy to accept other faiths in an extended gesture of ecumenical goodwill. They find it much harder to embrace atheists and humanists. The Scouts’ policy is perhaps an example of what I can accept personally but would be unable to defend as the position of a taxpayer funded educational body:

Religious Policy: *The Scout Movement includes members of many different forms of religion. All Members are encouraged to make every effort to progress in the understanding and observance of the Promise to do their best to do their duty to God; belong to some religious body; and carry into daily practice what they profess. The atheistic absence of religious belief is a bar to becoming a Member of the Movement.*

We know that Steve and Faithworks will politely debate philosophy with, say, Richard Dawkins. The key question is: would they allow him, as an expert educator, a role of responsibility in their schools?

If we are to back Steve's vision, then we must offer him decent, spacious and reasonably central sites for his schools. We must also get buy-in *now* from the other religious and humanist communities before committing to Oasis.

Postscript

This was originally written in mid-May 2007 as a contribution to the public consultation on the new school proposals. I was able to attend the Cabinet meeting on the evening of 2nd July at which the decisions were made. There were statements of support for SET from many City educators and from both opposition parties. The union asked for all proposals to be rejected and for all schools to stay open. The Millbrook school governors and Southampton YMCA spoke up for Oasis; nobody expressed support for CfBT or for ULT.

The technical appraisal by Council officers scored various aspects of the bids but warned that *the scores are not weighted, and deliberately so, It is not intended that the scores are added up in order to produce "result" based on the crude application of an arithmetic formula.* Nevertheless, if you did add up the numbers, Oasis came out top; it beat SET on community, inclusion and finance.

Peter Baillie, the responsible Cabinet member, proposed to award both schools to Oasis and this was unanimously supported by the Council Cabinet. There is no provision to appeal against the decision, but it was "called in" by the Scrutiny Panel; this of itself was unlikely to change the outcome but introduced a further delay of a couple of weeks. This delay offered the opposition a real opportunity to reverse the decision at the full Council meeting on 18th July when Labour's June Bridle proposed a vote of no confidence in the Conservative administration. Most Liberal Democrats abstained, however, and the Conservatives survived by 20 votes to 17. The scrutiny and Cabinet meetings took place the following day and the decision was confirmed.

Personal

For the period our daughter was at Bitterne Manor primary school, I served her school as an elected parent governor. I have also spent several years as the leader in charge of a local Scout Group, having regular contact with KS3 children attending several schools and have served on the Central Neighbourhood Partnership representing both the school and the Scouts.

¹ I have attempted to use accurate figures. They are derived from the websites of Southampton City Council, the DfES and individual schools and from the results of a FoI request to the City Council in September 2006.

² This is not the artificially reduced “published admission number”.

³ Based on the school’s website.

⁴ There is an agreement with Hampshire that extends the catchment for Bitterne Park school beyond the City. Fifteen places were awarded to non-Southampton children.

⁵ This will change to an “equal preference” policy for 2008–09 admissions.

⁶ Even with just one child, it seems better value to move into the Thornden school catchment, with a premium on house prices of around £50,000, than to pay around £10,000 per year for a private school.

⁷ The Guardian, 2005-08-09. See also

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/politics_show/6381601.stm.

⁸ As Southampton LEA has an Audit Commission APA rating of 3, it would also have needed consent from the Secretary of State before publishing its own proposal.

⁹ This is an Islamic educational foundation linked to a prominent expatriate Iranian. Khayami has sponsored the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, a US government funded Iran information site. He has also been active in promoting understanding between Islam and other faiths.

¹⁰ This seems to be led out of Barrington Harvey, a computer gaming PR agency.

¹¹ If you are uncomfortable with the sense of guilt imposed on children by many religious groups, you will find Steve’s book *The Lost Message of Jesus* to be a breath of fresh air.