

Question and answer session with Jim Knight, Schools Minister

NCSL Seizing Success conference, Birmingham ICC, 7 June 2007

Q1 Lesley Kinney, Flash CE Primary School: With growing headteacher recruitment problems does the Minister feel that anything can be done for the doubly difficult role of teaching headship in very small rural schools or is he planning to let these schools close down due to lack of heads, saving the government the embarrassment?

Jim Knight: For the last 10 years we have been against the closure of rural schools. If a local authority comes forward with a proposal to close a rural school then they have to have very sound arguments based on teaching and learning of the children concerned. In my constituency in Dorset we have very small schools that are starting to federate – in some cases to survive, although I would prefer them to federate for positive reasons. My last job was as rural affairs minister and I see schools as crucial to rural communities. I have no desire to see them close at all.

Q2 Susan Tranter, Fitzharrys School: How might schools in ordinary towns – not exceptional or in difficulties – benefit from the Academies programme?

Jim Knight: When I came to this post I was to be persuaded on Academies but I have since visited a number and I have seen very good practices in them. In each case they have made mistakes but they acknowledge that. The aspiration that the Academies hold for their children in often very difficult circumstances is always an inspiration to me.

Q3 David Spafford, Kesteven and Sleaford High School: What is the future of the grammar school in the UK please? Why is the Government not supporting them?

Jim Knight: It's been interesting to observe the manoeuvring on this issue in recent weeks. We are against any new selection and we reiterated that in legislation last year. If for example Buckinghamshire wanted to open a new grammar there would have to be a change to primary legislation to do it. But for existing grammars we have to leave it to the parents. That has been our position for 10 years now.

Q4 Mike Foster, Oxclose Community School, Washington, Tyne and Wear: Testing as it is, is no longer fit for purpose. We are moving towards measures like assessment for learning but we are stuck in a testing regime from the 1950s.

Jim Knight: We are carrying out a progression pilot to see whether we can evolve the testing system. I can't say anything about the outcomes of this until we know. It may be that we can move on from a situation where you have to get as many children as you can across the bar in one afternoon in June but I

don't see a move away from the accountability that testing gives us. It will evolve but it won't go away.

Q5 Rosie Pugh, Castle Dyke Primary, North Lincolnshire: Until we get a better press for heads we are not going to get people coming through to headship. In our small local authority there is one casualty a year. These are outstanding heads but they burn out. Are there new courses to help heads with the emotional aspects of their role and on work-life balance?

Jim Knight: I have a part to play here. We passed legislation last year which I was very proud of but every time that we do that there is a lot of guidance that goes with it. I am committed to looking at this personally so that you are not swamped and you get only what you need when you need it.

Q6 Mike Osbourne, John Taylor High School, Staffordshire: I've heard a lot about collaboration so far but not much about choice or competition. I'd be interested to hear the minister's views on how we balance these approaches.

Jim Knight: To some extent we want both. We want collaboration and we want choice. The 14-19 approaches for example all depend on collaboration. Trusts are also to a large extent about collaboration, with their need to work with employers and higher education. But we still do believe in choice: but a choice between good schools rather than a choice between good schools and bad schools.

Q7 Ceri Hammond, Brackendale Junior School: What advice could you offer a new, young and enthusiastic head on taking up their first headship and what should their priorities be?

Jim Knight: I think you should ask a headteacher first. I have visited on average one school a week since I took on this post a year ago and I have seen some really good practice. In fact, you should follow a minister around if you want to see really good stuff! In my view I think the safety of pupils is the first priority for new heads. They have got to get the discipline and behaviour right in order for children to feel safe and be ready to learn. A strong ethos and mutual respect has to be there in the school.

Q8 Frances Bowman, Westwood Primary School, Leeds: With the current crisis in recruiting heads what plans are in place to let people work part-time or do a job share? I gained my NPQH but since then I have had a baby and I'm now faced with the dilemma of balancing career and family. Will I have to wait 10 years until I can apply to become a full-time head?

Jim Knight: I need to go away and talk to Steve and his team about these issues as part of their work on succession planning.

Q9 Vanessa Dunnet, Leybourne SS Peter and Paul CE Primary: I have heard a lot over the past day about developing new potential heads. Are there any plans to retain outstanding heads that are soon to take early retirement?

Jim Knight: In terms of retaining outstanding heads, that is something that we are looking at as part of succession planning. We have also made changes to the pension arrangements so that retiring heads can do a day or so a week without affecting their pension arrangements. This is something that I have asked Steve Munby and his team to work through. The talent and experience that these people have is something that we need to keep hold of if we can.