

Written evidence submitted by Outwin Finders

Summary

Many small independent schools are facing the possibility of closure because of the present crisis. One MP thinks 4 out of 8 in his constituency are under threat.

A closure creates more children seeking places in the already over subscribed maintained sector, loss of jobs, loss of business for service providers and loss of educational facilities.

The government cannot be seen politically to be propping up independent schools even though they are small businesses but there is the possibility of a half way house by allowing Trusts to oversee both maintained and independent schools.

Independent school rescue plan

When I was a head in at Hereford the 11-18 section of the school had approximately 600 pupils with 200 of those being on assisted places. The Blair government ended the assisted place scheme because of political dogma. It did not save money as the pupils still had to be educated.

In reality academies can be regarded as half maintained/half independent as the fees are paid by the state.

The process of conversion from independent to academy is long and bureaucratic

The Plan

An independent school facing closure joins a Multi Academy Trust (May have to become a Multi School Trust if academies and independent schools are linked)

The school keeps a governing board to protect identity but the running of the school is overseen by the MAT Board.

The government covers any purchase or any existing debts interest free but with security against the property. There may not be debts.

The school can offer a new form of assisted places. Means tested and funded at the same level as the per head payment to maintained schools. These cannot be purely academically based for fear of 'grammar schools by the back door' accusations.

However, these schools often have outstanding facilities for sport, music and art – centres of excellence. The MAT is the admissions authority.

This scheme prevents the loss of educational facilities and widens the choice available for parents. By joining a MAT the school is in essence half

independent and half maintained to counter the argument of the government propping up the independent sector.

Case study

Not really a case study but a live situation

Ashby Mellor Educational Associates is a small group of former and current heads and bursars who work part-time as consultants for the good of education.

One of the group heard about a prep school near to his home in Leicestershire that had announced closure (only two months ago). He set up a meeting with the chair of governors to see if a rescue package was possible.

With a visit and brief research it was very evident that the school (like a number of others) was victim of poor governance and management with debts acquired through unwise mortgages to improve facilities.

A rescue package may have been possible but for the crisis.

The school

250 pupils

120 plus acre site

Full size swimming pool and sports hall

Good teaching facilities

£2.2 million debt

Rescue package estimated £1 million needed to underwrite during recovery time.

On the market for £4.2 million with a boutique hotel purchase most likely until the virus hit.

The plan

Buy the school for £2.2 to pay off the debt. It is an educational trust so should not be seeking profit from the deal. The value of the premises is security.

Join a MAT

Immediate introduction of assisted places would make the school viable so reducing the amount needed to underwrite immediately.

A group like Ashby Mellor Educational Associates (people with experience of schools as businesses) needed to overhaul the governance and management system so the MAT inherits a working model.

This would be a fantastic addition to the educational offering in the area and keep a school with fantastic facilities in the system.

While this is the bare bones of an idea from my, fairly extensive, knowledge of the independent sector I think it could work.

Independent schools generally fail because of lack of numbers. With this scheme schools could work to capacity albeit with a range of fee levels. Security of numbers helps financial planning. Other failures are due to poor governance and management. With a MAT there should be clear oversight of the running schools.

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