

25 February 2020

An open letter from the Committee for Education, Sport & Culture

Debate about the future of secondary education has increasingly focused on the various and conflicting "red lines" of one group or another – and about which models of education would (or would not) avoid these red lines. These red lines include school size, sixth form size, whether to have 11-16 schools or 11-18 schools and equality of opportunity and facilities. Significant disagreements also still exist about the 11+ and about how much should be spent on school buildings.

It is easy to look at a single model of education, point out concerns about the red lines some people believe it crosses, and argue there must be a better model. Often this is done without identifying what that better model is or how it is suddenly going to be found after nearly five years of careful analysis of various models and at times divisive debate about the same issues.

Any potential model of secondary education will inevitably cross one or more red lines for a significant number of people. There is no way around this. It cannot be solved by continually developing and then discarding models in an attempt to find one which will please everyone. Such a model simply does not exist. The real challenge has always been to decide which of the red lines we are most willing to cross or compromise and which of them can be most easily mitigated and managed.

For some, equality of opportunity and of facilities is a critical consideration, and therefore models which give advantages to one group of children over another cross a red line. This would rule out models involving 11-18 education on one site and 11-16 education on two other sites. Let's be in no doubt that three 11-16 schools with one attached to a sixth form is the same thing as one 11-18 school and two 11-16 schools. This model would see two-thirds of the Island's children of compulsory secondary school age lose out. Selection by ability would have been replaced with selection by postcode.

For others, regardless of the many benefits of larger schools, any model containing schools with more than, say, 1000 students crosses a red line. Of course this would rule out the current reforms which are based on two 11-18 colleges operating as a single school. It would also rule out the model of one 11-18 school and two 11-16 schools – because that model would invariably include around 1250-1300 students at one location, most probably at Les Varendes.

Then there are those people who prioritise sixth form size. Some want all sixth formers to be in the same place. If that was to be done without crossing the red line of equality of opportunity then it would inevitably require three (or perhaps two) 11-16 schools. But this provides equality only by denying all students the benefits of 11-18 schools. That is not this Committee's idea of equality. Such a model would then probably require a single post-16 college because the Island has too few sixth formers for a standalone sixth form college. This would delay the integration and development of The Guernsey Institute. Some people are happy with sixth forms of a similar size to the average size of school-based sixth forms nationally, which is the size the sixth forms will be at de Saumarez College and Victor Hugo College under the current reforms. But many people want sixth forms to be no smaller than that and this rules out a model of three 11-18 colleges with around 150 sixth formers at each.

There are other constraints. Some people will not be satisfied unless there is a return to selection. Others will accept almost any model as long as it does not include selection. Among people who agree about how many schools there should be – whether two, three or four – there is often disagreement about where they should be located, what the age range should be at each school and the space standards to adopt when building schools or extensions.

In the current reforms, de Saumarez College and Victor Hugo College will provide space which, by national standards, would accommodate up to 1720 students. We will have around 1400 students at each college at the peak of the student population. This is expected to fall gradually from the mid-2020s until there are around 1150 students in each college. If a three-school model is adopted instead, we will have 11-16 schools with fewer than 650 students in the future, re-creating many of the challenges we see with small schools today.

Of course, if the States are willing to spend more money, there are changes which could be made to the space standards at the 11-18 colleges. The Committee is laying an amendment in the States this week which, if approved, would allow the next States to consider doing that. However much is spent, there will be disagreement about whether it is too much or too little or how to spend it. The same tensions will exist irrespective of the number of schools and how they are arranged. Broadly speaking, the greater the number of sites from which secondary education is provided, the more expensive they will be to run. With more schools or sites, other compromises may need to be made to ensure education does not exceed the budget allocated to it by the States. Some of these compromises may be very unpalatable to people currently protesting against the current reforms which, ironically, would avoid the need for such compromises.

There is no model that will be met with universal or overwhelming approval once broad ideas turn into more detailed plans. This means any change to the structure of secondary education will invariably be made in the face of significant public opposition. Being against one particular model (for example, our model) is understandable – but the question for the States is not which model to avoid but which model to adopt. The Requete which is before the States this week provides no answers to that question nor does it even set out a credible route towards finding such answers.

When the States don't know what to do or can't bring themselves to provide the leadership the Island needs, they tend to commission reviews in order to create the impression of action and conceal the reality of indecision and inaction. This is one option open to the States this week. But it would simply be to push tough decisions further down the line. This would be to the detriment of young people who are in school now in a transition model designed to lead them into the two 11-18 colleges by 2022 and of young people in the future who would be denied the benefits of these reforms and with no idea of which model is one day going to emerge in its place.

Twice already, and initially after considerable debate among educationalists and the public, the States directed that as soon as possible secondary education shall be provided in two 11-18 colleges operating as a single school. The States made these decisions knowing that some people would find this model objectionable or difficult, but on the basis that it is the model best able to deliver on some important principles. These include capturing the best of non-selective education to promote high standards and outcomes, equality of opportunity, high quality facilities for all students and making the best use of the funds the States are prepared to invest in education annually.

The many contradictions in what people do and don't want mean that, in the court of public opinion, every Committee *for* Education, Sport & Culture is destined for unpopularity and failure. But, unless the States face up to these difficult decisions and show some leadership, our secondary students and those in waiting are doomed to continue in the current inadequate model for the foreseeable future without any direction from those elected to provide it.

We need to press ahead with the reforms which give our Island a fighting chance of capturing the best of non-selective secondary education. The alternative is being trapped in perpetual uncertainty and continual review, spending millions on developing different models which can never be implemented. We need to step off that damaging cycle and get on with making our education system the very best it can be.

With kind regards,

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