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National Association for Small Schools

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29th April 04

Dear Sir,

This letter responds to a news item in an issue of TES naming your authority as one of fifteen with high levels of unfilled classroom places. The article cites government advice about dealing with the problem using strategies such as mergers, amalgamations and closures, as well as putting surplus space to alternative uses. Clearly our members are very interested in what develops.

It is our observation that under decades of pressure from the problem of surplus places it proves rather difficult for LEAs to do much to reduce the actual number of places without major upheaval. We have observed that where major reorganisation and review occur pressure to close rural schools, especially small rural schools, often arises as perhaps an easier option to meet requirements. Despite the Government's own presumption against closure, School Organisation Committees have in some worrying cases ignored both the guidance and the evidence of the quality of the schools concerned.

Whilst we recognise that you and your colleagues and the elected members you advise will have due respect for the worth of small schools at a time when test and inspection outcomes are generally so positive we would like to share some correspondence received recently from Steven Twigg MP, a Government Education Minister.

We communicated our concerns at some SOC outcomes, notably in Metropolitan areas with outer rural fringes, but the Minister wrote to assure us that we should not be alarmed. The guidance to SOCs remained firm and the department had also made it clear to local authorities, in his words, "While the best value framework asks LEAs to manage surplus places effectively, we do not believe it increases pressure on them to close small schools. We have made it clear that surplus places can be removed by a variety of means, including removing temporary classrooms, or by allowing extra space to be used by the wider community under the Extended School initiative."

We believe that small schools, particularly but not exclusively in rural areas, do reflect more closely the essential roots of education in the family and community. We believe that it is their essential humanity of scale and proximity to everyday circumstances that drive the undoubted success of such schools, often against all conventional expectations.

We recognise the higher costs but again believe that these but represent an added investment in quality that repays continuously later. As American experience shows the higher costs are offset by reduced social distress and higher tax revenue from enhanced school outcomes. The Extended School concept, urging partnership between school and community at the level of general service provision, both educational and social, clearly brings a different set of value-for-money perspectives. We would be happy to work with you to develop programmes under the Extended School initiative and look forward to hearing from you.

Please address any reply to Brenda Edwards in the first instance at Red Roof Barn, Coombe Keynes, Wareham. BH20 5PS

Yours faithfully,

B Edwards

M. Benford