

Evidence of Michael L.N.Jones

National Secretary of RhAG

The National Assembly Committee on School Funding March 2 2006

1.Preface

This evidence is particularly directed to the funding of Welsh-medium schools but some observations are of wider application.

2. Personal Background

I am currently the National Secretary of Rhieni dros Addysg Gymraeg (Parents for Welsh-medium Education) a body founded in 1952 to promote Welsh-medium schools and formed from the PTAs of Welsh-medium schools all over Wales. I have been a member of the Executive Committee since 1982 and throughout that period the Legal Adviser to Rhag. I am by profession a solicitor and I have been a school governor since 1985. I have been a member of the Finance Committee of the Governing Body of Glantaf Welsh Comprehensive School for upwards of 12 years.

3.School funding generally

Like most school governors I have frequently wished that school budgets were larger and for many years I have noted that South Glamorgan up to 1996 was an authority regularly near the bottom of the table in the level of its spending calculated with reference to the average figure per pupil and that Cardiff after that date continued the pattern until quite recently. Now its capitation spending is more or less on the average figure for Wales and this has made a difference in the Cardiff schools. I do of course appreciate that in Cardiganshire which has always been the most generous spender on education this is to an extent forced upon an authority that has to maintain many small rural schools where more staff have to be employed to teach small classes and where the ratio of headteachers to pupils is much higher. Even so I believe that the disparity of spending between different authorities is unacceptable and should be prevented by the Assembly ring-fencing money allocated from WAG for educational purposes even if that involves ending the arrangement which has entitled counties to spend their block grant from the Consolidated Fund as they see fit without strict regard to the estimates submitted seeking amounts towards specific services such as education, roads, social services etc. As education funding is generally the largest block of income in each year it is always the most tempting target to be "borrowed" from to help out some other budget. My first plea therefore is that ring-fencing of education spending be introduced as between WAG and the LEAs and also that the Minister for Finance in WAG

should regard the education element of what comes from the Treasury under the Barnett formula as sacrosanct to educational purposes.

4. Triennial funding

Another general point, not specific to WM schools, is the need for the introduction of a 3-year funding regime for schools. Annual funding makes forward planning for curriculum development well nigh impossible, particularly in view of 2 factors, namely:-

1. Late notification of the budget allocated to a school for the forthcoming academic year.

At Glantaf the year starts for financial purposes on 1st April. The budget has not yet been allocated and is unlikely to be forthcoming until mid-March at the earliest. This was the picture last year and the Finance Committee could not set the budget until mid-April, after the statutory date. The Headteacher and her Bursar required time to collect details of the amounts coming from the county including normal funding and extra allotments from WAG such as that to cover the costs of implementing the new teachers' contracts and the amounts coming from Elwa to cover sixth-form teaching.

2. Attempts by the county (which are being resisted vigourously) to "adjust" the budget at or after the year end for reasons considered to be quite specious.

Schools and headteachers need to have certainty as to their funding for at least three years ahead and cannot be expected to do a good job in controlling and managing financial resources the extent of which they do not know until the last minute and upon which they cannot rely even as the academic year proceeds.

Headteachers do of course exchange information and experiences with other heads and they cannot understand why 3-year funding is widespread practice in England and unknown in Wales. The Assembly should introduce appropriate Regulations under the relevant statutes to oblige Welsh LEAs to follow the best English practice in this regard.

5. Lack of transparency in budgeting

When budgets do arrive at schools they are often incomprehensible as to the rationale of their make-up, leading to suspicions that the complexity of the calculations may well be designed to hide acts of favouritism as between one school and another. It would greatly assist school Finance Committees if the Assembly would intervene by Regulation to ensure that schools receive a budget whose make-up is transparently clear. It is difficult to give examples because in spite of many years' experience of reading budgets whose format is always in some respect different from that of the previous year the only figure which is absolutely clear is the net sum to be received by the school over the forthcoming year, and even that it now appears is subject to attempts at adjustment 10 or 11 months later, and of course now instead of one sum from the LEA there are now 2 sums, one from the LEA and one from Elwa.

6. Additional funding for Welsh-medium schools.

A particular problem for WM schools is what, if anything, is allocated to cover the additional costs of WM education which arise mainly from the following factors:-

1. In addition to the 3 core subjects of EM schools (English, Mathematics and Science) there is of course in the Welsh curriculum in WM schools the core subject of Welsh which is taught as a 2 credit subject at GCSE (like English) with language and literature papers. This requires a longer school day and additional staff.

2. Although there is now a much better supply of text-books in Welsh than was the case at the inception of statutory WM education in 1947/1949, there is still a far greater need for the preparation within WM schools of teaching materials which cannot be acquired on the open market. Studies carried out by CYDAG suggest that teachers in an average sized WM secondary school (1000 on roll) spend a total amount of time on preparation of teaching materials annually equivalent to the cost of 2 additional teachers.

Elwa has accepted this argument and has allowed a 25% mark-up on its allowances to WM sixth-forms.

Unfortunately the attitude of LEAs throughout Wales is not as enlightened as that of Elwa. Some LEAs are generous in allowing extra funding to WM schools; others refuse to make any allowance at all. Moreover the allowance made by an LEA may differ from one year to the next, adding another element of confusion to the school budget of an individual school. Currently Cardiff is believed to be the most generous LEA in its allowance for the extra costs of WM education.

7. Treatment of the costs of growth in the WM sector.

Finally most WM schools face problems from time to time due to the increasing demand for WM education. These problems are faced most acutely by WM secondary schools with their more complicated curricular demands giving rise to the need for a number of specialist teachers all with the additional requirement of academic proficiency in Welsh as well as a command of their own subject.

A short history confined mostly to South East Wales will illustrate the point. Rhydfelen was the first Welsh secondary school to be opened in South Wales. It took children from all over the Glamorgan LEA some from as far away as the Neath and Afan valleys as well as from Cardiff and Monmouthshire. In 1974 a second school was opened at Llanhari which took children from Bridgend, the Rhondda, Cardiff and the Vale; Rhydfelen served the Taff, Cynon and Rhymney valleys and the Gwent area. By 1978 Llanhari could not cope with the entry from South Glamorgan and Glantaf was opened. In 1988 the Rhondda was carved out of Llanhari's catchment to go to Cymer (Porth) School and in 1981 the Rhymney Valley children and those from Gwent had been transferred to the new Cwm Rhymni school which ended up spread over 4 old buildings in and around Bargoed. In 1995 Rhydfelen again lost the Cynon Valley and Merthyr children to

the brand new Rhydywaun School and in 1988 Cwm Rhymni lost Gwent to a new school Gwynllyw, first located at Abercarn and then at Trevethin. Each of these divisions of catchment areas undoubtedly meant problems for the parent school with a temporary drop in numbers and a consequent drop in requirement for teachers. I have no information as to the detail of what happened but I do know more about the problems for Glantaf when its catchment area was twice reduced because the growth in demand for WM education in Cardiff and the Vale required 2 more schools.

In 1988, ten years after opening with 99 pupils, Glantaf had outgrown its building in Llandaff North. The LEA preferred to make Glantaf a split-site school by transferring the Waterhall building from Cantonian HS to Glantaf rather than by building the long-promised sixth form block at Glantaf. By 1995 Glantaf was bursting at the seams at both sites but an LEA scheme to open a second WM school at a site in Ely was turned down by the Welsh Office, and the LEA then decided to divide Glantaf by opening a separate school at Waterhall with new building on that site (later Ysgol Plasmawr) while Glantaf was a successful contender for money from the Popular Schools Initiative which gave additional accommodation in the form of a Performing Arts block and a Science Block (the first proper laboratories in 18 years). The division was well managed and well prepared so that Plasmawr started with three complete years and sufficient staff chose to go to Plasmawr to avoid the need for any redundancies at Glantaf although the "fit" of staff to subjects was not perfect.

Two years later the Cardiff LEA insisted for political rather than educational reasons that it would accept no more children from the Vale which had been sending 4 streams into Cardiff, 2 from Barry coming to Glantaf and 2 from Penarth and Cowbridge going to Plasmawr. The effect of this on Glantaf was to make the school of an uneven composition. The sixth form was large, the product of the 8/9 form entry prior to the opening of Plasmawr. Years 11 to 8 were 5 or 6 forms with years 8 and 9 benefitting from the opening of another primary school in eastern Cardiff 8 years previously but year 7 was down to little over a 4 form entry and it would be some time before the most recently opened primary to the east of the Taff would make good the loss of the Vale children and bring Glantaf back up to an 8 form entry. The school therefore faced the problem that immediately it was over-staffed in the junior school and in the foreseeable future would be over-staffed with sixth-form teachers but ultimately would grow back into a school admitting 240 pupils annually with a sixth-form in proportion which historically had been a high proportion of the intake. There were 2 alternatives:-

1. To dismiss redundant staff as and when justified. This would have the immediate effect of destabilising the staff and demotivating a staff which had done nothing to deserve such treatment. Further the dismissal of staff was likely to reduce the wide curricular choices offered and make the school less attractive to parents and pupils in a competitive market.

As to the sixth form staff even with reduced numbers of pupils it was unlikely that there would be any real redundancy but rather smaller groups in each subject needing nonetheless the same number of teachers. Furthermore at the end of the dip in pupil numbers the staff would need to be restored to its original complement without any certainty that staff as good as those lost could be recruited, particularly in certain subjects.

2. To keep all the staff apart from those leaving due to natural wastage and to seek additional funding from the LEA to pay for the surplus staff during the period of a dip in the number of pupils.

The second course was adopted in Glantaf with excellent academic results. The LEA did accept the school's arguments to some extent and provide some additional funding but the remainder had to be covered from the school's very limited reserves and by careful management of expenditure.

This is a period of generally falling rolls but this problem does not much affect WM schools as growth in demand for WM education outbalances the general reduction in the overall cohort. In Cardiff it is generally accepted that the 17.5-18 streams currently in the primary school reception classes cannot be accommodated in Glantaf, designed for an 8 form entry, and Plasmawr, designed for a 6 form entry. The surplus 3.5-4 streams will require a third WM comprehensive, logically to serve the easternmost parts of Cardiff as both Glantaf and Plasmawr are in the west of the city and taking in fact 4.5-5 streams from the 3 easternmost primaries which will leave Glantaf for a time with a 7 form entry, 1 down from its present intake. The likelihood is that in 2007 at the latest the demand will have risen to require 19 primary streams and Glantaf in 2014 will need again to take 8 streams. The problem of short-term v. long-term needs is likely to arise again in Cardiff.

It is also likely to arise in relation to Llanhari whose pupils from Bridgend are planned to be diverted to a new school outside Maesteg. Growth in Newport may well lead to the opening of a WM secondary in Newport with a consequent temporary reduction of intake at Gwynllyw. The effect of the opening of Bryn Tawe at Swansea has been to cause temporary problems at Bro Gwyr.

The Assembly needs to address the financial problems of growth in WM secondary education and to require LEAs to be generous to schools suffering temporary problems which will foreseeably be ended by continuing growth in the WM sector so as to avoid the difficulties caused by destabilising staff who cannot be easily replaced at a future date having regard to the comparatively small pool of WM teachers who are available.