



Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL Cymru's) Response to the Inquiry into the Reorganisation of Schools in Rural Wales

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers represents over 160,000 education professionals across the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom. It draws its membership from teachers and lecturers, leaders and support staff in maintained and independent schools, and Further Education Colleges. As well as campaigning vigorously to protect and enhance members' pay and conditions ATL also believes that the education profession has a key role in developing education strategy and policy. ATL has taken a leading role in publicizing issues relating to poverty and rural exclusion in Wales and the rest of the UK. At the forthcoming party conferences ATL will be running fringe meetings entitled *Another Country? The hidden inequality of the rural idyll*. ATL Cymru represents over 6,500 education professionals in colleges and schools across the whole of Wales.

Introduction

The issue of the reorganisation of schools in rural Wales is extremely contentious and emotionally charged, the debate surrounding the issue frequently generates more heat than light. ATL believes more in-depth, robust research (both qualitative and quantitative) is necessary to enable a clearer picture of the current situation in Wales to be developed, thus informing a viable, evidenced based policy solution to be established.

ATL believes that the educational needs of pupils should be paramount when considering the reorganisation of schools in rural Wales. Children, and their education, should not be used as proxies in campaigns about the provision of rural services. Nor should they be used as surrogates in debates about other societal changes.

The benefits of small schools are not proved

Although their supporters make many claims for small schools, **there is currently a lack of evidence to support many of the claims made about the**

benefits that smaller schools can bring to pupils. Indeed research by a team at London University's Institute of Education suggests that the opposite is true^[1]. The Institute studied thousands of pupils in their fourth, fifth and sixth year of schooling in England. They found no evidence that children in smaller primary classes do better in Maths or English. They did find evidence of a 'positive relationship' between class size and Year 6 literacy: pupils in larger classes made more progress! Comparative research on this is necessary for Wales.

Estyn found that there is little evidence in difference in the standards achieved by pupils or in the quality of education provided by small schools when compared with other schools^[2]. **There is no evidence to support the view that size is a significant factor. Schools of all sizes can provide a high quality education for pupils.** Estyn also concluded that there are few differences in the quality of teaching between small and other schools. However, Estyn noted that the smaller the school, the more challenging it often is for the teacher to match work to all pupils' learning needs. This is because, in these schools, teachers have to teach pupils of widely different ages and stages of development in the same class.

We are also concerned about the quality of social interaction in very small schools. ATL does not subscribe to a narrow view of education that values and assesses its benefits solely in terms of qualifications achieved. We believe that education is concerned with the development of the whole child and student. Play, discussion, team sports and the like are essential to this development. Children need a variety of peers with whom they can interact in the school setting.

ATL is convinced that extra-curricular activities are an important means of raising self-esteem and increasing participation in education^[3]. It has been argued that **pupils in small, rural schools in Wales are offered access to a more restricted range of teachers and to fewer extra-curricular activities**^[4]. This needs further examination.

More pressure is faced by teachers in rural schools, caused by the multiplicity of specialisms^[5]. Small schools generally do not do as well as others in the areas of leadership and management, staff development and curriculum planning. In particular, in small schools, when the head teacher has a substantial teaching commitment, there is less time for leadership and management tasks. This results in an increase in the workload for the head

^[1] Institute of Education, London, *The effects of class size on attainment and classroom processes in English primary schools*, December 2004

^[2] Estyn, *Small Primary Schools in Wales*, 2006

^[3] ATL Position Statement, *Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas*, 2008

^[4] Institute of Welsh Affairs- Professor David Reynolds, *Small School Closure in Wales: New Evidence*, 2007

^[5] Institute of Welsh Affairs- Professor David Reynolds, *Small School Closure in Wales: New Evidence*, 2007

teacher^[6]. We would urge that realistic and sustainable options for federation be explored and examined. Federation in some cases can result in the increase in the portfolio of specialisms available to schools as well as reducing workload.

Estyn's report 'Small Primary Schools in Wales' highlights **the need for a common, clear, nationally agreed definition of what constitutes a small primary school**. ATL agrees wholeheartedly with Estyn and would like to see a common definition agreed to enable transparency and a fuller understanding by all those involved in this issue.

Poverty and Social Exclusion

ATL believes that breaking the link between poverty and low educational attainment remains as much of a challenge for rural schools (and colleges) as it is to their urban counterparts. **ATL views the issue of rural schools reorganisation firmly in the framework of its impact on poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.**

Although a majority of factors due to poverty and deprivation are similar for urban and rural dwellers, **ATL believes that the factors due to disadvantage and social exclusion are somewhat amplified for deprived rural households and hence for rural schools (and colleges) working to facilitate social mobility.** Whilst urban poverty is highly visible and well documented, social exclusion in rural areas is rarely captured in official statistical data because of the dispersal of poor rural households and their often close proximity to affluence.

Services need to be extended and accessible to pupils in rural schools in Wales. A recent study of **aspirations** of young people from deprived inner-city areas has suggested that disadvantaged young people overwhelmingly expect to pursue routes into employment that were already 'known' within their families and local communities. These routes into work were commonly seen as promising a higher chance of success, whilst simultaneously enabling young people to draw on existing contacts and networks. Very few expressed 'higher' aspirations to professional careers. No comparative research has so far been undertaken on the aspirations of disadvantaged pupils in rural areas, but anecdotal evidence appears to confirm that these findings are just as valid for rural areas^[7].

A survey of ATL members working in rural schools across the UK, has established that **transport is one of the most substantial obstacles to providing a broad and balanced education for all pupils in rural educational settings.** The lack of well resourced regular and extensive provision of public transport and safe routes to schools currently prevents many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds from taking part in after-school and extra-curricular

^[6] Estyn, *Small Primary Schools in Wales*, 2006

^[7] ATL Position Statement, *Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas*, 2008

activities, which have shown to be an important means of raising self-esteem and increasing participation in education^[8].

We would also draw attention to the findings of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in its recent report on rural housing.^[9] The pressure put on poorer families in rural areas will undoubtedly affect children's education.

Present Consultation Process

ATL does not believe that the current consultation process is designed to aid communities to participate in such an important debate as the potential closure of their local school. Consultations often appear to be seen by local authorities as simply a hurdle over which they must jump on the way to a pre-determined conclusion. We would wish to see a more robust system which demonstrably involves local communities at the earliest point possible, prior to a formal consultation period being established.

Cost and sustainability

With an increasingly tight budget all providers of education in Wales will need to ensure that they are getting value for money. It is also essential that money is targeted where it can make most impact. This is true for Wales as a whole as well as within local authority boundaries. **There is a disproportionate amount of money spent on small, rural schools in Wales to the detriment of pupils in larger schools who are often the forgotten pupils**^[10]. It has been argued that reorganisation of rural schools in Wales could help enable a more equitable distribution of funds to all schools to affect significant improvements for all schools across Wales. Larger schools often provide efficiencies of scale and a critical mass of resources that enables one-off expenditure of a scale that would not be possible in a smaller setting^[11]. This argument needs to be carefully investigated and not summarily dismissed.

Recommendations

- Careful **analysis** of this issue needs to be undertaken
- Children and their education are not used as **proxies** for other issues
- **Poverty proofing** needs to be taken into consideration in the reorganisation of rural schools, this needs to be fully cognisant of transport costs

^[8] ATL, *Rural Schools (Scotland) Bill: A proposal to introduce a presumption against the closure of rural schools: ATL'S response to Murdo Fraser MSP, Member's bill consultation*, April 2008

^[9] <http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/2235-wales-housing-rural.pdf>

^[10] Professor David Reynolds evidence to Rural Development Sub-Committee inquiry into the reorganisation of schools in rural Wales, 11th June 2008 <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-third1/bus-committees-third-rd-home/bus-committees-third-rd-agendas.htm?act=dis&id=88754&ds=7/2008>

^[11] Institute of Welsh Affairs- Professor David Reynolds, *Small School Closure in Wales: New Evidence*, 2007

- **Comparative studies** need to take place to assess the positive or negative impact that the reorganisation of schools in rural Wales will have
- The educational needs of children in **Wales as a whole** needs to be taken into account when the issue of rural schools is discussed
- A generally accepted **working definition** of what constitutes a small school needs to be agreed
- **Best practice guidance** needs to be established to set standards for decisions on future school re-organisation.

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