

1 December 2012

Dear Parents

Forgive me for writing to you about educational policy. However, I am so uncomfortable with what has happened over the past two years nationally, and what is proposed, I think I should set this out for your consideration. After all, it will be your children that will be affected by policy and subsequent change. At the outset, please can I be clear that this letter is not about my own political preferences, but a deep rooted conviction to do the very best for the students of Brymore both now and in the future. Furthermore, government policy is having a direct impact on Brymore as an institution as well as the boys themselves. Set out below are my professional concerns that I believe you need to know. Finally, it is also worth noting that David Laws MP has recently returned to Government, promoted to the post of **Minister for Schools**, the “number two” in Education second only to the Secretary of State Michael Gove. Following a recent letter he has agreed to visit Brymore, not only to see what a fantastic school it is, but also to hear concerns about how government policy will affect schools like ours.

Recently Mr Laws, to his credit, attended a meeting of all Somerset Headteachers for a question and answer session. Many colleagues, with significant experience, asked challenging questions about government policy. After an hour of discussion, Mr Laws expressed his surprise at what he described as the “negativity” amongst those gathered, when in actual fact colleagues were just being passionate about doing the best for the students in schools and expressing a genuine concern about planned and current policy.

GCSE English Examination Results Update (Summer 2012)

Parents will have noted that there has been much national coverage with regard to the grading of GCSE English Language grades in the summer 2012 exam. This issue is now subject to judicial review and will be heard in the high court. Recently Ofqual, the regulatory body for the Examination Boards, published a report laying the blame for this issue with teachers of English across the country for the “overgenerous marking” of coursework, particularly for those students on the C/D grade borderline. This is ironic as Ofqual is responsible for ensuring that the exam boards carry out their moderation function accurately in the first place!

...../

1 December 2012

1. To reassure parents - we were one of only a small number of schools in Somerset where our English results actually went up. This was despite students having to get 15 more marks this year to gain a grade C than they did last year. The moderators did not change the marks awarded by our staff.
2. Also in the Ofqual report are plans to ensure that in the future any grading of the components that make up the English GCSE only occurs at the end of the course. This will essentially mean that schools will no longer be able to project grades with much certainty.

New Policy - Current proposals and what may be ahead of us?

Examinations and Qualifications

If your son is currently in Year 11 (Exam Year 2012/13)

- For this year and all subsequent years, additional marks will be awarded for the accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar in exams that have a sufficient written English element. . These subjects at Brymore are *GCSE English including Literature and History*.
- Passing GCSEs will become harder. Ofqual has instructed exam boards to “tighten” GCSEs in four key subjects, starting with *Mathematics from November 2012*.

If your son is currently in Year 10 (Exam Year 2013/14)

- For this year and all subsequent years all GCSE exams will be taken at the end of the two year course. *Students will no longer be able to re-sit individual modules, but they can re-take whole GCSEs.*
- Passing GCSEs will become harder. Ofqual has instructed exam boards to “tighten” GCSEs in two further key subjects: *English and History from September 2013*.

If your son is currently in Year 9 (Exam Year 2014/15)

- As per Year 11 and Year 10

For those students who are currently in Year 8 (Exam Year 2015/16) - prospective parents please note

- Year 8 will be the final cohort of students to be prepared for GCSE exams in English, Mathematics and Science subjects. *GCSEs will be replaced by English Baccalaureate Certificate (EBC's) in these subjects.* Geography, History and Languages will follow.

Exam entry and re-sits

- Given that the new EBC exams will be two years long and the vast majority of students will start them at the beginning of Year 10, any re-sits are likely to be taken in a different institution eg College or School based sixth form provision, which could be Brymore.

.../

1 December 2012

National Curriculum

- A new set of regulations on the ICT requirements in the National Curriculum came into force on 1 September 2012.
- The new National Curriculum will come into force in September 2014, a draft having already been published.

Vocational qualifications

- The DfE has reduced the number of vocational qualifications that will contribute to key measures in the school performance tables from 2014. The changes have been introduced in response to Professor Alison Wolf's review of vocational education for 14-19 year olds. All her recommendations were accepted by the government. For Brymore this means that agriculture and horticulture will no longer count in the league tables, although they will count for the students themselves. Essentially two of our highest scoring subjects, will not count in the school figures, making us appear less successful. For clarification I have no intention of removing these subjects as they still count for the boys themselves. The only reason to remove the subjects from the curriculum would be to play the 'league table game'. I believe the needs of the boys come before any 'game' no matter how important that game is.

New accountability measures for schools

- As the EBC qualifications are introduced, and results released, these will become the **headline measures** in performance tables upon which schools are judged.
- A maximum of two qualifications, which are not full-course GCSEs, will count for pupils in the 5 A*-C including English and Maths headline measure. However...
- Only qualifications on the "Wolf list" will count in performance measures from 2014 (not agriculture and horticulture)

Aside from the general concerns set out at the beginning of this letter I have four very specific worries.

1. The move away from modular exams and the ability to re-sit, to end of course (terminal) exams where students will sit all their exams in a six week period (likely to be 12 or more) is a backward step, a model of assessment that should be consigned to the past. I wonder whether this is disadvantageous to students for whom a straightforward test of memory at the end of two years may not enable them to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do. Clearly, this will have a negative impact on middle to lower ability students who will get one chance at school with no ability to re-sit, re-draft and learn from their previous efforts. This method of assessment does not suit the boys of Brymore.

.../

1 December 2012

2. The EBC is not an inclusive policy and could seriously destabilise schools. Currently, History, Geography and Languages are optional in most schools in Years 10 and 11. If they are to be made compulsory, which subjects will disappear and which staff will lose their jobs as a result? What about the Arts and other subjects not part of the EBC? Why are these subjects less important? At Brymore we will continue to offer the curriculum that suits the boys we teach. The focus of policy seems to be on the more able students. There seems little consideration for middle and lower ability students who will find much of what is proposed extremely difficult to negotiate.
3. The draft National Curriculum has just been published and has already attracted widespread criticism. Most of the recommendations made by the expert panel have been ignored.
4. There is also major reform going on with regard to how schools are funded and SEN funding and provision. We wait with baited breath; the scale and pace of change make it almost impossible to comment meaningfully, however students at Brymore, and Brymore itself, will lose out on funding.

If you have made it this far through this letter congratulations! However, with so much change going on, I thought it was important you were aware of my current thinking. Finally, with such a rapid pace of change, we will have to adapt accordingly. To reiterate, although I am looking to potentially offer students the chance to complete the full English Baccalaureate, I have no intention of dropping the subjects that make Brymore unique. By expanding, we will be able to offer more choice and I can assure you the staff here at Brymore will continue to work hard, as they have always done, to ensure your son achieves the highest grades he is capable of achieving without losing sight of the 3 'Rs', even if they will never appear in league tables.

For further information I suggest you visit the Department for Education website at:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/>

Should you wish to contribute your views to the consultation you are able to do so at:

<https://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/departmentalinformation/consultations>

In terms of what we will be doing as a school, inviting in David Laws is one step we are taking. Should you wish to find out more then please do not hesitate to contact me, or you are welcome to attend a presentation to parents, where government reforms will be covered, on Saturday 15 December at 9.30 am in the school hall. We will finish in time for parents to attend the annual carol concert at Cannington Church at 11.00 am.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this and the other letter enclosed.

Yours sincerely



MARK THOMAS
Headteacher

Enc