

Kay Langlois Show (with Gareth Owen) BBC Radio Guernsey

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Interview with Primary Headteachers

Gareth Owen - The Headteachers of Guernsey's Primary Schools have spoken out over proposals for a radical shake up of secondary education in Guernsey. They have supported plans released by the Education Department to scrap the 11+, create an all-island High-School across all sites and rebuild the La Mare School site. Philippa Wareham spoke to the Heads of three of the Primary Schools, Cate Mason (CM) from St Martins, Helen Shepherd (HS) from St Mary & St Michael and Peter McGovern (PMcG) from Notre Dame.

HS - We are speaking on behalf of all the Primary Headteachers obviously when the proposal was shared with us we met and put together our statement. We all unanimously support the proposals of the education board.

CM – I think one of the most important reasons is about pupil wellbeing and I think that, as a group of Heads, we have noticed that our children do become anxious for the 11+ and the impact can be from the infants, as it's mentioned in the home and families become anxious about it. And we know that progress is often built on a child's wellbeing so we worry about the impact of it on both their progress and their happiness.

Are you in support of all the proposals? A high school across four sites? How confident are you that that will work here in Guernsey?

HS –We are fully behind the proposal and it will work, we are a small island. Headteachers in primary and secondary – we all work together very, very closely. We share good practice, we share staff, we share ideas so it's already a work in progress, it is really just cementing the good practice that's happening now.

There has been some opposition in the last couple of weeks everybody's talking about these proposals, they're out there. If some people are opposed to them what would you say to them? What would you say to people that don't necessarily agree that those proposals are the right thing for the island?

PMcG – Well I think that the proposals on the table at the moment are the least disruptive option. If you were to close one of the High Schools completely and convert it into a sixth form centre or a college of further education there is going to be immense disruption over the next few years. And I think that the transition that we have from the new system could almost be seamless in the way that it's been put together so I welcome that opportunity.

HS – Many people need to look at the evidence from which they are basing their decision because we as a group of Primary Headteachers are seeing daily our pupils so we are basing it directly on our professional observations, we are involved, of the lives of these children – this is daily observation of our pupils so we are really talking from a strong evidence base.

CM- I think very much in our thinking is growth mindset and understanding that intelligence isn't fixed and children change, grow and develop at different rates – a simple IQ test is a very poor measure to understand intelligence and it's high time it went.

I suppose when you think about the education consultation which saw a majority wanting to keep the selection – you don't think that's representative then.

PMcG – Well I think the Education Department explained that very well in the preamble to the data and it wasn't a referendum it was a consultation and they have noted the interest groups that have responded and all that information is very clearly answered in the Education Department's proposals.

Some people might argue that the 11+ system has been around for years, it's fine, the children have gone through this system and turned out fine why do you need to change it now.

HS – Children also go through a Secondary modern system and turn out fine but the age of 11 is such a young age to be sending this very clear message that you have passed or you have failed and those aren't words that we use here in school but that's how it is interpreted by the pupils – you pass or you fail. And those who fail go off to a secondary school and they have to regroup and rebuild their confidence and move on and that's a valuable time that has been lost in learning. Let's just get away and be done with it, get rid of it and let's just all move on and children can move in their family groups, in their friendship groups to really very good secondary schools that we have here on the island.

What's the feeling that you're getting or the sense of the feeling that you're getting from parents? I suppose I would say parents and children but the children here might be a little bit too young to really understand what's going on but what are the parents saying to you?

CM – Well we had a focus parent group on Wednesday night and the 18 parents that were there were very much in favour of the education proposals. There was the odd query and concern about the finer detail but they wanted to see an end to the 11+ without a doubt as a focus group of people.

We've heard Deputy Mary Lowe is calling for a decision to be made for these proposals to be delayed she said as islanders, pupils, parents all need a little bit longer to consider these plans – what do you make of her call for that delay?

PMcG – This decision was made in 2001, to stick with the system that we've got, so I feel that we have been waiting since 2001 to reverse that decision and to do the right thing. I think a further delay would have a negative impact on everybody. The Education Department is doing what it was mandated to do which is to bring these proposals to the States at the time that they were told to do it so I think further delay would not be the right thing to do. We need to implement the proposals without further delay.

Fast forward to next month; say if this does get approved, what's next for you all? What does it mean, what steps do you take after then or if it doesn't get approved what do you do then?

HS – Life will continue but the uncertainty, if it doesn't go through, will linger, hang over us. And if it goes through then its full steam ahead and we can focus on that and we redouble our efforts in making this happen.