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The Henry Dunster Society

5 April 2017

Gillian Winter, Chair  
Bury Grammar School Governors  
Farraday House, Bridge Road  
Bury BL9 0HG  
England, U.K.

Dear Ms. Winter,

Thank you for your letter of 28 March. It was generous and brief, but also informative. I was particularly struck by the importance you attach to following correct procedure and by your explicit confirmation that, when you sought to appoint a Principal, “both the Headmaster and the Headmistress applied...and both were taken through the full recruitment process.” There were no other candidates.

In my letter to you of 27 March I raised this issue of procedure, and I’m glad to have the situation clarified.

Your letter says nothing, however, about the critical and much more important substantive issues I asked you to address, which are whether what you did made sense, whether you and the other governors know how your initial mistake in judgment has been compounded by subsequent decisions, and what your plan is to make things right again and to chart a successful course for the Bury Grammar Schools, going forward.

You decided, for whatever reasons, that the Schools would benefit from the appointment of a Principal. You contrived a recruitment process in which there were only two candidates, one the Headmaster of the Boys’ School and the other the Headmistress of the Girls’ School. Knowing full well how qualified they were to be Heads of School, because you chose them for

precisely those qualities, you then pitted them against each other in a contest for a different job, which the chosen candidate would have to combine, somehow, with the job he or she already had.

But that is not all. When you made this decision in January you announced at the same time that the new Principal/Headmistress would work with the Headmaster under the terms of an agreement that you published. It was agreed that the Sixth Forms would merge. It was agreed that there would be a comprehensive Curriculum Review to help shape the future of effective teaching and learning at Bury at other levels. And there would in the interim and for the foreseeable be no change in the relationship of the senior Schools to each other.

You guaranteed, specifically to reassure parents and pupils on questions of pastoral care, that the two Schools would continue to function as independent entities.

By the beginning of March, however, this grand compact had fallen apart. You had by then also approved a request for the appointment of a Head of Staff for both senior Schools. You agreed over the Headmaster's objections that the most suitable candidate for this job was the Headmaster's chief deputy, the Second Master at the Boys' School, who was installed in an office across Bridge Road. In short order the Head of Staff had been given the power to call teachers into his office to discuss their possible redundancy, without prior notice to or consultation with Heads of School.

At which point you had effectively eviscerated the meaning of the word headmaster at Bury Grammar. What is a headmaster if he is not the head of staff of his own school?

And then more recently, as you reminded me in your letter, you have been pleased to approve the appointment of the former Second Master and later Head of Staff as Acting Headmaster, at least for a time. Surely you see the disruption and dislocation this has caused?

There are two things wrong with the situation you and the other governors have created.

First of all, and to revert to procedure for a moment, there is a long-established and well-known process regulating relationships between Governors, Heads of School, and teachers in England, as elsewhere. The Governors or a sub-set of them appoint the Head of School. The Head appoints the teaching staff and, if he or she finds difficulties with any of them and wishes them to leave, the matter is raised with the Governors, without whose agreement the Head of School would be unlikely to act.

Furthermore, there is a reasonable expectation that the Head of School would have raised any concerns about the work and future prospects of a member of staff with that member of staff as an essential first step in coming to a resolution. That is not the way things are working at Bury and it is legitimate to ask whether that concerns you.

Second, and with respect to substance, it is difficult to understand why you thought it was a good idea to pit two, strong, highly professional school administrators, each with proven records of excellence, against each other, failing to anticipate the certain adverse outcome, especially given that the governors' January promises were not to be kept.

I hope you know that, just across the moors, governors at another independent school recently contemplated appointing a principal, because they could see that bringing on board someone with business skills could yield benefits in strategic planning and institutional development for their entire enterprise. Unfortunately, they didn't have the money to pay for such an appointment. So, they then thought - for about ten seconds - of making one of their two heads of school principal and promptly dropped the idea. It would be like asking two people already doing good work to drink from "a poisoned chalice."

What is to be done?

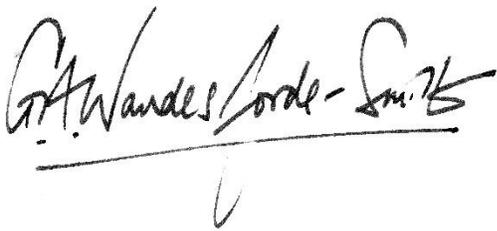
That is a question to which I have given a great deal of thought. Others have, too, including parents with children in school, teachers, loyal Old Clavians, friends of the Schools in and around Bury, and even sixth formers with an eye for dramatic posters. No-one wants to inflict more damage than you have inflicted already and some, especially parents, are afraid that the reputation of the Schools and the education of their children is going to suffer irretrievably, if there is no settlement soon and the issues I have rehearsed here, as well as others, go before an employment tribunal.

In my view the only way to prevent further debilitating damage to the Schools is for the governors to work as hard as they possibly can to reinstate the Headmaster, if he will agree to return, and establish a new agreement under which the Principal engages in the strategic planning you tasked her to do without in any way jeopardizing the independence of the two senior schools. And, most importantly, the governors should set in train a process of healing and reconciliation without which a constructive way forward is very hard to see.

It will soon be Founders' Day. It is an occasion with time-honored rituals; the service at church, followed by the lunch at School, when the parade ends, as well as the dinners and lunches Old Clavians attend in Bury and in London. The most predictable part is the part where a representative of the Schools rises to tell the assembled worthies how much has been accomplished in the past year and how bright the future looks. It's going to be a hard thing to pull off, this year, unless between now and Founders' Day the bad situation that prevails at Bury is turned around.

On behalf of the hundreds and hundreds of people whose lives and fortunes have been improved by Bury Grammar, and the hundreds yet to come, I call on you to make that turn around your legacy.

Sincerely,

  
G.A. Wandesborde-Smith