

Schools merger on hold

Apr 22 2009 by Moira Sharkey, South Wales Echo

CONTROVERSIAL plans to downsize Wales' biggest comprehensive and merge two primaries to make way for the expansion of a Welsh-medium school have been put on hold. Cardiff council's education chiefs had hoped to progress proposals for a shake-up of schools in Whitchurch but have now decided to stall the plans until further work is carried out following the response from the community. They have not ruled out the possibility that the proposals could be revised.



The school reorganisation for Whitchurch proposes:

- ❑ The reduction in size of Whitchurch High.
- ❑ The closure of Eglwys Newydd and Eglwys Wen primary schools. These would be replaced with one new primary school on Heol Don.
- ❑ The expansion of Welsh-medium primary Ysgol Melin Gruffydd, which currently shares a site with Eglwys Wen Primary on Erw Las.

The council's executive had been expected to formally propose the plan and agree that a public consultation be launched, at its meeting on April 30. This consultation is legally required before any change can be made to the future of a school. But the report on the proposals has now been withdrawn from the agenda.

Cardiff council corporate director Neelam Bhardwaja said: "We believe that more worked is needed on this report on the Whitchurch proposals before it goes to executive. "We have five other reports on the school reorganisation plan going to the executive that day so with this workload and the feedback we have had we feel that we need more time. We hope that we can carry out this work and bring the report to the executive within a few months."

And just as the proposals had a mixed reaction from the community, so too has the decision to put any progress on hold. Those connected to the schools that are closing are supportive of the delay while Welsh-medium campaigners say they are disappointed that they face further hold-ups.

Linda Morgan, councillor for Whitchurch and Tongwynlais and governor at both Ysgol Melin Gruffydd and Eglwys Wen, said she welcomed the decision.

"While I support wholeheartedly the expansion of Ysgol Melin Gruffydd as it desperately needs extra space, I don't believe we need to close two schools or reduce by 25% Whitchurch High as they are all excellent schools," she said. "It is a case of why fix it if it is not broken? I hope that these plans are revised over the coming months and a new plan which can have the full support of the community are proposed. I don't think this process can be rushed but I appreciate that it is very unsettling for the community."

This is the second time that proposals for a school reorganisation for Whitchurch have been delayed.

In 2007, an initial plan which had similar aims including a downsizing of Whitchurch, the merging of Eglwys Wen and Eglwys Newydd and the expansion of Ysgol Melin Gruffydd, went back to the drawing board after widespread public opposition.

Llais ein Plant (Our Children's Voice), which was set up by parents to campaign for an end to overcrowding in Ysgol Melin Gruffydd in Whitchurch and open another Welsh school in the community to cope with increasing demand, said it is concerned by the prospect of further delays. Group secretary Ashley Drake said: "Our children are being educated in overcrowded and inadequate accommodation which would be more fitting in the Third World. The delay has meant temporary classrooms become permanent fixtures and no real solution has been found."