

# **3-TIER TO 2-TIER - IS IT WORTH IT?**

**A summary of the key points from the School  
Organisation Review (SOR) and our  
responses to them.**

**By Julia Millar and Charlotte Cotton  
Parents of primary and middle school children in the Sudbury area**

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## Executive Summary

1. There is no proof that re-structuring the school system from 3-tier to 2-tier will improve Key Stage 2 results at age 11. Both 3-tier and 2-tier schools are performing badly at this stage. In 2006 the figures show that the 3-tier schools are closing the gap.
2. Suffolk has Beacon Council status for managing transfers of pupils from one school to the next. The minor anxiety and continuity issues associated with transferring are not sufficiently great to justify a complete reorganisation just to transfer once rather than twice.
3. The key stages exams are a recent introduction and subject to change. In the 3-tier pyramid, two schools rather than one have responsibility for the results but this doesn't necessarily lead to them being lower.
4. The £4.4million predicted annual saving is only equivalent to 1.3% of total costs. This will be eaten up by financing borrowing to fund capital expenditure, redundancy, redeployment and re-training costs. The consultation itself is predicted to cost £23million.
5. Staff morale and retention is at risk from the moment the decision is announced. This is several years before the start of the major organisational upheavals.
6. Smaller village (and town) schools, who cannot accommodate two additional years, will have to close.
7. Ultimately it is GCSE results which count. If grades A\* - G are considered, 3-tier pupils perform better than 2-tier. The gap for grades A\* to C is equivalent to 130 pupils per year improving one grade in one subject. Is this enough to justify changing the whole system?
8. Our Upper Schools will be stretched to comply with new 14-19 diploma requirements and would benefit from all available funding being targeted here, without having to accommodate years 7 and 8 at the same time.
9. BSF (Building Schools for the Future) funding is available whatever pattern of organisation an authority has. The Review has not proved how closing down all middle schools will assist in the better provision of education for the post 14 age group.
10. Having studied all the available evidence we do not feel that the Review Panel have proved the case that a complete restructuring of all the 3-tier areas will significantly improve results, save money or improve the sustainability of Suffolk's education system in the long-term. It is not worth it.

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The numbered points are the reasons given in the School Organisation Review (SOR) for switching from a 3-tier to a 2-tier system across the whole of Suffolk. All non-italic words are factual information taken from the review, all words in *italics* are our views.

## 1. POOR KEY STAGE 2 RESULTS IN 3-TIER SCHOOLS

The report states that Key Stage 2 (age 11) results are significantly lower in the 3-tier system, with a large % of 3-tier schools performing significantly below the national average at this stage. Performance in mathematics is particularly bad at KS2.

- Both 2-tier and 3-tier systems are performing badly at this stage - *not just 3-tier.*
- Suffolk is in the bottom 25% of all authorities for mathematics. *This is Suffolk as a whole, not just the 3-tier system.*
- In 2006 results for schools in the 3-tier system moved closer to 2-tier schools. In English the gap was reduced from 5% to 3% at both level 4+ (the expected level) and level 5+(higher attaining pupils). In maths the gap is the same as 2005 (6%) for level 4, and has come down from 6% to 4% for level 5. In science the gap in 2005 was 3% and in 2006 was reduced to 2%. And at level 5+ in science a 5% gap has reduced to 1%. In reading at level 4+ in 2005 the gap was 5% and this was reduced to 2% in 2006, and for level 5+ in reading a 7% gap in 2005 has been reduced to 3%. In writing the gap was reduced from 5% to 4%. *The figures show that the 3-tier system is currently closing the gap. Training programmes to improve KS2 results are still in their infancy and ongoing. Statistics can be used in different ways. The above figures can be used to prove - as the report chooses to stress - that despite huge efforts, the 3-tier system has still not closed the gap. Or they can be used to prove that the 3-tier system is improving.*
- The report says “one of the decisive factors for the Panel was that, despite everyone’s best efforts, the necessary improvements had not been achieved. . . . . They concluded, therefore, that change to the current structure would be necessary“. *This is a bit of a radical solution to some results for 11 year olds.*
- *Key Stage 2 teachers have, over the last few years, been undergoing intensive training on ways to improve KS2 results. Should we not allow these teachers time to translate this training into raising levels?*
- *The report goes on to use the poor KS2 figures again and again and again to prove what amounts to the same point: eg. 85% of 3-tier schools are below the national average for progress from KS1 to KS2 (compared to 12% of 2-tier), 0% of 3-tier schools are adding value between these stages, 17 out of 18 3-tier pyramids show less progress from KS1 to KS2 than that found nationally etc. All true, but no new points here, though presented in many different ways. If KS2 results are poor then obviously progress from KS1 to KS2 is also going to be poor.*
- 3-tier schools perform worse than 2-tier at KS2 if only levels 4 and 5 are considered. If the whole ability range is taken into consideration then the 3-tier schools perform better.
- *And before a massive restructuring is decided as the only solution, have they looked at everything? Possibly it doesn't suit years 5 and 6 to be taught subject specialisms so early? Perhaps the generic*

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*approach used in primary schools might be a better method of teaching for the core subjects in the first 2 years of middle school?. This could be done within middle schools as they are by keeping one class teacher for more subjects during the first 2 years and perhaps using specialist subject teachers for the more practical subjects such as DT, music, home economics, PE etc. This would require some retraining for middle school staff as the year 5/6 staff effectively become KS2 teachers. Perhaps this greater focus by these teachers on KS2 only could improve results? Moving up the age range, teachers of years 7 and 8 in middle schools could become more subject specific, more akin to secondary teachers. This can still be managed within the system as it stands.*

### What about GCSE results?

- By KS4 (age 16) the gap between the two systems has been made up if total points per pupil are considered. 3-tier schools make good progress in making up for the poor results at age 11. 72% of 3-tier schools in Suffolk are significantly above the national average for results from KS2 to KS4. (For 2-tier the figure is 50%). *Don't GCSE results count for more than KS2 results?*
- On average pupils from 3-tier schools perform slightly worse at GCSE than those from the 2-tier systems if grades A to C are looked at, but the percentages are not huge. The 2-tier system outperforms 3 tier schools for 5 or more A\* to C grades by 3%. The 3% difference equates to 130 pupils getting one grade lower in one subject (eg. 7Bs and 1C instead of 7Bs). *Does this small level of difference justify the upheaval and expense - even assuming that completely restructuring our schools could achieve this small improvement? Stop press: 2006 figures show a 2% gap A\*-C.*
- The 3-tier system outperforms the 2-tier for 5 or more A\* to G grades by 1%. *So the 3-tier system is doing better with the low ability pupils.*
- An important point from annex 4: A researcher at Durham university points out, "it might be worth noting that as a result of work that we carried out in Newcastle....**we now know more about the relative importance of LEAs in changing the attainment levels of pupils. The quantitative analysis concluded that by far the most important thing an LEA can do is to enhance the quality of teaching in the classrooms**". *This suggests that able and motivated teachers can boost results more than any restructuring.*

## 2. THE DISRUPTIVE EFFECTS OF TRANSFER

- *Lots of research into the disruptive effects of moving from one school to another is quoted. And yet as a result of the first report identifying this in 1996, "work to improve continuity when transfers occur was given high priority. Schools received extensive support and the work led to recognition of Suffolk as a Beacon Council." This would imply that Suffolk's transfer procedures are very good. The report tries to prove its point using pupils who have transferred 3 or more times between schools who are performing badly and using phrases like "repeated transfers". 3 transfers or more is not usual and is obviously detrimental to performance. 3-tier Suffolk children will only transfer twice in the vast majority of cases.*

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- *Whilst the transfer in the middle of KS2 (at age 9) could be a factor in the poor results at KS2, the transfer in the middle of KS3 (at age 13) doesn't appear to have the same adverse effect: "From KS2 to KS3 all but two of the 3-tier pyramids make better progress than that found nationally". The starting point was lower, but there's not been another dip on the second transfer so the case against two transfers is not conclusive.*
- **In 2001 "attainment and progress differences between the 2 and 3 tier systems were not considered significant enough to warrant the restructuring of education in Suffolk, with the potentially negative effects that this would have on the learning of several cohorts of pupils". ... "despite the considerable efforts from the local authority and from schools, the gap between the 2 and 3 tier systems has remained constant since 2002", so if it's no worse, why is it now considered OK to restructure and so bring on the almost certain negative effect on the learning of several cohorts of pupils?**

### 3. MISALIGNMENT WITH THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM KEY STAGES

- Unfortunately for any 3-tier pyramids, the national key stage tests which have recently been introduced do not coincide neatly with the points of transfer as they do in the 2-tier system. This leads to a lack of accountability for the results with two schools sharing the teaching at both KS2 and KS3. The review hopes that by changing the structure of the 3-tier schools there would be "greater potential to improve pupil performance".....while a change in structure could not guarantee improvement, it provided a better foundation and more opportunity for the future". *So there is no guarantee that this will improve results.*
- Some 3-tier pyramids across the country are improving their GCSE results at a rate above the national average. *So 3-tier doesn't always lead to poorer results.*

### 4. ESTIMATED £4.4 MILLION ANNUAL SAVINGS IN RUNNING COSTS

- More effective use of revenue with the possibility of recycling savings in Dedicated School Grant (DSG) into teaching and learning rather than fixed term costs. "The opportunity to re-invest economies of scale over the long-term". *But how long is long term? If you look at everything the DSG has to fund, it seems very unlikely that any children currently in the education system will see any benefits from this estimated £4.4million. Relevant quotes from the review: : "any savings within DSG can be used to fund the costs of prudential borrowing to fund capital expenditure and to fund redundancy costs." "Research into the options for change found that those involving a reduction in the number of schools would result in redundancies, early retirements or redeployment of staff, the costs of which would have to be found from within DSG." "estimated annual revenue savings.....of £4.4million....would initially be used to pay back borrowing from schools' balances".*
- "the costs of prudential borrowing" *could turn out to be enormous, preventing any schools from feeling any benefit for many many years. Much of the capital for secondary school re-building it is hoped will come from the BSF programme (Building Schools for the Future) - but the Sudbury area change over is scheduled for 2009 (when much new building work will already have had to be completed) and our BSF money isn't scheduled until 2016. This is based on "an assumption that the BSF programme nationally will prove successful and thus enable the DfES to complete (and therefore fund in full) the full 14 year programme.*

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- Furthermore “BSF would not necessarily fund in full the capital works required to implement the outcomes of the review and therefore other capital sources may need to be found. The funding provided through BSF is intended to resource 50% new building, 35% major refurbishment, and 15% minor refurbishment.” *Suggestions for other sources of funding are the Primary Capital Programme (but this is just for primary schools. This money is scheduled to start coming through to some areas in 2008 but is a 15 year programme - who knows when it will be our turn for a share - long after primary schools will have had to build their extra classrooms), Devolved Formula Capital, Targeted Capital Funding, capital receipts (from the sale of school buildings no longer needed - money which will come through long after much rebuilding work has already taken place) and prudential borrowing funded from the Dedicated Schools Grant. Given the huge sums involved - building costs estimated at between £55 million and £70 million - how much do we think will be spare from the £4.4million “savings”? On the contrary it would appear that whole of the County’s education system will be left servicing the most enormous debt.*
- Current annual running costs are £300million (running costs), £30million (maintenance) - both funded by the DSG. £4.4million is only 1.3% of this budget.
- If stage 1 and stage 2 of the consultation are completed, this alone is expected to cost £23million. *This rather puts £4.4million future savings into the shade.*
- A review annex estimates that each teacher switching systems will require 20 days training at a total cost of £3,000 each. *This is a cost to come out of the £4.4m savings. To say nothing of the effect on the education of our children of all the days when supply teachers are brought in to cover.*
- Transport cost are currently £16million per year. *School closures will mean many more pupils travelling much further to school and the review recognises that there will be an estimated increase in transport costs of £900,000 per year. Ultimately this increase will have to be met by the Council Tax payer.*

## 5. FUTURE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF TEACHERS

- Almost a third of Headteachers will reach retirement age in the next 5 years - *valid concern - but shortage of Heads is only a possibility. If the review goes ahead it is almost certain that many Heads and teachers will opt for early retirement or a change of school (to a more stable area). Moral amongst middle school teachers is already low as a result of this review.*
- Concerns about recruiting middle school teachers in particular as a smaller national pool of middle schools reduces middle school training courses. *But several colleges across the country still offer middle school training including Cambridge University. Many teachers choose this age group despite their initial teacher training being for either primary or secondary.*

## 6. SMALL VILLAGE SCHOOLS CAN IMPROVE THEIR VIABILITY

- With the addition of extra years, small schools can improve their viability for the future. *This may be so for some. For others closure is almost a certainty. The report talks about “keeping village schools” wherever possible but admits that in some cases it will not be viable to keep them open. “Federation” is mentioned, but what does this mean in practice? This is despite the fact that many village primary schools consistently achieve results above average.*

## 7. IMPORTANCE OF THE WHOLE OF KEY STAGE 3 AS A PERIOD OF PREPARATION FOR OPTIONS AT AGE 14.

- The benefits of a longer period of preparation in the same school before choosing GCSEs. *A valid point but better liaison between middle and upper schools could surely ease this situation. Ultimately the proof of the system is in the GCSE results which, as previously detailed, are only a very small amount lower in 3-tier schools in Suffolk compared to 2-tier.*
- *It is worth noting that small pilot schemes are looking at some pupils completing KS3 in 2 years, meaning they could complete this stage at middle school, leaving a clear year at upper school for teachers to get to know them and consider GCSE choices. Less able pupils would still need the full 3 years but could have a year’s teaching targeted towards their particular needs.*

## 8. 14 - 19 PROVISION

- Greater potential for improving participation and learning outcomes 14-19. The Review Panel had concerns about the difficulty of reviewing post 16 provision within the 3-tier system. The Panel believed it was unlikely that performance issues could be addressed without considering structural change. *14 - 19 provision is a very large part of the review, and many important issues are raised concerning major changes that will have to be made in the next decade, to comply with the new 14- 19 Specialised Diploma Entitlement. Structural change may well be needed for some upper schools but the report does not adequately explain why closing down middle schools will help with this.*
- The national learning entitlement for 14-19 year olds requires fourteen specialised diploma subjects to be available to all young people by 2013, with the numbers increasing incrementally from 2006. Currently most localities in Suffolk have only two or three lines available to their students. Substantial development of formalised partnerships, learning facilities and staff with specialised skills will be required for Suffolk to deliver the national entitlement . Particular strains will be placed upon small secondary schools ..it is unlikely that even the largest schools will be able to offer all 14 lines without collaborating. In addition research studies indicate that the minimum size for sixth form to achieve sufficient breadth and choice should be 200 students. Students in large sixth forms are more likely to achieve higher outcomes. Currently only ten of the thirty 6<sup>th</sup> forms in Suffolk usually have 200 or more students. Where limited breadth and choice is available post 16 this can lead to students making inappropriate study choices ..... this is likely to be a contributory factor to the high drop out rate from learning that Suffolk has at 17 years. *Evidently the 14-19 issues need huge consideration and some restructuring of post-14 education may be required. Should available resources and grants not be targeted here? How does closing down middle schools help to increase choice post-14? And when upper schools are having to deal with, and finance, all of the above, do we want them to be absorbing two extra years (years 7 and 8) at the same time?*

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- *The Government is also proposing that from 2011 all pupils must stay on at school until they are 18 - another major change and expansion for upper schools to deal with.*
- *Thrown into this melting pot is a third consideration that demographic changes - falling primary numbers, but also new house building in some areas - will mean that some future reassessment of school roles will be needed. A few schools can expand, and a few that are no longer viable can eventually close as part of a natural process. This does not support an argument to re-structure the entire 3-tier system.*

## 9. BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE (BSF) FUNDING

- *“The Panel wished to emphasise the importance of the school organisation review in laying the foundations for the authority’s vision for BSF. They recognised that the vision had to demonstrate how schools would be transformed and how value for money would be achieved. If, as the Panel believed, there were a clear link between performance and structure, then the vision would have to be based on a change to the existing system. ...the Panel believed that a strategy that applied to the whole county would provide the fairest means of allocating resources....The Panel concluded therefore that a change from the current mixed system of provision would provide the best platform for the authority’s case for BSF”. But BSF funding is available (for years 7 and up) whatever pattern of school organisation the authority has. In fact BSF funding is available to all schools deemed Secondary and all our middle schools are deemed Secondary schools. And spending money on major restructuring schemes in the 3-tier areas does not allocate resources fairly across the county.*

## 10. CONCLUSION

- *Having studied all the available evidence we do not feel that the Review Panel have in any way proved the case that a complete restructuring of all the 3-tier areas will significantly improve results, save money or improve the sustainability of Suffolk’s education system in the long-term. On the contrary it seems clear to us that the enormous expense and disruption will adversely affect years of pupils who will be educated in mobile classrooms, move into schools which are in the process of closing down, and be taught by poorly motivated staff who are having to re-apply for jobs, move and re-train, or by supply teachers as the experienced teachers have already left. Pupils will also be passing through a system with beleaguered reserves.*
- *And what of the middle school staff? Experienced and skilful teachers in the middle of their careers may find new positions difficult to gain as younger, and therefore less expensive, teachers take the available positions. Do we want to risk losing this pool of experience? It is such teachers who motivate individuals to achieve.*
- *The review has promised, in stage 2, to put together detailed implementation strategies to cover how this whole change over will be organised, presumably including such basics as which schools will close and which will expand, how the human resource implications will be managed, how transitional support will be provided and the likely timescales for change. The PDP’s plan is that Councillors agree to the proposal to change in principle before any of the above is addressed. But we need this information first - before we commit irreversibly to saying “yes” to this proposal. It is quite possible that restructuring half the county will not lead to such a noticeable improvement in results and will cost far too much.*

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*Some cynics would say that the whole review is in fact a virtual application for BSF funding. Another proposal can be put forward for BSF funding that does not involve closing our middle schools.*

- *The “negative effects on the learning of several cohorts of pupils” will apply to our children in the next decade if this switch goes ahead. As parents we don’t want these effects to be “minimised” we want them to be negligible. The County Council owes a duty of care to the children in schools now, or about to come into the school system. In pursuit of the possibility of marginal improvements to standards of achievement by future generations of pupils, brought about by a change of structure, the Policy Development Panel is willing to risk the standards which this generation can achieve.*