FILE CAJ

cc CSG

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

24 March 1986

The Prime Minister's attention has been drawn to an article by the Education Correspondent of The Guardian in the April edition of "Good Housekeeping". The article asserts that "proposals have been set before the Department of Education and Science for a definite break in education at 16, and a new start in a college for all those who would previously have been sixth formers in the schools". I attach a copy of the article.

BF

The Prime Minister has asked me to pass on her grave concern if there is any substance in the suggestions in the Good Housekeeping article and has further asked for a note from your Secretary of State commenting on them and on the present position on provision for 16+ education.

TIMOTHY FLESHER

R.L.Smith, Esq.,
Department of Education and Science

DSG

REQUIEM FOR THE SIXTH FORM

BY MAUREEN O'CONNOR

The Guardian's education correspondent looks at the question of separate colleges for 16 to 19 year olds

The English sixth form is dying. For so long the pride of our secondary education system, the traditional sixth form is succumbing to the twin pressures of falling rolls and the fact that young people grow up more quickly these days

Increasingly, sixth forms are being replaced by colleges for the over 16s which, all the evidence shows, are very much to many young students' taste – and have had the added advantage, recently, of protecting examination classes from the effects of strike action. More than half of English local authorities now have at least one 'tertiary' or sixth form college.

The idea of 'junior colleges' for 16 to 19-year-old students has a venerable history. They were suggested in the 1944 Education Act, just one of several clauses of that reforming legislation which has never been implemented. Croydon toyed with the idea again in the 1950s, but it was not until the 1960s that Luton established the first sixth form college to cater for all its A level students. A trickle of other local authorities, looking for economical ways of changing to a comprehensive system, followed suit, and the first purpose-built sixth form college opened in Stoke-on-Trent in 1970.

The trickle has now become a flood with 112 sixth form colleges in existence catering for more than 65,000 students around the country; 35 of the even newer tertiary colleges have also replaced school sixth forms in some areas, amalgamating with local colleges of further education, and this figure will soon reach 50 as plans approved for colleges in places as various as Port Talbot, Swansea and Weymouth are implemented. Nationwide, post-16 colleges, whatever the type, now cater for more than half of the young people who stay in full-time education after the age of 16.

The earliest sixth form colleges saw themselves as wholly academic institutions, catering for students taking A levels and intending to go on to higher education. Initially, some demanded an entrance qualification of four or five O level passes. But as school sixth forms began to make provision for less academic youngsters wanting an extra year of general education, so the sixth form colleges found it hard to remain exclusive. All now provide non-A level courses and nearly one-quarter of young people attending them are non-A level sixth formers.

Tertiary colleges are, by their nature, even less heavily biased towards A level courses. Overall their work is split evenly between GCE and vocational courses. One of their great strengths, of course, is that they offer the unique opportunity for young people to combine A level and vocational elements in their programme.

Falling rolls mean that schools which cater for children from 11 to 18 are shrinking in size and many have difficulty in maintaining adequate numbers of students beyond school-leaving age. Nationally, less than one child in three stays at school beyond 16, and in some urban areas the staying-on rate is considerably lower. The Department of Education and Science recommends that a school sixth form should have at least 150 pupils, and be able to offer a minimum choice of 14 A level subjects.

Students at the South East Essex Sixth Form College, in Benfleet, investigate Newton's laws of motion during an A level physics lesson

Many schools find these numbers impossible to maintain. Some, in an attempt to provide an adequate range of A levels, run classes with only a handful of students in them. This is an expensive shift by any standards and one which takes teachers away from classes lower down the school. Nor does it have much educational justification because there is strong evidence that A level candidates taught in very small groups of two or three lack stimulation and perform rather badly. When money is in short supply anyway, local authorities do not need much encouragement from central government to rationalise their sixth form provision.

Additional strain

To add to these difficulties government policy is to improve and broaden the curriculum for 16 and 17 year olds in the schools. The new AS (Advanced Supplementary) level exam, due to be introduced in 1988, will place additional strain on schools' abilities to provide all the subjects which academic sixth-formers need. And at the same time they are being asked to involve themselves in the new Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) for youngsters who want a one-year sixth form course before looking for work or going on to further education.

As a consequence of these factors, proposals have been set before the Department of Education and Science for a definite break in education at 16, and a new start in a college for all those who would previously have been sixth formers in the schools. A handful of authorities are even proposing to transform existing sixth form colleges into tertiaries as a logical final step towards a comprehensive system of education for 16 to 19 year olds.

It is by no means fanciful to suggest that by the end of the ▷

century the traditional school sixth form will have almost completely disappeared from state education and – because of the attractions of college life as opposed to school – may even be under threat in the private sector as well. Already one or two fashionable sixth form colleges in the south of England recruit up to 20 per cent of their students from independent schools, especially among those who apparently have become disenchanted with boarding and/or single sex schools

Apparent advantages

The financial arguments in favour of post-16 colleges are clear, and local authorities of all political persuasions are finding them attractive. Far more A level subjects can be offered – 30 is not uncommon in the larger colleges, and 20 to 25 is standard – and A level subjects can be taught in groups of an economic size. From the students' point of view these are plus points too. Four languages at A level, taught in groups which are large enough to be intellectually challenging (eight or 10 is the usual minimum) have to be better than one or two languages taught in tiny groups in a school sixth form. And subjects which are seldom offered at school, like drama, textiles, psychology, geology and government and politics, are regularly offered in some post-16 colleges.

Initially, there were some doubts about a post-16 form of organisation which effectively abolished the most cherished comprehensive school sixth forms, modelled on their grammar school predecessors. Parents wondered, understandably, whether academic standards would be maintained. Aware of these doubts, the college principals have kept a very careful eye on their own performance – and have come out of most comparisons with flying colours. The A level pass rate is higher in both tertiary and sixth form colleges than it is in comprehensive schools, and in some areas even compares favourably with the pass rate in selective grammar schools.

But neither sixth form nor tertiary colleges are keen to be judged only in the relatively narrow terms of their A level successes. For some years now the larger colleges have been developing courses for young people of lower ability, who might not previously have stayed in education beyond 16. Others give priority to general studies alongside exam subjects, and most offer a range of optional non-examination courses, ranging from anthropology to cordon bleu cookery, as well as leisure and sporting activities. Several point to A level successes by students who might never have been allowed to attempt such a course on the basis of their O level or CSE results. They have benefited, the colleges argue, from the opportunity to make a fresh start in a different environment at 16.

What interests many colleges rather more than their academic record is the role they are undoubtedly playing in persuading more young people to stay in education after the age of 16 – an area in which Britain performs particularly badly compared to other western nations.

Wherever a college system has been introduced the number of young people over 16 who are prepared to stay in education has increased, according to reports from Her Majesty's Inspectors.

To some extent, principals admit, this is the temporary effect of something new. But in most areas, while the initial surge of enthusiasm may have dropped after a year or so, there have been long-lasting improvements in the numbers of pupils deciding to stay on, and in some instances even a dramatic increase.

This is one reason why both the Liberal Party and the Socialist Education Association (which carries some weight within the Labour Party) are now committed to the general introduction of tertiary colleges for all 16 to 19 year olds. Both argue that they offer an economically and educationally desirable way of encouraging a great proportion of young people to continue in education after reaching the official school leaving age.

Manchester and Sheffield are two of the large Labour-controlled cities planning to 'go tertiary' shortly. The Inner London Education Authority, after years of attempting to support its large number of small sixth forms and experimenting unsuccessfully with a consortia of schools sharing courses and facilities, is now consulting parents and teachers on college options. Elsewhere, Conservative-controlled authorities in York, Worcester and Hull are also introducing sixth form colleges. St Francis Xavier Sixth Form College in Clapham, the first in inner London, takes 16 year olds from 12 Roman Catholic secondary schools in south London. In the first year it offers four languages at A level, 21 other A level courses, the same number at O level, and has 80 students studying for the newly introduced CPVE exam. One of the great advantages, says principal, Brian Snalune, is the more mature environment for study.

Some reservations

But although the tide is now running strongly in a tertiary direction, and a Conservative government is approving an increasing number of reorganisation proposals which include sixth form and tertiary colleges, there are still a few obstacles in the path of a root and branch reform. The DES has turned down some college schemes, generally on the grounds that they have not adequately considered how the schools for younger children are to function without their 'crown' of sixth forms.

It was initially feared that schools for 11 to 16 year olds would prove unstimulating for university-educated teachers. But this has not generally been the case, and some staff now argue strongly that schools which offer seniority and extra responsibility to their fifth formers have fewer discipline problems. The colleges, incidentally, say they find that potential sixth formers are only too pleased to be relieved of the chore of supervising the younger children.

Necessary guidance

Liaison with the 'feeder' schools, and the care and counselling of students who will only be in a college for two years, are aspects which need careful planning. Clearly, fifth formers moving on to post-16 courses need careful advice – particularly if it is an institution offering a wider range of courses than a school sixth form traditionally provides. Most sixth form and tertiary colleges arrange advisory sessions for potential students during their fifth year at school.

Similarly, once in college, students need to settle down quickly. Well-established sixth form colleges generally allocate incoming students to personal or group tutors who will oversee their studies, as well as acting as personal advisers, throughout their time at college.

Given the economic advantages of a concentration of educational resources for post-16 students – at a time of continuing cuts in real educational spending – it is difficult to see what could stop local authorities stepping up the pace of reorganisation. And given that there are proven educational advantages in the college system – and that in many cases young people are voting in its favour with their feet – it is easy to see why so many teachers believe that the traditional school sixth form will have faded away by the year 2000, if not before. □

EDUCATION: Policy: PL6