

Penhill Primary and Nursery School

Consultation: A survey of parents' opinion



Prepared for DJB Consultancy on behalf of ULT
July 2008

Background

- Swindon Academy was established in September 2007 by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and Swindon Borough Council in collaboration with the sponsor, the United Learning Trust
- Swindon Borough Council has now proposed expanding the Academy to include Penhill School
- DJB Consultancy has commissioned a consultative opinion poll amongst a sample of parents with a child attending Penhill Primary and Nursery School
- The aims of the research are:
 - to find out parents views on educational standards at Penhill
 - To find out whether parents support or oppose the proposal and reasons for their views
 - To assess the expected effect on children and on Penhill school
 - To identify concerns around the proposal
 - To measure attitudes to proposed building refurbishments
- All respondents were given a brief introduction:

I would like to ask you your views on a proposal to expand Swindon Academy to include Penhill Primary and Nursery School. As you may know, Swindon Academy opened in 2007. It is a school for children aged 0 to 19. If the proposal goes ahead, Penhill School would close in December 2008 and re-open as part of the Academy in January 2009, on the same site as it is now. Existing Penhill pupils would be guaranteed a place. The aim of the proposal is to raise standards at Penhill by making it part of the Academy.

Method

- The consultation process began on 1st June 2008 and included the widespread circulation of a consultation document, public meetings and interviews with key stakeholders
- DJB Consultancy commissioned EW Research to carry out research among parents/carers to assess attitudes to the proposal
- It was felt that a combined qualitative and quantitative approach would give both a broad range and depth of response
- A total of 52 parents were interviewed for the survey (there are 400 children on roll)
 - Parents were approached and interviewed on a random basis as they visited school between 16th and 25th June 2008
 - Interviewers working on the survey were fully trained and briefed and had completed CRB checks
- Interviews were conducted face to face in the school playground. The school was kept fully informed of the survey
- Following the survey, two focus groups were conducted among a total of 13 parents (mainly mothers) to investigate attitudes in more detail
- The groups took place on 2nd July 2008 at Penhill School. Parents attending were selected to represent a range of opinion both for, against and unsure
- One group was made up of parents from households where the chief income earner is on benefits or working in an unskilled job, while the other was made up of parents who tended to be working, some in non-manual occupations
- The survey has been conducted by EW Research, an independent market research agency which operates according to the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

Sample details: 52 parents

Gender		Working status		School year of child/children	
	%		%		%
Male	29	Full time	8	Nursery class	13
Female	71	Part time	12	Reception	13
		Unemployed	21	Years 1 or 2	58
		Housewife	29	Years 3 or 4	33
		No answer given	27	Years 5 or 6	31
Age		Ethnicity		Religion	
	%		%		%
18-24 years	8	White	98	None	65
25-34 years	48	Asian	2	Church of England	23
35-44 years	37			Catholic	8
45+	8			Muslim	4
Social Class*					
	%				
AB	6				
C1	2				
C2	25				
DE	67				

The sample reflects the profile of parents:

- Predominantly DE socio-economic grouping (unskilled workers or those reliant on state benefits)
- Seven in ten of those surveyed are women. In our experience mothers traditionally take lead role in children's education
- The large majority are white British, reflecting demographics of the area

Summary and conclusions

- Almost half of parents (46%) support the proposal for Penhill School to become part of the Academy while a third (37%) oppose it. Parents are overall split in their attitudes to the proposal. The main reasons given by those in favour are:
 - Children will find the secondary transfer process easier if they are already part of the Academy
 - They have a positive opinion of the Academy which may be due to their child's experience
 - They like the sound of the individual approach to learning
 - Standards are likely to go up at Penhill
- Those against the proposal cite the following reasons:
 - Good teachers may leave Penhill
 - Penhill would remain on a separate site to the Academy, which may cause children to have trouble integrating
 - Some parents do not have a good opinion of the Academy, as they feel discipline is an issue and there are too many supply teachers

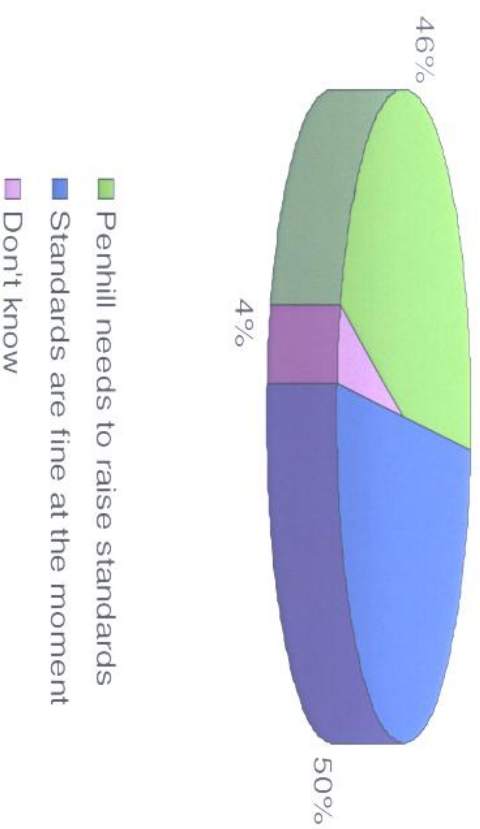
Summary and conclusions

- Parents feel the proposal is already decided and their views will not truly be taken into account. They feel disappointed with the public meeting which they say failed to answer their questions. They tend to feel that Penhill is treated less well and receives less funding than other schools
- Many parents are happy with educational standards at Penhill at the moment. This may be because of low expectations in an area with a traditional lack of educational attainment
- Others feel standards should be improved and in particular more homework should be set and marked, the ratio of adults to children in classes should be increased, and those children falling behind should be identified earlier and given special help

Summary and conclusions

- Parents would benefit from clear reassurance and information on a number of their concerns:
 - They would like to know whether the building improvements will go ahead if Penhill does not become an Academy, and would like a clear explanation of the programme of school buildings improvements including other primary schools
 - They would like clarification over uniform: in particular, will it become compulsory at Penhill (which many would like) and will they have to buy uniform twice, once in September and once in January
 - Parents would like to know that someone is listening to and taking account of their views
 - Parents would like to know what will happen to the headteacher and teachers if the proposal goes ahead
 - Parents would like more information on the process of integration at the secondary stage for Penhill children
 - Parents would like to know more about attitudes to discipline at Swindon Academy

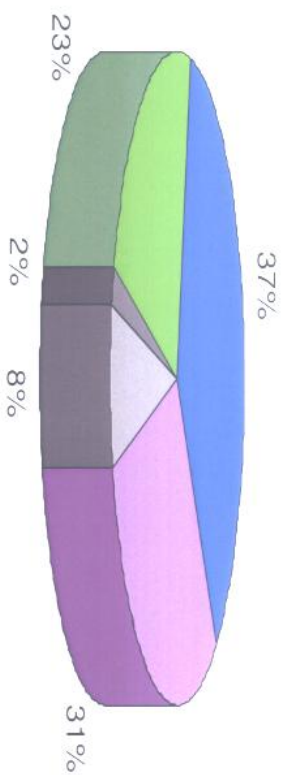
Parents have mixed views on the need for standards to be raised at Penhill



Base: All (52)

Q Ofsted education inspectors have judged the standards at Penhill at Key Stage 2 to be low and have advised that standards need to be raised. Others think standards are fine at the moment. Which of the statements comes closest to your view?

Three parents in five think it is very important that educational standards are raised within two years



Base: All (52)

- Urgent
- Very important
- Quite important
- Not important
- Don't know

Q How important would you say it is that Penhill School raises its standards of education over the next two years?

Overall, the school and teachers are valued but some would like to see standards raised

- Parents are generally warm and enthusiastic about Penhill, and in particular they like:
 - The teachers, many of whom they say have taught at the school a long time, and genuinely care about the children
 - Family Learning at Key Stage 1, which is reported to bring parents together and encourage them to mix, as well as providing a qualification
 - The position of the school as the heart of the community; many parents attended the school themselves
- Some parents feel standards are fine at the moment, feeling children will learn if they want to and are ready to, and what is most important is for the school to provide a happy environment
- Others feel standards should be raised, as they are variable from class to class. Working parents are more likely than those not working to feel standards should be raised
 - Parents who have wanted their children to be set homework say they have had to push for this, and when homework is set it is not always marked
 - The teaching environment would be improved by more teaching assistants in class
 - Some feel the problem in the area is the lack of input from some parents; some do not have high expectations of education. Parents feel it is hard to raise standards when a substantial proportion of parents do not value or want this
 - Some parents may struggle themselves with reading and learning so may not be equipped to support their children
 - If there is a lack of back-up at home it is hard for the school to enforce higher standards

"You know the teachers, they know your kids. That's the best thing about it. They make you feel welcome"

"I liked working with the kids. And it was good to socialise with other adults. You can work towards a certificate as well"

"If they are not happy they are not going to want to learn, no matter what standard of education"

"There's not enough interest from the parents sometimes to help children along. A school can only do so much"

"The area we live in, it's not so much we're behind, but we need as good an education as our children can get"

Many would like uniform to be made compulsory

- For many parents Penhill school's attitude to uniform represents a lack of complete commitment to raising standards
 - Uniform at the moment is optional, which some parents think is fairer to those who may not be able to afford uniform
 - However, most think uniform for all children looks better and brings the children together with a sense of belonging
 - This opinion is felt among parents dependent on benefits as well as working parents
 - Therefore, parents would welcome clearer direction on uniform for the school. If uniform becomes compulsory this should be enforced
 - Parents feel compulsory uniform would be a good preparation for secondary school
- A concern voiced on uniform is that if Penhill becomes part of the Academy in January, parents may have to buy uniform twice in a school year, once in September and then again when the change happens in January
 - Clarification over uniform would therefore be well received
- Some parents feel that Penhill is badly treated in comparison to other schools in the borough
 - They believe that Penhill receives least funding and rarely receives new equipment or building refurbishments
 - They report that the head has repeatedly been told that no money is available for building work at Penhill

"My daughter was failing in maths. I had to ask for homework and now she is getting stacks of it"

"They still have not introduced uniform properly. It's 99% at first but then it tails off"

"If it had to be worn like it is at the Academy it would make it easier when they went to secondary school"

"I think they should definitely enforce it. It should be compulsory"

"Out of all the schools in the borough this school gets the least funding. I think this is the only school I know that doesn't have any playground equipment"

Parents are looking for answers to their concerns about the proposal

- Awareness of the proposal to expand Swindon Academy to include Penhill school is high
 - 94% of the 52 parents surveyed are aware of the proposal
 - Some parents are aware of United Learning Trust as the sponsor
 - Almost all have received the consultation document and several attended a public meeting
 - Attitudes to the information received and the consultation in general tend to be negative, as a strong feeling among parents is that the proposal has already been decided so there is little use their voicing their opinion
- Some parents received the impression at the public meeting that those presiding did not really listen to what parents had to say and did not answer questions
 - The end result was that parents left feeling dissatisfied
 - Some parents feel that the Council, the sponsor and the Principal at the Academy have not subsequently been willing to give answers to parents' questions, particularly on building work at Penhill
- Some have read the consultation document, and more have done so among working parents and those in higher socio-economic groups
 - The impression of the document is that it is too strongly in favour of the proposal and does not present the alternative viewpoint
 - This ties in with parents' views that the Council has already decided in favour of the proposal
- Parents would like to feel that someone is listening to and taking account of their views. It is important to counteract the widespread feeling that the proposal is already decided and provide reassurance to parents on their key questions

"They weren't telling us what we wanted to know. They put it over like we are going to do it whether you want it or not"

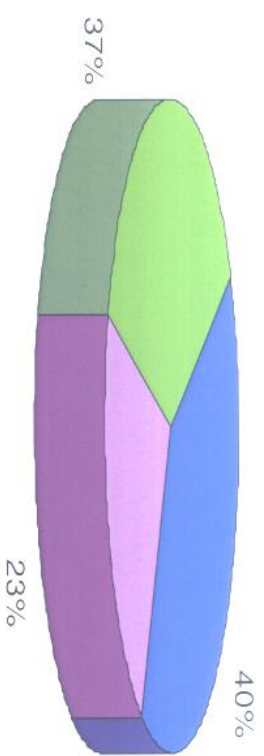
"We all came out of there angry. It was very heated. You didn't get your voice across"

"We have not been kept well informed. It has all been last minute, just to hush us up"

"The Council will agree to it because it gets Penhill out of their finances"

"I don't want more information. It will all go ahead regardless"

There is no clear consensus among parents on whether the proposal will benefit Penhill School or not



Base: All (52)

Will be of benefit Will be of no benefit Don't know

Q On balance, do you think it will be of benefit or no benefit to Penhill School to be included in Swindon Academy?

The proposal may lead to higher standards but parents fear teachers will leave

- Parents are concerned that the proposal will cause teachers to leave the school because they are against the change in status, or because they will be made to hand in their notice and re-apply for their job. As already stated, parents value teachers highly
 - Some feel this will have a negative effect on the school as it will lose its most valuable resource
 - Similarly, parents fear it will not be beneficial to the school if the head is not on site
- The perceived benefits for Penhill are in improvements in educational standards
 - Parents feel this would be a good thing as on balance the school could do with raising standards
 - Some feel that Swindon Academy has proved that it can raise standards as it has greatly improved teaching and learning after changing from Headlands School
 - Others feel that the Academy approach is currently untested as it has been open only a year and results are not yet available
 - Similarly, it is unknown how it would work when applied to a primary school
- Some parents would welcome improved access to extra-curricular activities such as after school clubs, and feel this is needed at Penhill
- However, some fear that Penhill would lose its identity if it becomes part of the Academy
 - Others feel that the it is people that make the identity of a school, and it would be important to ensure this remains unchanged as far as possible

"If the Academy takes over they will lose staff... The good teachers will leave"

"I know that standards would go up because of what I have seen there (at the Academy)"

"I'm not sure about the Academy taking over a primary school"

"Things I used to do like netball, football, gymnastics. It all seems to have stopped"

"This school will still be the centre of Penhill. We make it the school"

Parents fear the separate site may cause problems for Penhill children after secondary transfer

- The main benefit of the proposal for the children is perceived to be an easier transition to secondary school
 - Children will feel they belong to something, so that when they move on they are still part of the school, which makes the process of integration less difficult
 - Children will know their new teachers, the familiar faces will help the transfer
- The main drawback parents see for the children is the geographical issue of Penhill remaining on a different site
 - The children may be perceived as different from others who are based on the main site and singled out as Penhill kids
 - In the worst case parents fear children would be bullied
 - Part of this perception is the already identified feeling that Penhill is less well regarded and receives lower funding than other schools in the area

"They (children) would meet the teachers throughout the school. Then they would know them when they move up"

"The problem is that we will still be here"

"At Pinchurst they are all on the same site. But ours have to come from here to the Academy"

"It would be like sticking them in a cage with a loud of lions"

Attitudes to Swindon Academy are mixed; some parents are positive while others remain unsure

- Most parents agree that Swindon Academy is a great improvement on Headlands school, and they give credit to the Academy for the change
- Some parents, especially those with a child at the Academy, are positive towards it, in particular the individual approach to learning
 - The Academy is highly rated for its work with special needs children
- Others feel Swindon Academy has problems, in particular a perceived lack of discipline among the children, bullying is allowed to go unchecked and fighting is an issue
 - Some comment that the standard of teaching is not always high as they feel there are too many supply teachers or inexperienced teachers
- For many parents it is too soon to tell, as the Academy has been open only a year, and they feel they need longer to judge the school

"Since Swindon Academy took over Headlands, my other daughter's education has improved"

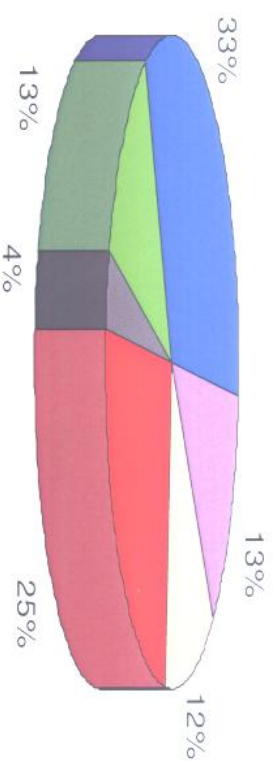
"I think Swindon Academy is brilliant. I have other children who were at Headlands, and I've seen the changes / they worked well with my older son with ADHD"

"My eldest goes to the Academy and is doing really well"

"My son is running riot at the Academy"

"Firstly, the Academy hasn't been going that long and I've heard reports of bullying. Too early to say if it's working"

Almost half (46%) support the proposal while a third (37%) oppose it



Base: All (52)

- Strongly support
- Support
- Neither /nor
- Strongly oppose
- Oppose
- Don't know

Q Do you support or oppose the proposal to expand Swindon Academy to include Penhill school?

Attitudes to the proposal are mixed

- Many support the proposal because they would like to see standards raised at Penhill
- Parents with a positive view of the Academy due to personal experience are particularly likely to support the proposal
 - Many feel the change would help children with special needs or those needing individual attention
 - Those who have heard of the curriculum which offers individual tailored learning are in favour of this approach as it offers the best solution for each child
- Others feel the proposal would result in children becoming unhappy
 - They may not integrate fully as they are from a separate site
 - Staff changes would mean lack of continuity and uncertainty
 - Some are unhappy with discipline and teaching standards at the Academy

"If it's going to improve a lot of things, then it's worth it. If it brings up standards"

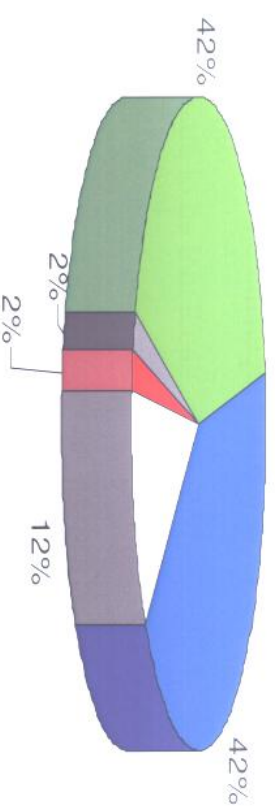
"I know from people needing one to one attention it's quite long to wait here, but from what I've read it would be different at the Academy"

"We were told they would be put in the same class but learn at different levels. It's a good idea for the children"

"Because the Academy hasn't done a lot for my oldest child (first year there). His level has dropped dramatically"

"The kids will be unhappy if there are too many new teachers"

The large majority think building improvements at Penhill are an important priority



Base: All (52)

- Very high priority
- Fairly high priority
- Neither / nor
- Low priority
- Don't know

Q The proposal includes plans to improve buildings and facilities at Penhill including a nursery block with no mobile classrooms, a landscaped car park at the front of the school and an independent youth and community centre. How much of a priority do you think it is that building improvements are made at Penhill?

Parents would like to see building improvements at Penhill

- Most parents think Penhill is in need of building improvements
 - In particular they would like to see refurbishment of the car park, the nursery block, the drainage, the toilets, leaking roofs and the playground
 - The feeling appears to be that these improvements are important but not urgent
- Discussion of the building improvements causes parents to question why these would be made only if the school becomes an Academy (as parents believe)
 - This seems unfair to many
 - Parents compare Penhill's status with other local schools which they perceive receive greater funding for building works; this contributes to the consensus that Penhill is treated unfairly
 - It is important to clarify for parents the building works programme and under what circumstances the refurbishments will take place

"I wouldn't say it's an absolute disgrace. It just needs to be smartened up"

"It doesn't look as nice as it could do. Some of it does need facelifting, like the huts"

"Seven Fields is getting a brand new school. But the money has run out for us"

"If improvements are so urgent, why do they only have to be done if we become an Academy?"

Interest is expressed in adult learning, IT and leisure and sport facilities for young people

- Parents feel the school at the moment has strong links with the wider community, due to the fact that many parents attended the school themselves, and the school is the heart of the community
 - Nevertheless, parents acknowledge the school does not currently offer its facilities to the wider community, and there is some interest in changing this situation
 - Adult education is of interest, because of the need to improve standards in the area, and to help children with homework
 - Parents express interest in the continuation of Family Learning
- Some problems of behaviour relate to the fact that there is not enough for young people to do locally, according to parents; it would be a good idea to offer more facilities
 - A youth club including structured leisure activities would be a good idea
 - Sport especially football would be popular
- Parents would like to have access to school IT facilities
- Parents like the idea of childcare in the form of before and after school clubs, but in practice they say this can be too expensive for those not working or on low incomes

"They should use every inch of the school for the benefit of the community"

"Some of the things children learn now I don't know about. Maths and computer"

"All the little rugrats round here are bored. If there was a youth club...something supervised for the children to do"

"They tried to do it here before (childcare) but it was too expensive"



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