



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London EC1V 4PY

7 May 2020.

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to you regarding three former Steiner academies (Bristol, Frome and Exeter) which were transferred to the Avanti Schools Trust (AST) on 1 November 2019 and are now called respectively Avanti Gardens, Avanti Park and Avanti Hall.

The academies were transferred to AST following inspections by Ofsted where each school was graded "inadequate". Whilst SWSF accepts the findings of those reports I am writing to you today about the apparent decision to include conditions in the funding agreements with AST which meant that AST could not apply for exemptions to the EYFS.

You will be aware that the opening of the three Steiner schools was part of the academy programme introduced after the 2010 general election. The schools were established by parents who specifically wanted the choice of Steiner Waldorf education as part of the Government's policy to provide more parental choice in education. At the heart of that choice for parents was the option for their children to start formal learning at age six rather than age four and after a full three years in kindergarten where learning is play based and focused on developing language, communication, social, emotional and physical capacities. This is an approach favoured by many early years organisations and supported by academic research.

Prior to taking on the schools in June 2019, AST had stated in meetings with parents that they were committed to taking on aspects of the Steiner Waldorf approach suggesting at one point that the schools could have the tag-line 'Steiner Inspired'. By September 2019 there were indications that this position had changed significantly and the tag line 'Steiner inspired' was no longer going to be applied. By the time AST took over the schools on 1 November 2019 it was clear there would be no applications for exemptions to the EYFS or the KS1 tests. This was diametrically opposed to what the parents in those schools had chosen for their children.

Parents stayed hopeful because AST had promised to maintain the curriculum in the schools for the rest of the academic year and only make changes following the outcome of a curriculum review. The scope of the review when it came had narrowed from original proposals, but still parents were hopeful, trusting that the most important aspects of the school they had chosen for their children would be reflected in the new curriculum. Also



there had been nothing in the terms of reference to say it would not. However, the outcome is that the kindergartens will be disbanded and formal literacy and maths teaching will start at age four. We are told that an underlying reason for this is that the terms of the funding agreement issued by your department made it impossible for AST to apply for exemptions to the EYFS and KS1 tests and thereby maintain the practice already established in the school of starting formal learning at age six.

Whilst all three academies had received “inadequate” gradings in 2018, none had been graded “inadequate” previously. The Steiner Academy Frome had received one previous inspection for which it had been graded “good”. All were relatively new schools and Steiner education new to the state sector. The Steiner Academy Hereford, which was established in 2008 and therefore has had longer to establish itself within the parameters of state provision, is a highly successful school frequently at the top of the league table of schools in its area. Internationally, Steiner Waldorf schools do well in many countries in the state sector such as Germany and the Netherlands. They are also expanding at a fast rate across Asia as private schools, particularly in China. In short, there is no evidence to suggest there is something intrinsically flawed about Steiner education and its specialised curriculum that would justify a decision to deny parents access to it in any form as the education provision of their choice. So whilst the decision to transfer the schools to a new operator after just one ‘inadequate’ grading is possibly justifiable, it is not clear why there would be a decision to deny parents any chance in having a later start in the formal teaching of their children so central to their educational choice especially without any consultation with them.

Despite the ‘inadequate’ judgements by Ofsted inspectors in 2018, parents were still overwhelmingly committed to having a Steiner Waldorf education for their children. Their lives have been turned upside down by the new AST curriculum announced on Tuesday. Other than the Steiner Academy Hereford which is oversubscribed many times over, there is no alternative school for them to attend within the state sector which provides the kind of education they seek for their children and therefore the parental choice they had 10 months ago is being denied them. Many families moved their homes and jobs across the country to join these schools.

We acknowledge there have been issues around the leadership and management of Steiner schools and there have been failings but the whole school movement has been taking huge strides in addressing this. My own organisation has been re-structured to better support schools in this task and we are making progress.

Parents seek out our schools for the artistic way in which children are taught without stress and high pressure. The availability of this kind of education within the state sector is essential if parental choice is to be genuine especially when the mainstream approach of introducing formal learning at a younger age than most of our counterparts in Europe is considered by many educationalists and parents to be too stressful for a substantial number of children. Without the availability of Steiner or Steiner inspired education parents will



increasingly turn to home schooling. Many home school hubs have already been set up around the three academies transferred to AST. Following the announcement of the new curriculum for the schools it is likely these numbers will grow. This is not the preferred option of the parents, nor ours, and is one we know is of concern to Ofsted and your own department.

I ask that you consider these issues as a matter of urgency, explain the decision to effectively deny the possibility of exemptions in the new AST schools and what measures your department will take to accommodate the parental choice of large numbers of parents who seek Steiner education or Steiner inspired education within the state sector. I would be very happy to meet with you to discuss this issues in more detail.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "fran russell".

Fran Russell
Executive Director

Association of Steiner Waldorf Schools in the UK and Ireland

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