

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

13 September 2011

**Public Participation
Item No. 6 - Denominational Home to School Transport**

Statement from Francis White

Statement for the meeting of the Council on Tuesday 13 September 2011

As late as last Thursday there had been **no developed and reasoned educational argument** in any of the council's papers for depriving children who attend and are due to attend faith schools of the means of getting to them.

On the figures shown in the document, *Current denominational transport policy; background information*, 76% of the pupils in Wiltshire affected by this proposal attend either Corsham St Patrick's Primary School or Trowbridge St Augustine's comprehensive school. Everyone can see that whereas a number of primary and secondary faith schools will be affected, the brunt of this savage and discriminatory move is bearing down on St Patrick's and St Augustine's in Trowbridge, a school which after the 2 grammar schools has led the way in Wiltshire for year after year in terms of that often quoted measure of achievement of 5 or more GCSE grades at A* to C including English and maths. On present figures approx 150 pupils travel to St Augustine's on school organised buses from the Devizes area, 73 travel on service buses from the Melksham area and 66 on service buses from the Warminster area. I hope this will help to focus some minds on the number of individuals whose stated principles and prospects you will disregard and whose lives you will turn upside down if you press ahead with the withdrawal of the subsidy for denominational transport.

We warmly applaud all schools in the county who are making progress but the standards consistently set at S Augustine's, year after year, and by St Joseph's in Salisbury in recent times have won plaudits from every quarter. The principal sponsors of this iniquitous proposal have failed to explain why they are so determined to wipe out the transport subsidy for the families concerned beyond stating that this was a discretionary payment and they had to find the money somewhere.

I am fostering a hope, even at this late stage, that those professionally best placed to argue for the protection of standards in education in Wiltshire, and those we hitherto looked upon as friends and professional colleagues, may find it in them to alert the cabinet to the negative consequences of removing the transport for faith schools.

Have we got to resort to that old, sad cliché of knowing the cost of everything and the value of nothing? It does, unfortunately, seem to fit perfectly with the proposal under discussion.

It is simply not good enough, as happened last Thursday, for one influential councillor to warn those who would scrutinise the merits of our argument that if the rapid scrutiny group were to put obstacles in the way of this proposal they just lay themselves open to having to face other groups of 'disgruntled' people on other issues. I think it was at that point that some people almost lost the will to live because they feared that this would turn out to have been a sham after all and, in spite of a claim to the contrary, minds had been made up among those with the most influence. Whereas support by Wiltshire County Council for transport to the voluntary aided schools had been deemed right for decades, suddenly, on no educational grounds whatsoever, it's apparently wrong to subsidise transport for pupils to the voluntary aided state schools of Wiltshire. Sorry about this, faith schools, no hard feelings, but you are the easy target.

I heard one of the council's spokesmen last week deny any discrimination, any vendetta against the faith schools. Why should anyone believe that? If all schools have to suffer some sort of pain as a result of the financial mess, will someone please tell us today what penalties are being applied to all the other schools which will have comparable negative implications for their futures? If there is no-one who can do that convincingly today, those who are desperate to drive this measure through will continue to face the accusation of discrimination.