



Anthony Gell School

24 November 2021

Dear parents/carers,

I wrote to you on 23 September and highlighted some of the work which the governing body have undertaken during the last few years which has focused on strengthening our provision, by benefiting from strong partnerships with other schools and organisations.

Since 2016, I have assisted governors in carefully monitoring the national, regional and local landscape with regards to formal and informal partnerships of schools, academies, trusts and federations. A number of different options have been considered over the years and we have, up to now, always concluded that AGS should not become an academy or join any formal trust. We have been well supported and achieved success for many years as a maintained school within Derbyshire County Council (DCC), whilst working in several strong and effective partnerships which have included: COGS - the Cluster of Gell Schools and Peak 11 - a group of 11 secondary schools from across the Derbyshire Dales and High Peak regions of Derbyshire.

During this time, we have watched the number of maintained secondary schools in DCC substantially reduce, as schools became academies. There used to be well over 40 maintained secondary schools in DCC; there are now less than 15 and this number is predicted to be as few as 7 by this time next year. Strong and well-established partnerships such as Peak 11 have disbanded and schools like AGS are having to work harder in order to remain in and benefit from a school-to-school support network.

Governors have concluded that they would like to explore in more depth the idea of AGS becoming part of a multi-academy trust. AGS is in a strong position and as such we are able to consider lots of different options, which of course include AGS staying as a DCC maintained school.

If AGS was to become an academy and be part of a multi-academy trust (MAT), there are several points which governors have highlighted. Governors will use these in order to assess the relative strengths of any proposed partnership:

- The strong ethos and values of AGS must not be changed;
- AGS must retain a high level of autonomy in any formal partnership;
- Partners must share our vision and have a proven track record of success;
- AGS must be able to continue to work closely with other schools outside of any trust, including our partner primaries and local secondary schools;

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- The trust should be local to Derbyshire if possible, and must not be restricted by geographical distance between member schools;
- The partnership should be focused on school improvement and in providing opportunities for all students to experience high quality learning, equipping them for the world in which they will live in and contribute to.

A range of options have been considered, using the criteria listed above to evaluate the relative strengths of each. Discussions have taken place with other schools and with the Local Authority (DCC). During this period of exploratory work we were presented with an option which governors would like to investigate.

The option worth further exploration at this stage is for AGS to become one of four DCC secondary schools to join a pre-existing Derbyshire Trust called the Embark Federation. The Embark Federation currently consists of a group of 12 Derbyshire primary schools. This trust has an excellent reputation within Derbyshire and beyond. The Trust is keen to expand and develop its expertise, and are working with a small number of secondary schools with this in mind. The four secondary schools Embark have been talking to are: Anthony Gell School, Aldercar High School, Buxton Community School and Parkside Community School.

Governors are very keen to seek the views of all stakeholders as part of a very thorough process of due diligence, before deciding whether AGS should join Embark alongside the other named secondary schools. Before this can proceed, we need to ask the DfE to consider the proposal, as it would not be possible for any of this to happen without DfE approval.

In order to hear the DfE's views on the Embark proposal we have had to submit an application to the Advisory Board. The application provides details about AGS and the Embark Federation as well as the proposed partnership we would like to explore further. The terminology stipulated by the DfE at this stage is 'an application to become an academy'. This terminology could be misinterpreted and governors are keen to avoid this from happening. Even though it is called an application to become an academy, it is nothing more than alerting the DfE to a proposal which will need to be reviewed thoroughly. The AGS governing board will take votes at various times in the months ahead and can at any point decide not to proceed, up until the point where conversion papers might be signed. The other piece of terminology governors wished me to alert you to is the wording used by the DfE if the proposal is given their approval at this relatively early stage. They will use the phrase 'an academy order has been issued'. This too could very easily be misinterpreted. The DfE will not be 'ordering' AGS to become an academy, they will be saying that the proposal has their approval.

If this happens, the schools and the Trust are able to begin work on the more detailed processes which will be an essential part of effective due diligence.

The Advisory Board will review the applications from all four secondary schools and Embark at the same time. It will be treated as a singular proposal. The Board could possibly do this in their meeting in December, but it is more likely to happen in their meeting in January. We will be alerted to their decision a few weeks after they have met.

A formal consultation will take place only if the DfE approve the proposal and issue 'an academy order', and if the AGS governors decide they wish to continue to explore this as an option. If this happens, the formal consultation for all stakeholders is likely to happen in the second half of the forthcoming spring term.

AGS staff, along with staff in the other three secondary schools who are part of the possible partnership, are aware of this proposal and have already started to have opportunities to ask questions and explore the idea. Our staff are a key part of what makes us who we are. Any future collaboration or formal partnership must also help the staff of AGS to continue to do the best job they can for the children/young people in our care, and provide them with the support they deserve as hard-working professionals.

I expect that you will have lots of questions about all of this and you may be a little surprised. You will also want to have a chance to have your views heard. I, along with the governors, will continue to work hard in the months ahead to provide you with answers to your questions and to interrogate this idea thoroughly. You will, if the proposal receives DfE backing and governors choose to proceed to take the next step, have opportunities from February onwards to participate in meetings and provide feedback. We have to be sure that any future formal partnerships are going to be beneficial to the students in school now and those who will follow them in the years which lie ahead.

Thank you for your ongoing support.

Yours sincerely,



Malcolm Kelly
Headteacher