

Big changes for English schools

The announcement last week that the Government plans to hand over all English-language schools to the English Schools Foundation entailing a considerable increase in fees will be read with concern and indeed dismay. A far more explicit statement is needed as to how this will help to achieve the ideal of a better education for children.

There are four main groups most closely concerned, excluding the students themselves who no doubt may also be wondering what is there in this for them. The first is the Government which obviously wants to dispense with an increasingly costly and embarrassing problem and demonstrate to the community at large that there are no special favours for any group of people.

The second is the English Schools Foundation which, from statements so far made, is evidently pleased at the prospect of becoming the single authority for English language schools. No doubt it is brimming with many long shelved plans to upgrade standards and provide an education that would compare with the best available at state-run schools in other English-speaking communities.

The third is the parent body which by now must have concluded that in return for increases in fees of 85 per cent and 75 per cent respectively in primary and secondary schools they are being given the doubtful privilege of relieving the Government of a political embarrassment with little in the way of a direct improvement in educational standards.

The fourth — and by no means the least — is the teaching staff who over the years have set high standards in steadily declining conditions. They will be understandably concerned to ensure that under the new arrangements both Government and ESF teachers are offered acceptable terms and conditions together with early prospects of improved teaching conditions and facilities.

The English Schools Foundation may well find that before long it is riding a tiger in trying to satisfy the demands of those whose expectations will rise in proportion to the higher fees they will be asked to pay. Indeed there will be many parents not subsidised by their employers calling for gradual increases rather than the swingeing figures announced, while many more than the five per cent mentioned are likely to seek remissions of some kind.

The reason for this is that many expatriates are employed on local terms under which they receive no rent allowance, no home leave and no assistance with school fees. Rising living costs are eating more and more into salaries which in most years are struggling to keep up with inflation and the new fee increases will prove an onerous burden particularly for those with two or more children.

The Government's decision appears to have been made with little prior public discussion and without considering fully the implications for the many parents who patronise this type of school. No doubt the Government will raise allowances to its own employees — though in this case it will only be paying out more on the one hand from what it saves on the other — but it remains to be seen how many employers in the private sector will respond, either by increasing allowances or instituting them for the first time.

All in all, it is difficult to see how the cause of English-language education has been improved, particularly since parents have been warned that a number of much needed reforms can only be considered on the basis of further fee increases. At the same time new schools for the ESF will ultimately have to be paid by parents since the foundation is a largely self-financing organisation.

On the face of it the benefits seem very one-sided, with the Government being the only winner.