

MELKONIAN STAFF WILL RESIST SCHOOL CLOSURE

The Staff at Melkonian Educational Institute (MEI) were officially informed this week by the Central Board of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) that the School is to close in June 2005. On informing the Staff, the AGBU presented a position paper which set out the basis upon which this decision was taken.

Whilst the AGBU has taken into consideration 'continuing deficit levels', it insists that financial considerations have not been the primary issue. Rather, the AGBU cites the MEI's 'recent educational performance' as a key element in the decision to close the School. Indeed, the AGBU goes on to say that, if the MEI 'provided exceptional opportunities to its students as it had done in the past (comparing here with the role of the School in the 1960s), substantial subsidization would be warranted'. Their conclusion is that 'unfortunately this is not the case...'

We would like to make it clear that, during the whole process so far, the Staff at Melkonian have not had any opportunity to know the detailed criteria upon which their work was being judged, nor have they been party to, or had any chance to challenge, any report relating to the quality of the teaching and learning in the School. Indeed, the Staff can verify that, in reaching the conclusion that 'MEI no longer meets the challenges of its mission', no classroom has been visited nor has any qualified person made any professional inspection of the main work of the School; that is, teaching and learning.

It can only be assumed that conclusions about the recent educational performance of the current School, which the AGBU says was the focus of attention in evaluating the School, were made upon reports made by persons unqualified to assess the standards achieved by the School.

The Staff at the School strongly refute the allegation that the School does not provide exceptional opportunities to its students. We are affronted that we are currently judged to be failing our students in this respect. Indeed, we would say that the educational opportunities provided are of a high and continually improving standard. Those who have ever worked in an educational establishment will be aware of the complex nature of assessing standards achieved. It seems that conclusions have been arrived at here on a basis unknown and by persons unqualified.

We are confident that any knowledgeable examination of the outcomes of an education at MEI, be they either tangible, such as external examination results or numbers of students going on to higher education, or less tangible, such as the personal qualities of the young adults graduating from the School, could not come to the conclusion quoted above. It can also be demonstrated that, rather than declining standards, the School has in recent years improved standards of curricular provision and student achievements well beyond those of the 1960s. This is despite the fact that, in the words of the AGBU, 'compared to similar institutions in the area, MEI requires a relatively much lower financial commitment.' We feel that excellent value for money is being provided.

Although the AGBU acknowledges the 'diligent efforts' of the current teaching staff, their conclusion that subsidy be withdrawn and the School closed on the basis of a failure to provide exceptional educational opportunities is unacceptable to us. In addition, we strongly suspect that the unfounded argument of declining standards is nothing other than a smoke screen, designed to pave the way for an ultimate sale of the land on which the MEI has stood since 1926. Further, we believe that we have built, and could continue to build, a School of great worth. Rather than abandoning the School at this stage in its history, we are prepared to resist the planned closure and do all we can to ensure that the Educational Institute built on this site continues to exist beyond June 2005.

All Staff at Melkonian Educational Institute