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COPY NO. 6625th February, 1966CABINETCOMPREHENSIVE REORGANISATION AND RAISING
OF THE SCHOOL LEAVING AGEMemorandum by the Secretary of State for
Education and Science

I think my colleagues should be aware of certain problems in the field of school reorganisation which may give rise to controversy and difficulties in various parts of the country. We initiated last year the reorganisation of secondary schools on comprehensive lines, but without providing any money for it. We inherited from our predecessors a commitment to raise the leaving age to 16 in 1971 and I do not regard it as either politically or educationally possible to postpone this reform. The school population is growing rapidly. We have provided in the National Plan for larger building programmes than in the past but this will only accommodate extra numbers and do little or nothing to improve the old schools. Moreover, there are already signs that some local education authorities are not going to find it easy to build at the rate envisaged in the Plan.

2. A strong minority of local education authorities would much prefer to be allowed to make their plans on the basis of a different age of transfer from the primary to the secondary stage either because they (rightly) dislike the 11-13 schools which comprehensive planning on the basis of the present age of transfer forces upon them; and/or because a different age would, in their particular circumstances, allow a more economical use of buildings and teachers.

3. I therefore propose (without any public fuss) to permit those authorities who can show me that a different age of transfer from 11 would produce an educationally better comprehensive system and a more economic use of buildings, to adopt what they consider the most sensible age. A period of diversity throughout the country is in any case inevitable for some years while reorganisations proceeds, and indeed I have an open mind on whether in the long run it would prove disadvantageous.

4. This decision will ease my troublesome relations with the Central Advisory Council (England) under the chairmanship of Lady Plowden, which was appointed by the previous Government to review primary education and the age of transfer to secondary schools and is likely to report in July or the autumn. On present indications the Council will recommend an eventual change to 12-plus with an interim period of local option. I could not possibly accept this after

the Council had reported in the autumn; for comprehensive schemes are due to be in to me by July, and to announce a change in the age of transfer in the autumn would therefore make a farce of the whole comprehensive operation. But to permit a limited degree of local option now will avoid a clash with the Flowden recommendation, when it comes.

5. I ask my colleagues to note that I intend to go ahead with comprehensive reorganisation and the raising of the school-leaving age and to allow local variation in ages of transfer where this will make the best use of existing resources and produce the best educational results.

C. A. R. C.

Department of Education and Science, W. 1. ,

25th February, 1966

