

Geoff Barton's random thoughts for new headteachers:

Refurbishment

If you've just jumped off the NPQH conveyor belt, or been besieged by any of the dozens of gurus and consultants who swarm round every school, you'll have heard some advice that sounds utterly, unarguably, unassailably true: namely, that everything we do in school should be focused on learning.

Who could argue with that?

Remember the sneering disbelief of the education press a few years back when a survey showed that primary headteachers spend more time dealing with toilets than they do the curriculum?

Even education writers as respected and well-informed as Mike Hughes (whose Closing the Learning Gap is one of the most practical books on school improvement I know) advises us not to hold any meeting in school if it isn't about learning.

Well, yes and no.

My guess is that this is another example of advice that is more easily dispensed by people outside schools than those of us working day-in, day-out in real education establishments. It sounds eminently sensible, but actually betrays a perception of complex organisations which feels a bit simplistic.

For example: I'm a big fan of Apple computer and an admirer of Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple Computer and Pixar Studios. He's one of the most creative, visionary leaders I can think of. But my guess is that he doesn't spend every meeting talking about hardware and software decisions, or debating new movies projects at Pixar. I wouldn't be surprised if sometimes he doesn't have to turn his mind to an irksome matter of personnel, or finance, or buildings.

Just as we do.

In fact, if you've got to headship by any route other than sheer accident, chances are you have a certain kind of temperament. You'll have a disposition that – how can I put this? – rather likes to see things done in a certain kind of way. The best heads, in my experience, are intolerant of mediocrity, know what they believe in, appoint the right people, and then trust other people to get on with their jobs.

You'll note that beneath the trust bit is the control – the determination to appoint the rights people and to see that standards aren't compromised. One of the most valuable lessons from Jim Collins survey of the most effective US corporations – Great to Good – is that great leaders would rather make no appointment rather than make a fudged decision by appointing someone they don't have complete faith in.

That determination to have things done in a certain way – which I see as a strength rather than a weakness – explains the naivety of assuming that we could delegate all other matters to other members of our team (and in my experience there are never enough people to delegate to). At our school we're in the thick of a lengthy and

complicated period of building work. Now as someone who insists on high standards of behaviour and uniform in my own classroom, and in the school generally, am I really going to sit back and have no say in the decisions about design and décor? That doesn't mean I want to choose every door handle (though I want to choose the ones that are most visible) or the position of every new noticeboard, but don't be surprised that headteachers are bound to want involvement in decisions like this.

Day-to-day project management and liaison on specific issues is done by the Business Manager. But it has to be right that headteachers are also involved in key aspects of refurbishment and site development. Because I would argue that these issues aren't separate from issues of pedagogy and learning: they integral to it. Like those primary headteachers of a few years back, I spend more time than I probably ought to discussing toilets. We have a system whereby sixth form students spot-check toilets throughout the day to pinpoint missing soap and toilet paper, and any to ward off smokers or malingerers.

Why, you might ask, should I take any active interest in this? The reason is that the quality of the physical environment is inextricably interwoven with students' experience of school life. Why should their toilets be allowed to be any less civilised than the staff toilets? And how can I with any integrity stand up in assembly and talk about high expectations, courtesy and respect, if the covert message of the state of the toilets undermines that?

So, for new headteachers who aren't certain how much attention they should pay to issues of premises and refurbishment, here are my five hints:

Hint 1: Dispense with guilt

One of the lessons we're now seeing in the huge amount of funding being allocated to the Academies project and to the Building Schools for the Future initiative is a recognition that we ignore the school environment at our peril. Like the operating system of a computer, it shapes the way in which we work, our attitudes to learning, and can explicitly reinforce a school's values. Once seen like this, you start to have fewer qualms about time and money spent on the school environment. Get on with it.

Hint 2: Deschoolify school

Personally I want schools to feel less schooly. I don't see any reason why the attractive working environment that many people in business enjoy shouldn't apply similarly in schools. What does your Reception currently say about your values? How welcoming is it? Do the signs send out messages that students are inferior beings who should know their place? Do visitors know what to do if the fire alarm goes? Is there something for them to read about the school, so that even the most cantankerous parents waiting to have a go at you about your school's apparent victimisation of his child is bombarded with messages of the school's high public and community profile and its strong child-friendly focus?

Some other thoughts: Get lots of press cuttings visible. Have plants in Reception and in other public areas of school. Notice how businesses and shops display notices and information: see whether there are aspects of their work that you could import. In fact,

governors have set me a performance target of visiting one other school each term for no other reason than looking at another school. I fear they may be trying to tell me something. The idea is, of course, that it's too easy to get locked into our own familiar ways of doing things and seeing things. Find ways of grabbing the best of other people's ideas for the way your school might look.

Hint 3: Every display is a learning opportunity

I used to think display were about tarding up drab bits of wall space. Now – pretentious, moi? – I see them as learning opportunities. The best displays will be highly visual and accompanied not by simple statements (“Our geography field trip to West Runton”) but by questions (“How do sand dunes form?”). The best move we made was to pay our wonderful Art technician, Tina, to devote two hours a week to whole-school display. The impact has been transformational. She comes from a retail background, where the need to showcase products in windows and displays is paramount, and she has translated that expertise into some inspired showcasing of students' work.

Similarly, if the only place students encounter the excellence of art work at your school is when they set foot in the art Department, then you're missing a whole-school opportunity to stimulate and provoke their visual awareness. Investing in framed art work around school, labelling who it is by, and even finding some money from a grant that was available for reducing energy costs enabled us to install small,

stylish spotlights in one formerly utilitarian corridor. This is all the deschoolification of schools, and I can't overstate its importance.

Hint 4: You can't overstate the importance of health and safety issues

This is one area that nothing seems to train you for. We ignore it at our peril, and it's a further example of the innocence of assuming that headteachers – indeed all teachers – can only focus on learning. Whether your school is in the midst of rebuilding, or simply ticking over with existing accommodation, the ultimate responsibility for health and safety lies with you as Headteacher. Based on recent experience of two fires starting during the school day and having to evacuate the buildings, health and safety now has a much higher profile.

This is one area that you can't expect to be the expert, so seek out every other expert you can. Get the fire service to advise on emergency exit signs, evacuation procedures, to take a critical look at whether doors, windows, litter bins all comply with fire regulations. . Make sure each teacher's health and safety responsibilities are spelt out in the staff handbook. Use your health and safety governor and working party to help monitor progress.

Health and safety is one of the least fashionable areas of school life and of the headteacher's responsibilities. I strongly recommend that you give it as much priority as possible – from governors' meetings to the school improvement plan.

Hint 5: Pay attention to the detail

As so often with life in school, it isn't the big issues that have the biggest effect on our day-to-day experience; it's the details. A handful of students holding open doors for members of staff is an example of how small aspects of school life can reinforce a sense of courtesy and order. The same goes with the fabric of the buildings.

Encourage everyone to pay attention to the quality of the physical environment. If there's graffiti in a toilet, it's essential that it's removed immediately. It needs to be a high priority with the caretaking and cleaning team because even the smallest examples of graffiti undermines our values.

One of the most useful ways of keeping an eye on this is to do regular walks around the building with different members of staff. Once a term you might simply walk with the caretaker, commenting on what you notice about aspects of the site. Do the same with Heads of Department or Heads of Faculty: do a tour of their area commenting on the impression it creates as a learning environment. What do the displays and decoration say about the status and value of their subject?

All of this is an important way of setting out your standards and demonstrating a vision that the quality of the learning environment is an essential ingredient in a successful school.

So you can see my thesis – obsession some would say – that creating the right environment for students and staff is fundamental to being a headteacher. Of course, we're hampered by limited funds, and that means that there will always have to be compromises. If I could afford to, I'd have a central cloakroom (as in theatres) where

students could hand in coats and heavy items, dispensing with lockers. I'd have a single supervised toilet block, as at motorway service stations. I'd have more shared offices to encourage staff teams to work together, with meeting rooms available nearby – all breaking down the remorseless territoriality of the “my office” culture.

Again, although we can't afford to do any of this, you can see the underlying thinking: the way we shape the environment will shape the way people work and the way they perceive the school. That's bound to have an impact on the quality of their work, as staff or students. There's nothing we do that is much more important than that.

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