Future-proofing schools is crucial for our students

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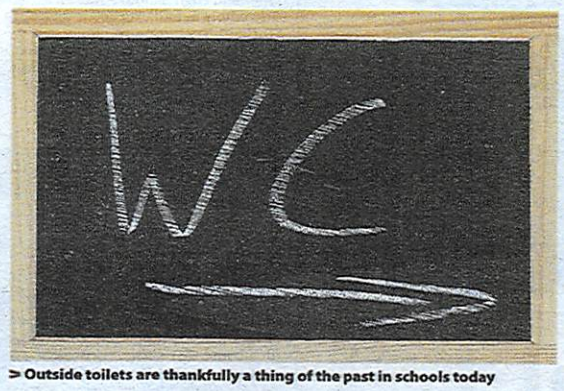

> Outside toilets are thankfully a thing of the past in schools today

ONE of the greatest challenges for education is to prepare children for a future, which is hard to predict. As Nils Bohr said, "Prediction is very difficult particularly if it is about the future".

It is therefore quite a task to invest in new school buildings based on what we think young people will need decades from now.

The schools I attended as a child and worked in the 1960s and 1970s had outside toilets. As a child, I was used to going to the 'outside lavvy' in my own home.

It was quite a scary experience. The only light was a candle and in winter the paraffin lamp, which was lit to stop the pipes from freezing.

If I had been asked to predict the future, I would have said 'outside netties are here to stay'. My grandfather would have agreed. He was quite disgusted by the thought of having toilets inside a house.

Of course, our views of what is considered 'acceptable' school accommodation changed over the years.

However, I increasingly became frustrated with the state of school buildings, particularly when I observed what was happening in the private sector. In 1995, I wrote a letter to Sir John Hall declaring that the two developments in the North East – the Metrocentre and the new Newcastle United football stadium led me to conclude that as a society we cared more about shopping and football than we cared about children.

Headteachers were given control of their budgets in the 1990s. As you would expect the first thing I did, as a forward-thinking headteacher, was to improve the toilets. I had a phrase at the time which was 'bogs before brains'.

Of course, this also had a sound educational rationale! Maslow the famous psychologist considered people had 'basic needs' which needed to be fulfilled before the 'higher order' needs such as love and belonging could be satisfied.

Allowing teachers to influence the design of schools does not necessarily produce good outcomes. My own school had been built in the 1970s and generally was in pretty good condition with very big classrooms.

There were also a couple of major flaws. The corridors were five feet wide. Break times were like the Newcastle A1 bypass at 5pm. The classrooms also had limited storage cupboards.

When I talked to architects who had been involved in the design of the building they explained that the big classrooms and narrow corridors were a product of the consultation process with teachers who, at the time, had more interest in what their classrooms would look like than how the 'traffic circulation' would operate.

In the 1990s, my school became one of the first local authority-based technology colleges. We were allocated funds to improve the technology facilities. The Yorkshire Post described our school as the 'School of the Future'.

We decided to introduce 'the information superhighway' as it was known at the time. I never envisaged the extent of 'wireless' technology we have in place today. If someone had told me the future head would be concerned about children bringing mobile phones in the school then, I would not have believed them.

Around 2000, 'Building Schools for the Future' a major investment programme in secondary school buildings, was kicked off. The idea of predicting the future of education and then designing schools accordingly was still central to our thinking.

The principle of significantly upgrading our schools met with general support across all political parties. To me, this was one of the most ambitious and visionary education projects in the last half-century. It was ambitious in terms of cost, speed of implementation and scope. ALL secondary schools were to be eventually transformed.

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The involvement of head teachers and governors working closely with architects did lead to creative and innovative building solutions. There were also a few schools where the designs were simply mad.

There is one school that won an international award for architectural design which looks spectacular. When I visited the school, I found the teachers complaining that they could not post children's work on the classroom walls because they were all designed to slope at 45 degrees!

The BSF programme spread rapidly. In 2005/6, 14 local authorities took part. By December 2009, 96 local authorities had joined the programme. It has always been interesting to me that the primary schools were not brought in right from the start. It was not until 2007 that the Primary Capital Programme was introduced. This involved 675 building projects in England over three years.

The BSF programme was applauded for its aims and aspirations. There were however reasonable concerns about the cost effectiveness of the programme. Today the school building and maintenance programme is being developed within greater financial limits.

We have moved a long way from the type of school buildings I attended as a child. When I visit the schools and colleges within the North East, I am gob-smacked by some of the wonderful facilities our children occupy.

Education is our young people's access to the future. Designing schools to reflect future needs of students continues to be a necessity as well as a challenge.

There are still schools which are not fit for purpose and we still have a long way to go. I still firmly stand with the principle that our school buildings should reflect our love and regard for young people. That is a given.

Les Walton is chair of the Northern Education Trust.