

Coalition between education and employers is key



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AT last week's extremely successful Schools NorthEast conference, involving more than 450 delegates, Sir Michael Wilshaw, Ofsted's Chief Inspector, stressed the need for schools and employers to work together.

This reinforced the key reason for the establishment of Schools NorthEast. We cannot transform the north east without a powerful coalition between those who provide education skills and employment within the region.

In 2007, I was asked by One NorthEast to identify the ways in education could engage with the regional economic strategy, and the mechanisms by which schools, within the north east region, could be more effectively involved.

We surveyed three hundred schools, held ten seminars and a conference involving schools, regional agencies and regional experts in education and skills. The development of a 'network of schools' received overwhelming support. Feedback suggested that the proposed new school and education networks linking with the regional economic strategy were considered both 'essential' and 'groundbreaking'.

The partnership scene, as viewed by schools and stakeholders, was crowded and complex. There was a schism between the operation of the schools-linked networks and the economic and social aspirations of the region.

Schools, education and regeneration agencies, although focusing on similar issues, rarely embraced opportunities for joint working.

There was great support, from all parties, for improved coherence and co-ordination within the region. Whilst significant resources were being directed to business development and business start-ups in the region, schools were unable to benefit from the expertise within this area. Equally Aim Higher, an education initiative, and Aspire, an employer-led initiative both focused on the aspirations of young people, and yet tended to work separately.

Schools, Further Education Colleges and independent education and skills providers were being brought into closer proximity at a local level by the 14-19 agenda, whilst the FE Colleges and independ-

ent providers had representative organisations which were directly involved with the regional skills agenda. The schools had no such representative body.

Another driver for change was the desire by Government Office, One NorthEast and the Learning and Skills Council to establish a regional commission for 14-19 education with representation needed from schools as well as further education.

Schools were increasingly becoming 'self managing' and, it was felt, would welcome recognition and support as an employer and a 'business sector' in the drive for business efficiency and operational effectiveness.

The CBI and the Chamber of Commerce increasingly wanted to engage directly with schools and opportunities provided by Business Link were being taken up by schools.

Essentially schools were disengaged from the regional economic agenda at a strategic level. In fact, the school sector had no direct link with any planning organisation directly related to the Regional Economic Strategy. There was no mechanism to ensure representation and feedback to the schools sector.

The regional agencies had traditionally engaged with the Association of Colleges (Further Education), Universities 4 the North East, the representative body for the Universities within the region, and the Association of Learning Providers (independent training providers).

ONE NorthEast and the Learning Skills Council had also established direct links with many representative organisations including the CBI, the Chambers of Commerce and the TUC. However, there had never been a mechanism to engage with a group representing all schools across the region.

All parties we consulted called for a stronger strategic leadership and collective voice for the school sector. The economic and skills development agencies, including One NorthEast recognised the critical role the schools could play in addressing the

economic and social needs of the north east region.

A key question during the process was 'Are we talking about all schools?' We decided that the strategy should be inclusive and involve the increasing number of 'independent schools' such as private schools, Academies and Trust Schools. In 2007, this was considered quite radical.

We then sounded out all secondary, primary and special schools in the region, including the independent schools. Support was extremely high for the establishment of a regional network of schools.

The consensus was to establish the network as a charitable trust and call it 'Schools NorthEast'. The proposal was met with a resounding 'yes' from all quarters. The dominant comment from all education and training sectors as well as employers was "This should have happened before now".

Many school and business colleagues involved in the project considered this to be a highly significant education leadership development opportunity within the North East.

We believed that if we could harness the power of the school sector to focus on developing a dynamic economy, a healthy environment and a distinctive North East culture we will have completed the virtuous circle that links economic development to the needs of individual children and young people.

The support from national and regional leaders was phenomenal. For example:

■ James Ramsbotham, chief executive of the North East Chambers of Commerce, recognised that 'there was no mechanism for communicating with schools - this will really help - heads are remarkably in the dark with regard to regional matters.'

■ Kevin Rowan, regional director for the TUC, announced "There is an obvious logic to what you are doing - why haven't we done it before?"

■ Steve Munby, the chief executive for the National College for School Leadership, said 'It was a great idea.'

Since 2007, Schools NorthEast has become an important feature of the North East educational landscape.

However, there remains a significant challenge to all those who care about the success of the North East. More than ever, the North East economy needs the support of schools working collaboratively with other education and skills providers and employers.

The challenge to Schools NorthEast and all other regional leaders is to understand that real transformation of our beloved north east cannot be achieved without breaking into the parallel universes we all occupy.

■ Les Walton CBE is Chair of Northern Education Trust.

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