

# Forget the league tables – be proud of who you are



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COLUMNIST

I WAS appointed headteacher of Norham High School in North Shields in 1988.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the school was sliding slowly but very steadily into decline.

Designed for an intake of 180, in 1988 only 77 pupils turned up. Norham was one of the most unpopular schools in the area.

Perceived as a "rough school" on the edge of North Shields, it served a working-class catchment, including a very rundown housing estate. GCSE results were not good. In 1988, only 5% of pupils gained five or more A to Cs. Only 56% of our pupils gained five or more A to Gs.

Only part of this could be accounted for by the 81% attendance rate. Not surprisingly, only 20% of our pupils stayed in education after GCSE. With rolls falling faster than the lead off the roof, we soon became overstaffed by a terrifying 50%. The local authority started talking of closure.

## Identify the causes of low self esteem

Our first move confronted our low morale, low expectations and our low standards. Teachers and pupils were suffering from chronic low self-esteem.

We did not concentrate on encouraging and motivating the poor attender or the low achiever. We asked what is preventing the child from attending and the teacher from being successful.

"To impose high expectations without dealing with the poor self-image, risks anxiety and hopelessness."

(Government Inspectors, please note.)

## Start with the easiest first – bricks before brains

The management team began a rolling programme of refurbishment of classrooms and corridors. Graffiti was effectively eradicated.

New security measures dramatically cut the losses from break-ins and vandalism. Pupils were involved in refurbishment decisions.

"School buildings should reflect our love of children as shopping malls reflect our love of consumerism."



► The work of Les Walton at Norham School was bearing fruit in 1992 when TV stars Denise Welch and Tim Healy opened its Open Learning Centre

## Build a positive culture – offer a lot of security and a little challenge

Loyalty is contagious. The new management style opened up issues that had never before been shared with staff. Over the first year, the overstaffing was resolved by unprecedented levels of consultation and sharing the problem with colleagues. Departing teachers left to go to attractive positions negotiated by management.

"If Dunkirk could be identified as a victory, then managing overstaffing can also be celebrated."

## Celebrate the success of all – catch your pupils and staff doing good things

For pupils, there came a developing sense of security and value. Pupils' successes were fed back, shared and celebrated. Positive partnerships with feeder schools and active visits into the community by the management team helped to spread the word that things were changing. The local press began to publish articles about pupils' successes. Local radio began to use staff expertise for education broadcasts.

"Publish the speed of the grass growing if it means you feel better about yourselves."

## Build on your uniqueness and encourage co-operative enterprise towards a shared vision

Staff development encouraged joining pilot programmes, raising expertise and morale and introducing "Investors in People". The pioneering Schools Mean Business project brought together parents, pupils and major employees.

In 1992, the management team and the technology department made a successful bid for Technology School status, creating a superb technology learning environment. The annual musicals written by staff won international awards.

"Your vision should be based on your unique identity – not just on where you are on someone else's league table. Have the Popeye Mentality – I am what I am!" (league table fans please note.)

## Real institutional and personal self esteem means you can handle misfortune

The Meadow Well riots in 1991, less than a quarter of a mile away, destroyed houses, shops and a youth centre. The school suffered not so much as a broken window. An HMI Report said: "Visiting Norham was an uplifting experience." This was the year that the LEA finally agreed that the school had a future.

"Describing a school as a failing school is a failure of the system not of the school." (Hardline interventionists and heroic turnaround promoters please note.)

## Build a reputation, build memories and consider that yesterday's success is dangerous

In 1992, The Independent newspaper said: "The pupil-centred approach has penetrated all aspects of school life, sometimes with spectacular results." The British Deming Association described Norham as "the finest example of total quality management in a UK school."

In 1995, the school was identified as one of the first eight county Technology Colleges in the country. By 1996 we would be oversubscribed, with 20% of our pupils coming from outside our catchment. Sustainable and continuous improvement that involved our local community was considered central to our work.

In 1998, under the leadership of Margaret Stone OBE, my deputy who followed me as principal, the school was ranked by The Observer newspaper as the eighth best state school in the country.

In 1999, Norham was named on the list of outstanding schools in the Chief Inspector's report to Parliament. It was the first school in the country to be a finalist in the Investors in People national awards for outstanding practice.

In 2000, Norham was in the top 50 specialist schools (out of 750) for the greatest percentage improvement in A-C passes at GCSE.

The above statistics are other people's criteria for success. "Your criteria for success should be that you like yourself and are proud of who you are."

## Balance the need for high self esteem and high expectations

If you ask me how this dramatic turnaround was achieved, I always say it wasn't done overnight. Fast improvement is one thing. Sustainable improvement is another.

Most of our success came from staff, students and our community having a shared vision of where we wanted to be. We wanted to be world-class – but on our terms and in our way.

■ Les Walton CBE is chair, Northern Education Trust