

Fresh start is not magic bullet, nor are headteachers



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THE concept of a fresh start as a panacea for all problems is prevalent within the education community. There is also a belief that, when schools have problems that are so firmly located within the economic, social and cultural framework, a simple educational fix will not provide a sustainable solution.

Blakelaw School was based in one of the most disadvantaged areas in the west end of Newcastle. The children were described as having low levels of literacy and numeracy, poor communication skills, steeped in an atmosphere of indifference. Very few people in the area had sustainable jobs and many of the parents felt let down by the education system.

In 1996, the school was judged to be failing by inspectors and plans put in place for its closure. Government education officials then postponed a final decision.

In October 1997, the Local Education Authority submitted plans for the school to be included in the Government's Fresh Start scheme. The Fresh Start scheme aimed to revitalise failing inner-city comprehensive schools by appointing so-called Super Heads. A firm belief at the time was that every school could be turned around, led by a Super Head.

In September 1998, Firfield Community School replaced Blakelaw School. Along with the new name came a new headteacher. The school was provided with a new school uniform, lots of new computers and a significant upgrade to the building.

Inspectors monitoring progress of the school noted improvements in standards and pupil behaviour, but pointed to a number of continuing problems, which still needed to be addressed. These included standards in numeracy, "inconsistency" in the quality of lessons and pupil attendance.

The Local Authority also expressed particular concern over the school's failure to overcome its poor reputation and attract more pupils. The need for more pupils was important as extra funding, as part of the Fresh Start programme, depended on the school becoming full within three years. The ambitious target for pupil numbers had not been met and extra cash had not materialised.

A teachers' union leader, com-



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menting on the Government's Fresh Start policy, said: "The reality is becoming clear that, even with brilliant heads and staff, these schools do not succeed. The fault lies not with the teachers but with the kind of children that attend these schools."

To be honest, I can never remember any national or local government official saying that Fresh Start would provide a quick fix. I also find great difficulty with the view that the fault lies with the children.

On Tuesday, March 14, 2000, the Super Head who had been appointed to lead Firfield resigned. Two other Super Heads within the UK resigned within five days.

The night before the Super Head cleared her desk, I received a phone call from the Director of Education in Newcastle. He asked if I could go into the school and support a deputy head, Russ Wallace, who was being drafted in as headteacher.

Sitting in the recently vacated headteacher office, we agreed on a way forward. Russ would do the day-to-day management and I would focus on strategy. Russ had incredible charisma and could relate to children, staff and parents in a superb way. When a DfE Super Head visited the school to offer support, we declined gracefully. Russ and I considered that to change the school required a team effort, not the supposed magic of one individual.

At the time, the term Super Head was coming into disrepute. This did not mean that this was the end of Super Heads. The term is still used today.

The headteacher market was becoming like the football manager market, with ever-rising salaries for those prepared to take the most diffi-

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cult jobs. Secondary Heads would be soon commanding salaries of £120,000, plus performance bonuses.

In 2001, it was considered that the Firfield Fresh Start had failed and Firfield School and West Denton High School would be closed in August 2002 to be replaced with a new 11-18 school. The Director of Education, Phil Turner, described the Fresh Start as a brave attempt and said that the model was flawed. As a result, he had no alternative but to move to closure.

Even in the face of closure, Russ and I decided that we would continue to drive for improvement. Many people talk about having a powerful vision for a school. We decided that we wanted a shared and positive vision for how we would close a school. We decided that we wanted the children and staff to walk away on the final day, proud of what they had achieved.

Russ and I loved cowboy pictures and decided that we both wanted to look like John Wayne in the film *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. In the film, John Wayne retired from the Cavalry knowing that he had done a good job and that he had made a difference. We wanted to do the same. The Head of Art painted a mural of John Wayne on the art room wall to remind us of our dream.

In our last year, Ofsted praised the significant progress made and the GCSE results also improved. Even at the point of closure, we never gave up on the children.

Russ, the staff and the children walked into the sunset, proud of what they had achieved. The staff also held their heads high, five going on to become headteachers in other schools. The children left with confidence, looking forward to their new school.

Fresh Start is not a magic bullet, neither are headteachers. We must continue to believe we can create great schools in areas of severe disadvantage. If we cannot, then it is our society that is failing, not the school, and certainly not the children.

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