

Improving lives of children always primary objective



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ONE of my favourite films of 1998 is 'Sliding Doors'. Gwyneth Paltrow stars in a romantic comedy that explores the nature of fate and self-determination.

The film describes how an advertising agency worker loses her job and returns home early to find her boyfriend in bed with his ex. In an alternative reality, she arrives a few minutes too late and remains with her boyfriend, oblivious to his infidelity.

In 1999, I contracted colon cancer and, because of the severity of the prognosis, I decided to retire from my post as director of education.

After announcing my resignation, I considered my future. One of my great ideas was to disappear into Northumberland with my family and live in the beautiful coastal village of Alnmouth.

After 30 weeks of chemotherapy, suddenly a door slid open. The DfE asked me to lead the interim management and support the outsourcing of Bradford Council education services. It was at this point that I established Northern Education Associates Ltd (Northern Education).

Northern Education has had a mission right from the start: 'To work in partnership to improve the lives of children and young people'. Also, to be innovative and radical.

Whilst we have been successful in terms of turnover and profit, the key driver has always been to be innovative in developing ways of improving the lives of children.

The colleagues I recruited to support the intervention into Bradford willingly joined the new organisation. Soon, Northern Education was being asked to provide school improvement services within Lancashire, Yorkshire and the North East.

We occasionally stepped outside the northern region, for example, supporting Bristol Local Authority, one of the authorities that had been identified by the Department for Education (DfE) as having the highest proportion of 'failing schools'. We also agreed because there was a daily flight from Newcastle to Bristol.

In 2002, we established our headquarters in the North East, where we have been based ever since. We have always seen ourselves as an educa-



> Gwyneth Paltrow in Sliding Doors

tion research and development service company, primarily addressing some of the most complex issues that national and local government face in education.

Northern Education continues to be invited to provide innovative solutions for education, addressing some of the most intractable challenges in education.

Whilst Bradford was one of our most visible support programmes for 'failing local authorities', we were often engaged behind the scenes to support local authorities and individual schools that were in difficulty.

My colleagues have continued to work as a team for nearly two decades. We have an unwritten 'Catch 22' within the organisation. 'If you decide to retire, you must have the intelligence and foresight to make such a decision. Because you have the intelligence and foresight to retire, then it would be stupid to stop working.'

The advantage of continuity within an organisation is enormous. This does not mean that we do not bring in 'new blood' to challenge our thinking. Every couple of years we are refreshed by new colleagues, who bring new perspectives and solutions.

It is of enormous benefit that an organisation has a memory. Too often today, when we talk to colleagues within central and local government, we are talking to someone newly appointed.

The loss of organisational memory within education is a major problem. Within Northern Education, my colleagues and I share with our new colleagues what we have learned from our involvement in an enormous range of activities.

As well as leading one of the largest outsourcing programmes ever completed in education, my colleagues have worked in contracts with the DfE, Learning Skills Council and Regional Development Agencies, as well as Local Authorities. We have now worked right across the UK 'from Bristol to Berwick'. Our activity

has been wide-ranging and quite remarkable.

We remember:

- Supporting Local Education Authorities and schools across the UK;
- Providing advisory services to the DfE under New Labour, the Coalition and Conservative Governments;
- Merging schools and Further Education Colleges;
- Supporting School Federations, School Trusts and numerous collaborations;
- Leading investigations into complex situations within schools and colleges;
- Providing the DfE Advisory Service for 14-19 across the North;
- Reviewing school governance and leadership;
- Establishing the Institute of Education Advisers;
- Project managing the establishment of Studio Schools and the first University Technology College within the North East.

What many people don't know is that Northern Education was invited by Birmingham Council to lead the investigation into the Trojan Horse Affair. We also invented and supported the development of Schools Northeast, which hosted the Secretary of State at its last conference.

Many of the projects that Northern Education and I were commissioned to do have been pivotal in challenging the status quo within education.

In 2009, we were asked by the DfE to sponsor a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). This would be the most challenging project that we have ever undertaken, even in comparison with the projects outlined above.

As usual, we took on the challenge without an absolute confidence that we would succeed. If we were completely confident it would not be a real challenge. It was to be our Everest.

We agreed with the DfE that the MAT would address head-on the issues facing schools within the North, which, for many years, had a history of not succeeding. We also wanted to demonstrate that addressing the issues that schools face in areas of significant social deprivation requires a new approach.

Are we succeeding? On the whole I believe we had made substantial progress in creating sustainable schools within fragile environments. The management of change in complex and severely challenging settings is not simple. Have we got to the summit of Everest? No. Will we? Yes.

When we are faced with life-threatening situations there may be two types of response. Play safe or take up new challenges.

Should I have opened the other door and retired to play golf in Northumberland? Probably not.