

How the North East can transform education together

On Friday, LES WALTON, former North East headteacher, founder of Schools North East, the Northern Education Trust, the Association of Education Advisers and a long-time champion of regional education, spoke at the Schools North East annual summit. These are his thoughts

ACROSS the North East, schools are navigating a perfect storm of pressures: political turbulence, economic instability, social complexity and rising expectations from every direction. Yet Les Walton believes the region holds the key to its own renewal.

His message is simple and urgent: the future depends on collaboration.

"Collaboration requires us to spend time listening," says Mr Walton, "both to ideas we love and to a bunch of annoying, disagreeable and otherwise unappealing rubbish.

"It also means facing uncomfortable truths. For years, well-meaning national policies have been 'transported, not translated' - imposed from the outside with little understanding of local context. Quick fixes have come and gone, but the deep-rooted challenges remain."

Mr Walton calls for a reset: a shift from externally driven reform to sustainable, self-initiated improvement grounded in the region's own realities.

Too often, interventions have been based on the false belief that North East leaders lack capability or are resistant to challenge. Mr Walton rejects this outright. He believes that all children, teachers and leaders want to improve - and to work in a culture where support and challenge are welcomed.

Instead of prioritising inspection and regulation, the focus must move to investing in leadership and building trust. This means leaving behind the top-down 'change zone' and entering the 'collaboration zone' where improvement grows from shared responsibility and mutual support.

Mr Walton believes the region must develop a shared understanding of its education system - how its parts interact and where its boundaries lie. Without this, improvement will always be fragmented.

"We can play all the right notes," he says, quoting Eric Morecambe, "but not necessarily in the right order."

A narrow fixation on academic results has sidelined children's broader development. Yet with the right perspective, he adds, "you see a small child with ten fingers and a piano with 88 keys - and I see potential."

Real transformation won't come from government mandates or isolated local projects. It will come from 'leading from the middle' - a concept championed by author Andy Hargreaves in his book of the same title, and a belief embraced by Mr Walton.

It means mobilising regional networks of schools and leaders who are rooted in their communities yet confident on the national stage.

Schools North East and the Association of Education Advisers play a key role here, convening and connecting leaders so the region speaks with one strong, informed voice.

To succeed, collaboration must be more than tactical. It must be purposeful.

"Collaboration should not be a last resort," says Mr Walton. "It should be the foundation of a mature, resilient system."

Vision alone won't deliver results. Mr Walton stresses the need for disciplined change processes - from analysing root causes to embedding new practices.

Shared planning, shared analysis and shared accountability ensure improvement becomes continuous and self-sustaining, rather than episodic and externally imposed.

While the challenges ahead are real - and relentless - Mr Walton believes the North East can thrive if it balances three imperatives: optimising the present, letting go of outdated practices and inventing new ways of working.

"We must focus the whole village on transforming the North East," he says. "Drive out fear. Aim for win-win."

"Ultimately, collaboration is not the easy option - but it is the only option that works."

"In challenging times, unity is not a luxury. It is our strongest defence - and our greatest opportunity."