

Raising standards....new building required?

A group of Freemen met on January 20 for a discussion evening addressing the question of whether a new building was required to raise standards in a school. The discussion was led by Professor Sir Geoff Hampton who is the Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Wolverhampton. He is also chief advisor to the Black Country Challenge whose role is to look at improving standards in the 467 schools in the Black Country region. Sir Geoff received his knighthood for services to education as a headmaster who turned round the achievements of a failing secondary school.

Previous recent government policy was to encourage schools to become academies and in many cases a new building was provided under the Building Schools for the Future programme. The capital programme has now been curtailed but schools are being encouraged still to become academies. Sir Geoff showed slides of a number of new schools around the world which have varied in their success in terms of the design of their new buildings. There is a danger if architects are allowed to experiment too much that the purpose and function of the building gets lost. New buildings can be helpful to a school but other initiatives are really important as well. A video clip was shown in which children were asked what makes a good school. Answers included good teachers, a good headteacher, good relationships between teachers and children, a place to feel safe but buildings otherwise received no mention.

The current view of a classroom is a learning space where knowledge management and e-learning work together. E-learning is an important tool which must be embraced. The teacher is no longer 'the Sage on the stage' but guides students in their learning. It is important to informalise learning while recognising sources of knowledge, An example of flexible use was given of a school in another country where the teacher had to plan for each session not only the teaching plan but how the room should be organised. In this case there were sufficient facilities staff to rearrange the room at least twice each day.

It is also important to consider what is the heart of a building, the place where relationships are formed, an ethos is developed and a community is built. At the University of Wolverhampton a social learning space has been created with a coffee outlet, computers and Wifi. The chairs have been chosen to include different types of seating which is comfortable for 30 minutes, one hour and more than two hours as in modern coffee outlets. The only supervision is given by the coffee shop staff yet in eleven years only three computers have been lost. The space is full most of the day and opening hours have been extended.

The biggest challenge in schools is the inclusion and engagement of all pupils. In both the state and independent sector there are disengaged children. It is important to acknowledge that not all children will get high grades in public examinations. It is also important to recognise that for children from deprived backgrounds education may be the key to escape. However, often these children are given no support in learning at home. It may also be the case that the best teachers are given to those who are succeeding at school leaving the less successful children with the less good teaching.

The learning needs of pupils which must be recognised cover:

- Short term achievable targets
- Strategies to learn
- Know what is expected
- Understand what they can do well and how to improve

- Recognise and celebrate achievements
- Develop strategies to improve.

Features of effective schools include:

- Professional leadership
- Shared vision and goals
- A learning environment
- Concentration on teaching and learning
- Explicit high expectations
- Positive reinforcement
- Progress monitored.

The differences between management and leadership were discussed. Management leads to maintenance with an emphasis on doing things right whereas leadership leads to change with an emphasis on doing the right things. A real utopian situation is to have a mix of the two but this is rare to find in one person. A strong senior team is probably the best way to get a blend of both types of skill sets.

Consistency throughout a school is the key word. A school needs all teachers to be good and attention should be given to improving teaching skills of the less successful teachers.

Sir Geoff summarised his presentation by setting and answering the following questions.

- Do you need a new building? No
- Does a new building help? Yes
- Do you need £20million? No
- What also matters? Teaching
- Can you teach effectively in any room? Yes

A new building is great to have but it is not essential. New facilities can be an asset but teaching and learning are the most important aspect to address.

In the discussion after the presentation the following points were raised.

- The Master opened by saying that research shows that children spend 17% of their time in school and 83% of their time at home. If money is spent on new buildings should it not also be spent on enhancing the community generally and the home environment? In agreeing with this Sir Geoff mentioned the example of the Microsoft school in the USA where the local community have been given on-line access. It is important to try to get buy-in from the community as well as improving the school.
- There are many schools which have had demountable classrooms for many years which need to be removed and repairs done generally to fix problems such as leaking roofs. The

money spent on new buildings for a few would have been better spent in improving the standard of buildings at many schools.

- Boys, especially black boys, are often disaffected in primary schools. This has a lot to do with the community where parents think that the school should do all education and the parents do not have a role.

- Another contributor listed three further things which improve learning for pupils:
 - I have had breakfast and will have lunch
 - I know the rules in every classroom
 - I have friends and feel safe.

- Bullying is a problem especially cyber bullying through texts and Facebook.

- Sir Geoff was asked if he was now more optimistic or pessimistic? In response he said he was generally more optimistic as there were good cohorts of teachers entering the profession with flexible routes such as Teach First helping. The new recruits are helping to spread good practice. However there are problems with the local communities which need to be sorted out.

Freeman Anthony Farnath ended the evening with a vote of thanks to Sir Geoff Hampton. He had given us an insight into the breadth and depth of his experience which had been put to use in many countries around the world.