



# National Education Trust

The UK's Leading Education 'Do-Tank'

**Here endeth the homily – and starteth the term**

*Bernard Trafford*

What does a head say to the staff at the start of the school year? If there has been a good set of summer results – A levels, GCSEs or SATs according to age and setting – the first comment (after welcoming new colleagues) is one of congratulation. It's closely followed by a quick outline of the priorities for the coming term and school year. Where things have been less good, this must include planned changes and solutions.

Heads must challenge complacency, even (or particularly) at this first meeting. However well things went last year, the school must seek to improve this time round: an organisation that isn't improving is going backwards.

And to finish, the cherry on top of the cake, a reminder that everything we do is for the children. That's not sanctimonious tosh: it's a necessary reminder because schools are so driven by the need to produce great results and satisfactory data, to satisfy the demands of parents, an insatiable government and its hostile Inspectorate, that the achievement of targets - the measurement of everything that can be measured (and a lot that can't or at least shouldn't be) – could lead a school to forget why it's there. So to finish, let's hear it for the children.

Well, that's easy, then. You can have my formula for nothing. To be fair, that's not such a generous offer because it's all pretty obvious. Still, I think these things need to be said. I have known heads who felt that teachers don't want to be bored with long meetings at the start of term: a quick session on nuts and bolts for 15 minutes and that's enough.

But it isn't enough. I often say, admittedly in defence of my obsessive mission to explain, that it's the head's job above all to remind everyone in the school – teachers, support staff, children, parents, anyone else I've missed out – what the vision is, what direction we are going in and what we must do together to get there.

If the head doesn't remind staff and children about the ethos of the school, what drives (or should drive) its very existence, who will? Some 20 years ago I remember a priest complaining that bishops don't give leadership any more. They are so busy espousing social causes and speaking out against all kinds of manifestations of injustice, unfairness or prejudice (all worthy enough) that they forget to preach - to their clergy as much as to their congregations.

That was about the time I first became a head. If that priest doesn't remember the conversation, I certainly do, and sometimes apologise to my colleagues for the fact that I am about to embark on something of a sermon. But again, if I don't say those vital things, who will? Some might reply, "We know what we are here for. It's understood." I seem to remember learning bits of Latin where certain words weren't necessary because they were said to be "understood". It works for Classicists, but not in school ethos: what is merely taken as read is too easily forgotten and eventually lost.

So what did I say to my staff this term? Let me start by putting it in context. We are very lucky. Ours is a large co-educational, academically selective independent school in the North East of England. And we came back to school celebrating a fantastic set of exam results, the best-ever at A level and GCSE, the latter by a long way, and our junior school's SATs results were as pleasing as ever, though not a record.

So what should I say? I didn't annoy my colleagues by warning them to avoid complacency: to be fair to them, there has been no hint of that in the past year, such a successful and productive one. Actually, I told them that we just needed more of the same: which means *less* of the same!

Let me explain. Over the last couple of years we have been trying – arguably, way behind the maintained sector – to concentrate not on teaching but on learning. The profession has perhaps been somewhat late in appreciating the basic truth that teachers may be teaching like fury, but their pupils are not necessarily learning.

Looking through the telescope the other way hasn't brought about colossal changes in my colleagues' teaching styles: they have a pretty successful formula. But it has led to their finding the confidence to take risks, to try new things, to do things a different way.

I spend a lot of time urging teachers to take risks. We are not talking about taking chances with a child's future: the worst that is likely to happen is a duff lesson. But even then it won't be that bad, because teachers are such thorough professionals: they make sure that the preparation is immaculate, that there is a safety net, even if it doesn't go to plan. A fair bit of learning will be salvaged and the whole experience won't be a complete waste of time.

But experimenting, taking risks, throwing away the revision sheets and the practice papers in a highly academic school and concentrating instead on real quality of learning, all that calls for courage. We don't have government or OFSTED breathing down our necks: but we have highly ambitious parents and aspirant students who, at A2, are holding incredibly high offers for top university courses and, at GCSE, know that they need to be gaining in excess of six A\*s in order to be looked at for the most selective courses two years hence.

It's a dreadful pressure, and I regret it hugely, doing everything I can to mitigate it: but our students know the harsh realities of their ambitions. Their parents, too, know just how tough it's going to be to ensure those top grades: so it would be very easy to give in to the pressure. Spoon feeding, the kind of teaching that can be very effective in getting kids through far too many tick box exams, would be welcomed. It takes real bravery in my colleagues to hold out and say, "No: we are doing education."

I am convinced that this year's record number of top grades stems from our refusal to spoon-feed and insistence instead on encouraging, challenging, *requiring* our students to fly intellectually.

We must continue to be courageous, brave, trusting our own judgement and strength. Contributing to a book on school leadership for ASCL (years ago, when it was still called SHA), I wrote a short chapter called *Bluffing*. The editorial team wouldn't allow that at all. "You can't call it bluffing," they said. "Call it *exercising judgement based on experience*."

I let them have their way: what's in a name? The point about bluffing, or exercising judgement based on experience, requires the same confidence I am demanding of my teachers. "Trust your judgement, your expertise, your thoroughness, your excellent qualifications and your understanding of the way young people learn: trust those qualities to inspire your students to explore and to push themselves further than they thought they could go. It will work, as long as you don't allow yourself to be tied down, trammelled by the exam requirements."

Confidence is all. Not blind confidence – which would be arrogance - but justified confidence rooted in preparation and professionalism. We have been agonising from time to time about the choice of 16+ exams: rather more than half of our departments have now moved to iGCSE, getting rid of the burden of coursework and its horrific successor, controlled assessment, and returning largely to terminal exams which seem to suit our clientèle. Whenever a department has made a change, however, they have done so with trepidation. What if the exam results slip as a result? That is the fear.

Fear of what? Of whom? It's not fear of me (I hope!), nor particularly of their students or their parents. It's a kind of institutional fear that affects all of us teachers if we are not careful: "they" whoever "they" are, will be on at us. "They" expect us to get these miraculous results. Fortunately, this year I could safely assure my colleagues that they mustn't fear trying a different exam board, or even a different qualification. The proof within our excellent results was that the teaching still works, the learning still happens, and the students still surprise themselves with what they can achieve.

That is perhaps this year's small triumph: maybe we are gaining the confidence to say we (teachers, students, parents) can do the educating together. And the exam results come along the way, a by-product as much as a goal. It's an exaggeration, of course: but it's not a bad state of mind to achieve.

I forbore to add a possible postscript to the issue of exam choice, because I didn't need to sour what was a very positive start. But I have been grinding my teeth ever since GCSE results came out a couple of weeks ago. This year we heard no politicians complaining about dumbing down.

Instead one or two newspapers, egged on by a few politicians, decided to rant about the disgraceful disservice done to pupils by schools that either enter them early for GCSEs or choose softer subjects to boost their results.

Okay: where it's true, there has been a lack of the sort of confidence that I have been describing. But whence comes that loss of confidence? We must and can only blame the policy-makers, and the media who jump on their various bandwagons. Pressure on many schools to hit particular targets has been intolerable.

I have always considered it a vital part of headship to absorb that outside pressure in order to protect the teachers and allow them to do their job freely and confidently. None of us can work well looking over our shoulders: yet that is what government has been demanding for the two decades in which I have been a head. The perverse choice of subjects, the entering of children early in order for the school to gain extra points which are of no value to the child; these are pernicious distortions of our purpose: and they are entirely the creation of the bullying machinery of government.

The coalition government, in power for only a little over a year, is quick to condemn these unforeseen effects of the barmier initiatives introduced by its predecessor. But we already have too many hares started by ministers driven by quirky personal agendas. The EBacc, or rather the bizarre omissions from its stamp of approval, will produce its own twisted curriculum over the next few years.

Schools, where confidence and courage thrive and leaders feel they can cope, will mitigate the worst effects, and hold out against the pressure. In others, for understandable and human reasons, courage will falter, and wrong decisions will be made to the detriment of children's education.

That's the bad news. The good news is that, as ever, that wonderful body of teachers, the poor bloody infantry, will make it work for the vast majority. They always do. They will again.

"Have a great term – and make sure you and your students have fun along the way." That's what I said to my staff: I wish it to everyone, young and less young, starting the new school year.

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