



10 New
Schools
Network
Celebrating a decade of free schools

Free schools at 10: *A decade of success*



About New Schools Network

New Schools Network is an independent charity, passionate about ending educational inequality once and for all. We envisage a country where every child has an equal chance to succeed in life, irrespective of their background. Through our programmes, we partner with individuals, groups, trusts, and business leaders to establish, run and improve pioneering and innovative schools.

About free schools

Free schools are new state schools. Legally academies, they are funded by government, and have additional freedoms such as control over the length of the school term and school day, staff pay, and the curriculum. There are over 600 free schools already open, with a further 200 approved and in the pre-opening period. Free schools are not-for-profit and have been established by groups including charities, universities, independent schools, teachers, and parents.

Acknowledgments

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Foreword



*The Rt Hon. David Cameron
Prime Minister, 2010-2016*

It started as a radical idea which we developed in opposition: independent schools within the state sector. Charities, faith groups, businesses and teachers would be free to come and set them up from scratch. Headteachers would be freer to decide what students were taught and how. Parents would have more freedom over where their child was educated. And pupils would be freed from the notion that their future would somehow be dictated by their background. We called them “free schools”..

Before the general election in 2010, I made a pledge: “We will create more good schools by breaking open the supply of education and letting anyone with a passion for giving children the best to set up a new school.” A year later, Canary Wharf College East Ferry opened its doors to pupils in East London. The challenge was great: this was a borough with the highest child poverty rate in the country, yet with some of Britain’s most expensive real estate. Like the 23 other free schools in that first cohort, it faced some opposition given that this was a new and untested idea.

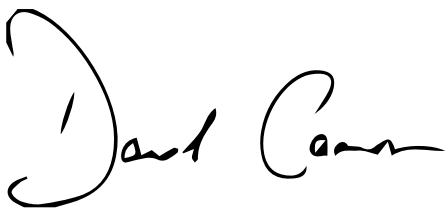
Ten years later, free schools have silenced the sceptics and smashed all our expectations. They are now the highest performing type of state school in England at GCSE and A Level. Disadvantaged children perform better in them than in any other type of school. They have only been open for a few years, yet some are sending more pupils to Oxbridge than private schools that have been around for centuries. Indeed, those first few pupils that arrived at East Ferry as six and seven year olds have just taken their GCSEs – and achieved an incredible 94 per cent pass rate.

There are so many people behind that success. There are the leaders, many of whom feature in this report, who had the vision and tenacity to build something from nothing. There are the ministers who were inspired by charter schools in the US and determined to make the concept work here. There is the New Schools Network, which has been the driving force in getting these schools off the ground and flying the flag for them. And there are the parents who have decided to look beyond the obvious options in order to give their children the best opportunities.

“In smashing the correlation between background and attainment, there is a wider lesson for us than simply what it takes for schools to succeed. There is proof that the state doesn’t just have to offer something that is “good enough” – it can offer the very best.”

There is more work to do, as the report illustrates. There is evidence free schools raise the attainment of those around them, so we need to see more of that happening on the ground. The provision needs to reach more parts of the country. And we need more free schools full stop – we should be aiming not for hundreds but for thousands.

In smashing the correlation between background and attainment, there is a wider lesson for us than simply what it takes for schools to succeed. There is proof that the state doesn’t just have to offer something that is “good enough” – it can offer the very best. To reiterate: we are seeing some of the most disadvantaged pupils get some of the best grades in the country. The ramifications are huge. A truly meritocratic society is within reach – and free schools are bringing us closer to that goal each day.



The Rt Hon. David Cameron *Prime Minister, 2010-2016*

Introduction



Sophie Harrison-Byrne Director

Unity Howard Former Director



Ten years ago, the first free schools opened their doors to pupils. These 24 pioneers, now part of a family of over 600 free schools, were established to generate change in our education system. Free schools offer something new, deliver proven approaches to raise standards, provide genuine parental choice, and inject innovation into the sector – particularly in areas of disadvantage where school underperformance had been impeding children from fulfilling their potential for decades.

When the free schools programme was conceived more than a decade ago, many suggested it implausible that people who came from outside of the education establishment could deliver a high-quality education for pupils across the country. Some believed the policy would deepen inequality, and others suggested it was a waste of money.

But while there have been challenges over the years, these theories have been proven wrong. An NFER report published earlier this year showed that free schools are more popular with parents; are more likely to be rated Outstanding by Ofsted; and are the highest performing type of state school at GCSE and A level. All the while, the pupil population of free schools is more likely to be from a disadvantaged background.

Free schools have provided revolutionary change in the education system: they have opened doors to new possibilities and influenced the practice of countless other schools.

From ten years' worth of learning, we now know that it is possible to establish world leading schools – from scratch – in areas which many had said it was impossible. Untapped educational approaches, designed with the local community, work. Teachers, parents and groups new to education are capable of creating new schools which deliver genuine opportunity.

Free schools have achieved what they set out to do: putting faith in exceptional school leaders to deliver the highest quality education for pupils, especially in areas which have long been trapped in the cycle of entrenched underperformance.

That is why we celebrate the first decade of free schools opening in this report. Over the summer, we interviewed the leaders of ten exceptional free schools across the country. We asked them to reflect on their journeys and how they have successfully implemented their vision, confronted the challenges of establishing a new school, and made an impact within their communities. Each school in this piece has brought a fresh, and genuinely novel, education offer to their pupils.

“Free schools have provided revolutionary change in the education system: they have opened doors to new possibilities and influenced the practice of countless other schools.”

The difficulties of opening a new school from scratch cannot be overstated; yet, with their own unique vision these schools can profit future generations of children and young people. Across the country, from King’s Leadership Academy in Warrington to Marine Academy Primary in Plymouth, these leaders have shared the same unrelenting pursuit for academic excellence over past decade.

As you will see in this report, there is no definitive blueprint for how a school should deliver education. You might read this and find yourself galvanized by Reach Academy Feltham’s approach which provides holistic family and community support for pupils from early years to young adulthood; you may be enthused by Exeter Mathematics School’s approach to developing skills fit for the 21st century, and optimistic about the benefits of more specialist maths schools; or you may be inspired by the network of schools within Dixons Academies Trust and Star Academies, which have unyieldingly transformed education outcomes across whole cities and regions.

The free schools profiled show the diversity in education across the country – one of the hallmarks of the programme’s success.

In the concluding chapter, we explore what the free schools programme could achieve over the next decade; but for now, let’s take this time to pause and celebrate all that has been accomplished so far.



Sophie Harrison-Byrne *Director*



Unity Howard *Former Director*

Canary Wharf College, *East Ferry*



Type: Mainstream

Phase: Primary

Location: Isle of Dogs

Ofsted: Outstanding

Year of opening: 2011

Other free schools:

Canary Wharf College,
Glenworth (2014); Canary
Wharf College 3 (2016)

Canary Wharf College, East Ferry was one of the first 24 free schools to open in 2011. Following its first Ofsted inspection, the school was rated Outstanding. A primary school, Canary Wharf College was set up to deliver small class sizes in the heart of one of the poorest boroughs in the country. Children at the school receive a high level of adult input and benefit from a longer school day.

We spoke to the founder of the school, Sarah Counter, who has gone on to open a further two free schools. The Canary Wharf College Trust, where Sarah is now CEO, offers provision to young people aged 4-18.

What was your original vision, and how has it been realised over time?

The original vision was to live, share and celebrate the love of learning in a Christian environment, which welcomed all faiths and cultures. I could have started a school in leafy Surrey where I'm from, but wanted to provide pupil places in an area of high need. The way to achieve my vision was to offer pupils and families smaller class sizes, a longer school day, and specialist taught music, languages and PE, with a broad range of extended activities like educational outings outside of school.

What has been the most rewarding moment since opening East Ferry, Glenworth and Crossharbour?

The most rewarding moment was this summer when our Year 2 children who started in 2011 took their GCSEs at Canary Wharf Crossharbour, and 94% of grades fell within 9-4. I believe if you give pupils the foundation of a really good primary education they can succeed into secondary. A lot of money is traditionally poured into secondary education, but greater resources need to be delivered to primary. To learn to read, write and argue at primary level gives children the grounding to take-off at secondary. I think we've proven that, but look forward to proving that further as more of our primary pupils come through.

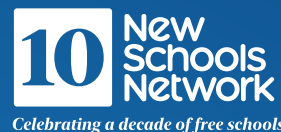
Staff growth and development has also been hugely rewarding. I see the staff as an extension of my family, especially those from the early days. One joined as a teaching assistant who didn't really know what she wanted to do in life, but thought she might be interested in education. She's now Deputy Head and well on her way to headship. To see staff flourish from teaching assistants to competent leaders has been a real joy.

What was the local and national support like at the start?

The national support for the school and programme was pretty muted, and I think everyone from the first cohort of free schools would say that, really. I felt backed by the community all the way. That was just tremendous. I found local east-enders incredibly welcoming and incredibly supportive.

You had very little time from the launch of the policy to opening East Ferry. How challenging was that?

It was incredibly challenging, it really was. I was living from one moment to the next. The big thing was that I had no pay. I had to live off my husband for the first six months – which I have never been paid for. That personal aspect of the free school movement has never been documented. Two sets of parents, myself and my husband had to put in our own money to pay for things like publicity. We've never recouped that money.



Canary Wharf College, *East Ferry* (continued)



Did you feel like you were doing something ground-breaking from the start? And did you feel like you carried a burden of responsibility for the success of the policy?

It was certainly a ground-breaking policy, from the beginning. Never before in the history of this country had any ordinary person on the street been able to go to the Government and say I have a vision for a public service, please give me money.

We had letters from the Secretary of State for Education, but we didn't even have a letter box because our site was under construction – one ended up under a railway arch in a soggy puddle. Because we were in the first tranche of free schools we were invited to a garden party at Buckingham Palace; I was invited to meet David Cameron in Downing Street; and received invites to the House of Lords. I had never paid attention to politics before, and came to realise that I was completely up to my neck in it. In 2011 we opened up with 60 children, nine staff and a bursar, cleaner and secretary. I'd go from wiping a child's nose to Downing Street.

The cherry on the top was receiving an Outstanding Ofsted rating two years after opening, and then receiving a letter from David Cameron at No.10. I also remember getting a Christmas card which was signed off 'Michael', and I couldn't figure out who Michael was, until I realised it was the Secretary of State Michael Gove. They were extraordinary times.

Since you've opened your free school, what's been the biggest change in the process?

There was constant encouragement for free school founders, which isn't there now. That support from the Government, as well as the community, kept me going during the hardest of times. Of course, I've opened up free schools for the children in Tower Hamlets, but there's very little thanks or credit you receive now, which was certainly really needed in those early days.

What would you like the free school's programme to look like in 10 years' time?

The programme has to become more streamlined and needs less bureaucracy. The building process especially has to change – because free schools were high on the agenda with the inception of the programme, the Government bent over backwards to get schools open in accommodation. I'm opening in temporary premises at Crossharbour this year which is exactly the same size as the building for East Ferry – they did it in nine weeks for East Ferry, this one is nine months.

What advice would you give to somebody else embarking on their free school journey?

Arm yourself with resilience. Hold onto the vision. Focus on the children you're doing it for.

Setting up a free school is a tough job with little personal recognition – if you focus on the children, you'll carry it through.



Derby Pride Academy



DPA
DERBY PRIDE
ACADEMY

Type: Alternative
Provision

Phase: Secondary

Location: Derby

Ofsted:
Outstanding

Year of opening:
2012

Derby Pride Academy is an alternative provision free school for young people aged 11-16. It opened in 2012 and can cater for up to 50 pupils not thriving in mainstream education. The school works in collaboration with Derby County Community Trust, the charitable arm of the football club, to provide good education outcomes for its pupils. A strong emphasis is put on personal development in order to teach students to communicate with others effectively.

This interview was conducted with the Principal of the school, Karen Hayes.

What first inspired you to get involved with the free schools programme?

We were inspired to get involved with the free schools programme as a way of increasing the diversity of the educational offer in Derby. We saw an opportunity to offer other mainstream schools in the city an alternative to permanent exclusion, with a particular focus on providing Level 2 qualifications.

What is the greatest difference between the education you provide and the education in mainstream settings?

Our vision of offering Level 2 qualifications means that we strive to offer a mainstream curriculum; however, it is our approach to the delivery of the education that differs from a mainstream setting. Lessons are shorter to help maintain pupil focus. Unstructured time is limited; even lunchtime has structured activity such as gym club, radio production, and film club available to keep pupils engaged throughout the day. Our behaviour expectations ensure there is almost always an opportunity for reparation, rather than punitive sanctions. Every day is a new day focussed on positive progress.

We contact parents or carers every day with details of how the young person has fared. For some parents, positive praise has been a rare occurrence at the young person's mainstream setting. Hearing even small successes goes a long way to building strong relationships with parents, and the young person as well.

What was your original vision for Derby Pride Academy, and how has it been realised over time?

Although it has taken some time, we are now central to the city's behaviour strategy and so our vision of working collegiately for the benefit of all young people across the city has been realised. We play a central role, helping to shape the city inclusion agenda by Chairing the city behaviour strategy and the opportunity area inclusion subcommittee.

As a result of the behaviour strategy, permanent exclusion has reduced exponentially. Derby Pride Academy is central to the success of the strategy and is proud to have supported every secondary school in the city with alternative placements to reduce exclusion.

What were the core considerations when designing a curriculum which caters to the varying needs of your pupils?

We want all pupils to thrive in their studies. To achieve this fundamental objective, the curriculum is designed to have a clear focus to learning in each lesson. The purpose of this is to: allow pupils to acquire the necessary knowledge about the topical era; enable pupils to be more accurate and creative in assessed pieces of work; and improve pupils' cognitive function – thus, learning is more effective.

We put a lot of training and support in place for our small team of teaching staff to gain expertise outside of their specialisms. This in turn increases what we are able to offer.

How does the school benefit from its partnership with Derby County Football Club?

Our relationship is with the charitable arm of the football club. We work with them to engage and sustain learning for vulnerable and challenging young people, utilising its network of expertise to provide targeted intervention for our pupils. Our pupils are proud to be affiliated with the city's football club.

With little consensus around what good AP looks like, how important is it that you share best practice with other AP schools? How do you go about doing so?

We utilise the varying networks across the country to draw from the examples of best practice whilst providing our own expertise to support other alternative provision settings.

We use social media and our website extensively to showcase our offer, and quite often will be approached via these mediums to support other schools.

Although we understand that there is little consensus around what good AP looks like, we believe there are a number of mandatory elements to AP that are good indicators of successful provision. English, mathematics and reading, as well as attendance, are elements that follow the pupils throughout their educational journey, and as such, provide an excellent baseline tool to measure progress.

What advice would you give to somebody else embarking on their free school journey?

The most useful piece of advice to give would be to consult widely and work collaboratively, particularly with mainstream partners. By building strong networks, we are supported to keep our standards high; inviting our mainstream colleagues to quality assure our provision extensively. It is very easy in our kind of setting to lower your expectations because you are regularly exposed to challenge from pupils. We aspire to mainstream expectations, delivered in a different way. We still have rules, we still challenge inappropriate behaviour, and we still aim high.





What has been the most rewarding moment since opening your free school?

We are rewarded every time an ex-pupil returns or makes contact to thank us for the positive impact we have had on their future.

We were extremely proud to be the first AP free school in the country to receive an Outstanding grade from Ofsted in 2014. Our work was again recognised by Ofsted as Outstanding at our second inspection in 2019.

We have provided support to many pre-open and newly opened AP free schools. We have built excellent relationships with many of these schools. For us, it is rewarding to see how our support has helped other schools and their leaders develop their offer.

What would you like the free schools programme to look like in 10 years' time?

At present, alternative provision and SEND free school applications are very different and so this is something that needs to change: the financial barriers that exist when opening an alternative provision free school need to be removed, to ensure parity between opening an alternative provision free school and a SEND free school.

I would like to see a more targeted approach to the programme – identifying areas of greatest need. Collaboration and conversation with AP free schools could also support good unregulated or independent AP provision to be compliant.

Dixons Academies Trust



Type: Mainstream

Phase: One primary; four secondary; one 16-19; one all-through

Location: Bradford; Leeds; Manchester

Ofsted: Outstanding

Other free schools:

Dixons Trinity Academy (2012); Dixons Music Primary (2012); Dixons McMillan Academy (2014); Dixons Kings Academy (2015); Dixons Trinity Chapeltown (2017); Dixons Sixth Form Academy (2019); Dixons Manchester Academy (pre-opening)

Through each of its free schools and academies, Dixons Academies Trust promotes high aspirations and collective ambition to support success. The trust supports students from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds across Bradford and Leeds in all of its existing 12 schools. These consist of six secondary academies, three primaries, two all-through academies, and a standalone sixth form academy.

Dixons Academies Trust has recently announced plans to expand into Manchester and Liverpool; earlier this year, Dixons Manchester Academy was approved to open.

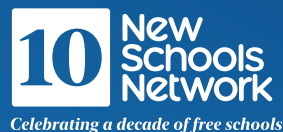
Dixons CEO, Sir Nick Weller, shares his insights in this interview.

What first inspired you to get involved with the free schools programme?

Luke Sparkes (founding Principal of Dixons Trinity and now Deputy CEO) was the first to visit the States, and several of us went subsequently. While he also took inspiration from schools in this country, both state and private, the way the best Charter Schools were able to transform life chances in some of the most educationally and socially dispossessed communities in and around New York was truly exceptional. Those visits with Future Leaders were probably the most significant initial inspiration.

Dixons Academies Trust has transformed outcomes across entire communities. Was that an early ambition when establishing free schools?

Yes. Our mission is to challenge educational and social disadvantage in the north. We focus exclusively on areas of social deprivation, either by sponsoring turnaround academies to address educational failure, or by opening new free schools to offer new opportunities and meet growing demand. Both routes are key to transforming the life opportunities of children and we do both in equal number.



NO
EXCUSE





Free schools have been crucial to this success: with only one year group at the start, each has been an unparalleled opportunity to develop and then refine a model to apply across the Trust. They have also proved excellent seed beds to grow and nurture leadership, not only for other free schools but also for some of our most challenging turnarounds. In its nine-year history, for example, seven Trinity staff have gone on to headships, either with us or occasionally elsewhere.

What has been the most rewarding moment since opening your first free school?

Dixons Trinity as the first secondary free school in the country to be judged Outstanding certainly attracted a great deal of attention and so far we have replicated that judgement with each one since, but we do things for students not for Ofsted, even if the endorsement is very welcome.

The opening day of each has probably been the most exciting, but the first results day in each has been perhaps the most rewarding. To see that first cohort through to the end and to celebrate all that they have achieved – that’s when you know you have achieved your mission and are truly transforming the life chances of children.

What advice would you give to somebody else embarking on their free school journey?

Visit lots of other schools during pre-opening and plan in detail. Look particularly at how they build and craft

their culture. Engage with the community – go door-to-door and tell families what you’re planning to do. Facebook advertising is low-cost and targeted. Appoint experienced leaders predominantly in each area first. Only appoint people who are totally aligned to your mission and values as your main criteria. Appoint people who are flexible and who can work hard: roles are very broad and demanding in the early years!

What would you like the free schools programme to look like in 10 years’ time?

As public finances have tightened, there has been an increasing focus on the programme meeting a basic need for places. While this will always be one purpose, the original focus was as much on being a driver of improvement and change in local areas where standards were poor. I would like to see a return to the more standards-driven approach of the early years. I would also like to see a return to the less risk-averse, more entrepreneurial approach which gave the movement its purpose and edge when it started.

What are the unique challenges of opening a primary or sixth form free school compared to a secondary free school?

Primary schools start very small, which is both an advantage and a limitation. Starting an all-through school with both Reception and Year 7 will scale you up to sustainability quicker, and enable you to share associate staff in admin, catering or caretaking for example, across two cohorts from the start. In the drive for student recruitment, don’t compromise on entry requirements: focus on retention and results, not initial numbers. It is better to be smaller and successful than it is to take young people on and then fail them.

Does the concentration of Dixons Academies Trust in Bradford and Leeds enable you to be more responsive to the local community?

It certainly enabled us to build our reputation and win the trust of parents. Glossy brochures are a waste of money, a good website is helpful to communicate, but word of mouth is the only truly powerful way to build your brand.

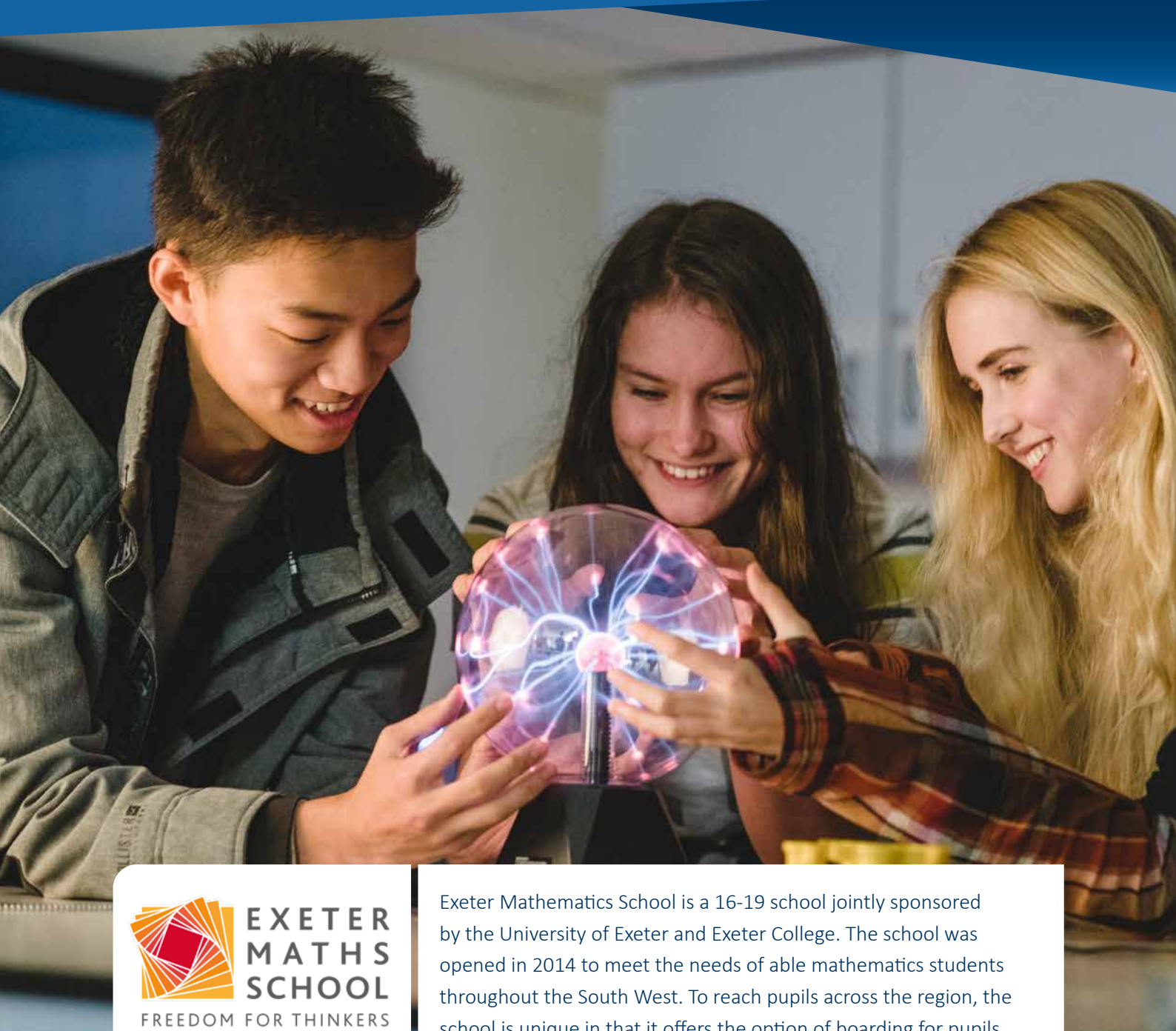
Geographical focus certainly helped us while we were developing our model and establishing success, to build links between schools and to identify and grow a well-defined backbone which we all share. It also helps with deployment of staff and career development across the Trust, in both training and advancement.

Will you continue to grow, and if so, into new areas?

We have a successful model, and if we are to truly challenge educational and social disadvantage we shouldn’t just rest on our laurels. We’ve been successful in our way, but groups like Outwood and Harris make a big difference to far more children. With limited opportunities to grow any more locally at the moment, moving down the M62 to create North West hubs in Manchester and Liverpool is the strategy we’ve chosen. We have our first two sponsored academies in Liverpool and a free school with first stage approval in Manchester. We’ll certainly be bidding again in the next Wave, whenever the Government commits to one. Which they should do: free schools are needed now as much as they were a decade ago.



Exeter Mathematics School



Type: Mainstream

Phase: 16-19

Location: Exeter

Ofsted: Outstanding

Year of opening: 2014

Exeter Mathematics School is a 16-19 school jointly sponsored by the University of Exeter and Exeter College. The school was opened in 2014 to meet the needs of able mathematics students throughout the South West. To reach pupils across the region, the school is unique in that it offers the option of boarding for pupils, and welcomes students from across four counties in the south west.

Exeter Maths School is one of three existing specialist maths free schools in the country. Like the University of Liverpool Maths School and King's Maths School, Exeter benefits from close links to the university, whose lecturers contribute to the curriculum and provide project work and assignments set by academics.

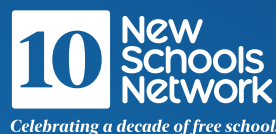
We spoke to the school's founding Headteacher, Kerry Burnham.

What first inspired you to get involved with the free schools programme?

The University of Exeter and Exeter College were inspired with the idea of establishing a maths school, and I was curious to find out more, and became increasingly excited. I had seen before how many students with a passion for maths had become quite isolated in their love for the subject. Often it is when they come together to study further maths at A level they become kindred spirits collectively and start to blossom – I could see the power of doing that with more students in a specialist school.

Is your curriculum design the same now as it was when you first opened?

Although we're credited for our innovative curriculum, we found curriculum design was actually quite clear and easy from the outset. From dialogue with the university, it was apparent what was needed and missing academically when students enter university. It was the easiest thing from the beginning to put in place and have clarity on. Maths as an A level fixes the majority of what students need to learn; there's only so much time for project work, and that's come from dialogue.



The vision and ethos driving the curriculum has been clear from the start, but the curriculum has developed organically over time. For example, King's Maths School come down and visit us and vice versa, and they've taken parts of our project work, we've taken parts of their enrichment models, so it's constantly evolving and progressing and it's helped us add to our initial ideas.

Is pupil success the most rewarding feeling since opening the school?

Not always. There are students who have had a really tough time and mental health difficulties. When I hear that they're doing well at university and are on a course that they love, and have sustained that interest, that makes my heart skip a beat.

My proudest moment since the school opened was when pupils gave a talk at the University of Exeter in front of 400 people; there was one pupil who had joined us who really struggled with eye contact and found it hard to talk to anyone, but they stood up and spoke. They're the proudest moments – knowing the school makes a difference.

What is the biggest factor in the school's academic success compared to non-specialist schools?

There's definitely something about bringing people with a shared focus and interest together, they inspire one another. Our teachers are inspired by our pupils and vice versa.

The pastoral care here is quite exceptional, and the pupils we've supported who may not be the most academically gifted could have easily fallen by the wayside or dropped out if they were at another school. Many of our pupils change and blossom within their first few weeks. Some can have huge issues with their confidence, but they find their tribe here, and after feeling good about themselves they're able to thrive. At a school like this, they're accepted for being who they are. They let go of their inhibitions at a specialist school like this.

Exeter Mathematics School has pursued several local partnerships in the community. What have you gained from collaboration with Exeter College and the University of Exeter?

If I hadn't worked so collaboratively with the college and university, I simply wouldn't have been able to open and run the school. I didn't come from a traditional headship background: I had never even had a SLT position before, or even a middle management post! Running a school from scratch is very challenging, and for me to be mentored and supported by their expertise, it's been vital as they helped support my knowledge gaps.

There were many practical gaps which they had expertise to support with: the college's expertise in estates to help get us light fittings; in governance, helping us get a brilliant board of governors because they have a great reputation in the city – they were able to attract wonderful people who were excited to be part of this project; in recruiting students, the university links got pupils excited and expertise from the college meant that parents were reassured that we knew what we were doing.





The school recruits from a huge geographic area and offers boarding for pupils that live far away. How important was it to offer boarding to pupils and how has that contributed toward success?

Boarding became a real feedback loop to rapidly improve at the beginning of our free school journey. We see the full range of pupil wellbeing, and socially they are able to build deeper friendships and support each other and work together. Every year our boarders outperform our non-boarders, and I don't think that's coincidental.

We've worked very hard on pupil recruitment, because unlike a local school, our ability to recruit from a large catchment area means we don't have the same benefits of building our local reputation. We've got to keep working on it every year.

What would you like the free schools programme to look like in 10 years' time?

More specialist maths schools. It's been wonderful to collaborate with the University of Liverpool Maths School and King's Maths School, and we have been and still are able to support each other's success. It's a collaborative, supportive network rather than a competitive one. We've also supported maths schools in pre-opening – Leeds, Imperial and Durham. Once Durham opens, there will be another maths school that offers boarding so we'll be able to benchmark from each other's success.

It was imagined that a maths school would serve every region of the country, but it's impossible without a boarding offer. We serve a large catchment area which encompasses Devon, Cornwall, Dorset, and Somerset. Our pupils wouldn't have gotten here if it wasn't for boarding provision.

King's Leadership Academy Warrington



Type: Mainstream

Phase: Secondary

Location: Warrington

Ofsted: Outstanding

Year of opening: 2012

Other free schools:

King's Leadership Academy Hawthornes (2012); King's Leadership Academy Bolton (2019); ASPIRE Centre, King's Leadership Academy Liverpool (2018)

King's Leadership Academy Warrington opened in 2012, with the aim to identify, nurture and develop potential in their students. This is instilled through the school's leadership curriculum: throughout seven years of study at King's Leadership Academy Warrington, students will undertake a study programme that fosters the development of leadership, citizenship, character and enterprise. The school's attention to character is informed from research on how young people could be advantaged in developing a career path and success for later life.

This interview was conducted with Shane Ierston. Shane has been Principal of the school since the start of its journey, and is also CEO of the Great Schools Trust.

What first inspired you to get involved with the free schools programme?

The opportunity it presented to make a difference – all parents deserve access to an outstanding education for their children. Without a successful education people cannot provide for themselves or contribute to the wider community. Having witnessed the effect of this first-hand on the lives of the children from where I grew up, I became committed to ensuring that other children reached their potential.

What was your original vision for King's Leadership Academy Warrington, and how has it been realised over time?

The original vision was for every child to be a successful citizen in tomorrow's world. We wanted something ambitious, reflecting high expectations that framed a future state to drive social mobility. Over time the vision evolved and became "to develop in each of our student the academic skills, intellectual habits, qualities of character and leadership traits necessary to succeed at all levels and become successful citizens in tomorrow's world". Since our opening in 2012, this has defined who we are and what we aspire to achieve.

What inspired you to develop a leadership curriculum, and why was it needed for your pupils?

We feel very strongly that character can be taught, and the way we practise this is through the application of our leadership curriculum. From Year 7-11, every child participates in a compulsory programme to develop their character; the development of non-cognitive skills is given as much emphasis as the teaching of academic subjects. We feel that the success of our students in academic areas is a direct consequence of our focus on their non-cognitive skills, such as building resilience, self-awareness, professionalism, respect etc.

What is the greatest challenge when creating an innovative curriculum, and how has it evolved over time?

I think the greatest challenge is overcoming the reluctance to change, the belief that what we already have is good enough, closely followed by the motivation to continue when you realise just how difficult the task is going to be.

A common mistake is to focus on the content, cognitive science and outcomes etc., at the expense of aligning the staff who will be undertaking the design. Once the staff are on board, the next step, in terms of identifying what the students need, should come from an interpretation of the mission and values. This



is where leaders need to be brave, and make decisions which are based on their own context not external accountability – had we gone for the latter back in 2012, we would never have chosen character and leadership as our joint specialisms.

With such an innovative ethos, how do you recruit staff which fit the culture and expectations of your school? Was it difficult in the early years?

It remains difficult, even to this day. Around 90% of senior leadership time is dedicated to staff development and recruitment. Given that innovation comes entirely from our staff, you could argue that a figure of 90% is still too low. When recruiting, it is always done against our values; we believe the rest can be taught on the job. As a result, the selection process is untraditional in that it actively 'weeds out' independent individuals in favour of those who operate interdependently.

Once staff have been appointed, they are invited to a multi-stage induction programme. This begins with a residential experience at an outdoor pursuit centre to immerse our new staff in the values and our leadership-based ethos. Summer training is mandatory and prepares colleagues for their arrival in September. Throughout the year, the academy finishes half-day on a Friday. This time is dedicated to staff development, equating to 20 days annually, which contrasts with the standard five INSET days. The academy has a slightly longer school day Monday-Friday to ensure students still receive the correct amount of instruction.



ASPIRE



King's Leadership Academy Warrington is a founding member of the EdTech Demonstrator Programme – how important is blended learning at the school?

Digital systems underpin our 'Classroom to Cloud' initiative, the foundation of which began in 2012 when every child was issued with an electronic device on entry to the school. We have continued this approach to ensure digital equality and as part of our attempt to create a non-selective state school with a private school ethos.

Following all COVID-19 lockdowns, cloud-based systems were activated seamlessly, to create a completely virtual school, front loaded with two weeks of pedagogical training and support packages for staff, students and parents, including wellbeing and mental health programmes. The virtual school went live on 18th March 2020, two days prior to enforced closures. Attendance online averaged 98% for all year groups with wrap around pastoral care supporting our most disadvantaged.

What has been the most rewarding moment since opening your free school?

I think in education it's more about the way 'rewarding moments' coalesce, which make the journey itself special. Having the privilege of standing shoulder to shoulder with an incredible team and hearing them say, 'we made that happen' brings the greatest reward.

What advice would you give to somebody else embarking on their free school journey?

Look at what the best are doing and use that as your starting point, not your end. There will be times when it feels that nothing is working. In those moments, return to your mission and take strength from the fact that your bid was successful because it was the best in the round. Have fun. Don't expect it to go to plan, enjoy the problem solving and remember that every day you win, you are changing the world.

Lighthouse School Leeds



Type: Special

Phase: Secondary (11-19)

Location: Leeds

Ofsted: Outstanding

Year of opening: 2012

Lighthouse School Leeds was the first special free school for children with an autistic spectrum condition (ASC) aged 11-19. The school provision has four cornerstones which facilitate a personalised programme of study for each pupil: communication; wellbeing; skills and experience; and a broad curriculum.

The school was founded by five parents, who shared their insights with us. They aimed to create a beacon that would not only support families with autistic children across West Yorkshire, but also build strong ties with the local community and Leeds City Council children's services to complement existing provision.

This interview was conducted with the five founding parents (pictured left).

What first inspired you to get involved with the free schools programme?

In 2005, five families met at an autism conference, all with a child with an autistic spectrum condition (ASC), and all fearful for their futures which felt quite bleak. We have all been firm friends since and created a strong support network for each other.

We could all see the huge potential within our children, but the existing educational choices did not specialise in autism. These students seemed to fall between the cracks in both mainstream and special education. We wanted happy and fulfilling futures for our children and were prepared to build those pathways for them, and importantly for children across the city.

In 2010, we started to meet weekly and pulled together a team of experts around us and proceeded to build a school vision with a strong focus on destinations, in particular independence and employability.

What was your original vision for Lighthouse Leeds, and how has it been realised over time?

Our intent is that every student has a bright, successful and engaging future in society, and that they can go out into the world with confidence in their own talents and abilities. To deliver on this vision we have built a curriculum for young people with an ASC based on four crucial cornerstones: communication, well-being, skills and experience, and a broad curriculum.

As parent founders, we also understand that times can be tough for families, and we wanted to ensure that the Lighthouse offer went further than the school day. We funded to ensure that every year, students could attend our Shine Club which runs in the holidays and takes students on inspirational trips to build confidence, friendships and a sense of adventure, which they would potentially not access on their own.

Lighthouse Leeds was set up by five parents. What were the needs of your pupils which existing provision in the region did not provide?

Prior to Lighthouse, families' options were either mainstream school or generic special school but many young people were not thriving in these settings and there was a real gap for something that was ASC specific in the city. All of our children's needs are very different, but the school was designed to meet a wide variety of need if the main diagnosis is autism.





How important is a culture of inclusivity toward the success of Lighthouse Leeds?

A culture of inclusivity is vital for our students to thrive in the outside world. At the school they are used to feeling equal, valued and important members of society – on leaving the school the outside world is not the same, so transitions need to prepare them for understanding their rights, and having the resilience to manage their way through a neurotypical world.

Times are changing slowly, as are employers, but not quite fast enough. We now have an employability college, Lighthouse Futures Trust, which is for 18-25 year olds and matches young people to sectors, ensuring they have competitive employability skills for the jobs market. We then find them paid work.

What is the biggest challenge when designing a personalised experience for each pupil?

Students change their mind on their futures at different stages in their education – they only have reference points for things that they have seen or experienced. We have brought in an Employer Engagement Curriculum that has seen over 80 employers come through the school doors in a year delivering talks, presentations, virtual and real tours of their organisations, and work experience. Only by opening the eyes of the students to all those possibilities can they make informed choices.

What are your recommendations for parents looking to set up a special free school? How challenging was it?

It is not for the faint hearted! A lot of capacity is needed and a wide variety of skills e.g. finance, education (in many different areas, legal, admin and so on. People are willing to help but be focussed about the skills you need and bring those people with those skills and experience into the team. Make sure you are building a school based on 'real need' and not because it seems like a good idea. Demographics showing where the need is based, numbers coming through the system etc. can all be provided by your local authority and this is the only way that an application will be supported – based on evidenced need.

What advice would you give to somebody else embarking on their free school journey?

One of the most important things is to have the agreement or 'blessing' of your local authority as this is needed all the way through start-up and being part of the local community. Secondly, it helps if you have a building in mind – finding the right site can be challenging. Thirdly, ensure that you have your systems and processes in place almost from day one as these will really help with the flow and the growth of the school. Make sure you use the help around you including New Schools Network and those that have already trodden the pathway to success – they are there to help and support.

What has been the most rewarding moment since opening your free school?

Seeing all the young people enter their new dedicated school building after three years in temporary accommodation. We were overly concerned about transitioning everyone to a totally new site as many young people find change a real barrier or challenge. It was the opposite and such a delight to see the sheer excitement on everyone's faces as they explored their new surroundings.

What would you like the free schools programme to look like in 10 years' time?

For those free schools who have been successful, it would be helpful and attractive to have a reduced application process that recognised the experience and successes already achieved.

Marine Academy Primary



Type: Mainstream
Phase: Primary
Location: Plymouth

Ofsted: Outstanding
Year of opening: 2013

Marine Academy Primary opened in 2013 in Plymouth. The school has two forms of entry and was established by an existing secondary school in the city, and Plymouth University. As the name of the school suggests, it has the marine environment as a specialism, which encompasses Plymouth's maritime past.

This interview is with Siobhan Meredith, one of the school's founders, who became Headteacher at the primary school in 2015.

What first inspired you to get involved with the free schools programme?

Opening a free school is such a magical prospect; the opportunity is second to none. There is a brilliant chance to create the right ethos from the start and it enables you to set the standards, expectations and culture from day one. You also have the ability to appoint new staff and attract staff of the highest calibre, with the promise of career progression.

What was your original vision, and how has it been realised over time? What is your core mission, and how is it unique to Marine Academy Primary?

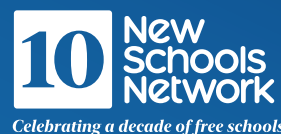
In 2012, the Department for Education said “the right school can transform a child’s life and help them achieve things they may never have imagined” and it was this that helped to form the original vision for Marine Academy Primary. The core mission and vision has evolved over time but has always had ‘an outstanding education that ensures all pupils reach their greatest potential and live by life’s highest values’ at its core. The vision has been further realised over time through joining the Ted Wragg Trust. The Ted Wragg Trust has the highest expectations for every child, every day, with social justice at our core.

What has been the most rewarding moment since opening your free school?

There are so many rewarding moments since Marine Academy Primary has opened, including:

- September 2013, the first children entered the temporary accommodation
- April 2014, the permanent building was completed
- June 2015, the Academy became the South West’s first Outstanding free school
- September 2017, the Academy re-designated as a 2-11 year old provider and opened its doors to Pre-School children
- July 2018, the first children left Year 6
- April 2020, Marine Academy Primary officially joined the Ted Wragg Trust
- July 2020, the original children who joined in Reception 2013 completed their primary journey with us

In addition to this, every week our children achieve something incredible or go above and beyond in so many ways!





Located in an area of high disadvantaged, how important is building positive relationships with parents/carers to your success?

The Ted Wragg Trust invests its energy and resource to help build optimistic and resilient communities and relishes the responsibility to grow exciting futures for all. We are committed to furthering social justice and providing fairer and more inclusive opportunities. One of the main levers to ensuring this is by building positive relationships with parents/carers and ensuring full buy-in from them, as we want our pupils to aspire to fulfil their potential. We will help to develop children who are self-aware, independently minded and confident citizens of the future and a way of ensuring this comes to fruition is to ensure parents/carers are part of this success. After all, parental engagement is consistently associated with pupils' achievements at school.

How has the school's curriculum evolved since you first began? What inspired the Marine Curriculum?

At Marine Academy Primary, our mission is to provide an outstanding education that ensures all pupils reach their greatest potential and live by life's highest values and our curriculum embodies this. We have developed our own Marine Curriculum, which is comprehensive, where children learn through exploration. It has a clear process of learning with specific learning goals for every National Curriculum subject, for personal learning and for international mindedness. The Marine Curriculum sets out clear progression and application of skills across all areas. We aim to ensure pupils are independently minded and confident citizens of the future.

This curriculum has evolved over time and even more so in recent years, following a successful partnership with Reach Academy Feltham. Our curriculum has always been broad, ambitious and about more than reading, writing and maths but we have worked exceptionally hard to rethink the timetable and ensure that all subjects are provided adequate time and that our children have the opportunity to excel in and learn knowledge about a range of subjects.

Since you've opened, you have recruited few staff with prior teaching experience. Why is this important, and how do you mould teachers to the school's culture?

This was initially important to support our budget, but we also found that we were able to recruit the most talented Newly Qualified Teachers who were up for the challenge of working in a new school and were eager for career progression. An example of this is that our Assistant Headteachers were both appointed as NQTs and have developed as leaders into these senior roles.

The way we do things at Marine Academy Primary is marmite and others will either love it or hate it. We do have a centralised curriculum but rather than our staff team seeing this as taking ownership away from them, they see it as a way for them to ensure that they are delivering the best knowledge. The same can be said about the fact that our children sit in rows. We have a really low staff turnover amongst teachers, and our teachers really are some of the most dedicated to ensuring social justice that you will find – it is part of our DNA.

How do you support pupils to transition into secondary?

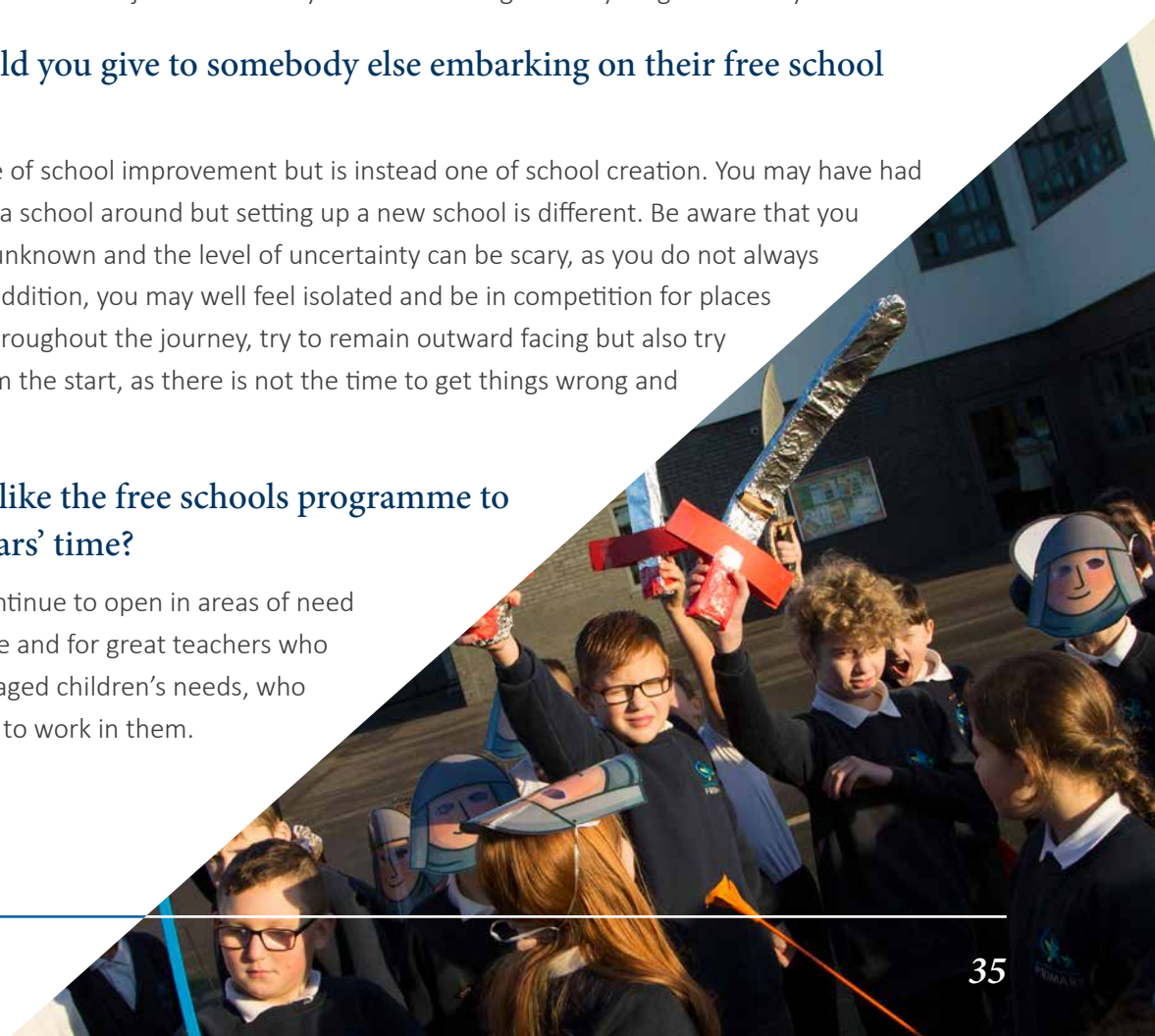
We share detailed, personalised information about our Year 6 children with the secondary schools that they are transitioning to. With over two thirds of our children transitioning to Marine Academy Plymouth, the school that we share our campus with, it is a great deal easier. We share internal data, alongside our own predictions about the children; give an example of every child's English and maths learning, which is their 'Personal Best'; and take on approaches similar to the schools the children will be attending. In addition, the Marine Curriculum prepares children for secondary school as they have developed core knowledge and understanding about discrete subjects which they will learn throughout Key Stage 3 and beyond.

What advice would you give to somebody else embarking on their free school journey?

The journey is not one of school improvement but is instead one of school creation. You may have had experience of turning a school around but setting up a new school is different. Be aware that you are entering into the unknown and the level of uncertainty can be scary, as you do not always have the answers. In addition, you may well feel isolated and be in competition for places with other schools. Throughout the journey, try to remain outward facing but also try to get things right from the start, as there is not the time to get things wrong and start again.

What would you like the free schools programme to look like in 10 years' time?

For free schools to continue to open in areas of need with high disadvantage and for great teachers who understand disadvantaged children's needs, who are good role models, to work in them.



Reach Academy Feltham



Type: Mainstream

Phase: All through

Location: Feltham

Ofsted: Outstanding

Year of opening: 2012

Reach Academy Feltham is an all through school in Hounslow. The school opened in 2012 to give pupils the ability to live lives of choice and opportunity, regardless of their background. The school has a longer school day to deliver more learning time and offers an academic curriculum, with a particular focus on English and maths as the building blocks for further learning.

The school was founded by Ed Vainker OBE and Rebecca Cramer. Ed is the CEO of the Reach Foundation and Rebecca is the schools Executive Headteacher. The Foundation also operates the Reach Children's Hub, a community-centred initiative in Hounslow which brings together services including and pre- and post-natal support, parenting classes, adult education classes, mental health and well-being support for whole families, and communication classes for parents and their young children.

This interview is with Ed Vainker OBE and Rebecca Cramer, founders of Reach Academy Feltham.

What first inspired you to get involved with the free schools programme?

Rebecca Cramer (RC), co-founder and Executive Headteacher: Having worked in three London schools since 2006 when I did the Teach First programme, I was equally inspired by the incredible children I had taught, and frustrated by some of the systems in large schools which made it challenging for all children to succeed in the contexts I was teaching in. I had visited some different schools and education systems around the world and it had opened my eyes to what was possible given the right political and educational landscape. The free school policy and the opportunity it presented to start a school, which took the best parts of what I had seen and learned about in practice and in theory, was an amazing opportunity.

What was your original vision for Reach Feltham, and how has it been realised over time?

Ed Vainker OBE (EV), co-founder and CEO of the Reach Foundation: We wanted to set up a school where every child left able to enjoy a life of choice and opportunity. We wanted to structure the school differently – being all-through while staying small, giving us the best possible chance to realise that vision. That focus on every child is important and we have not realised it yet, but we have seen 70% of our pupils going on to Higher Education, compared to a local average around 20%.

10 New
Schools
Network
Celebrating a decade of free schools



What has been the most rewarding moment since opening your free school?

RC: There have been so many moments that are so tiny and yet add up to form a whole story. Often the most rewarding things are the ones that seem so difficult at the time, but you can look back and laugh at them. Obviously results days are the time when it really hits you – I never fail to have a big cry out of pride and relief.

The team at Reach is well-known for promoting cradle to career education – why was it important to you that Reach be an all-through free school?

RC: We all know that the evidence shows how instrumental the first 1,000 days of a child's life is. We are really clear about how crucial that period of time is in defining the future happiness and success of a child. We are also very clear that everyone needs support as adults to raise children. It is tough. Ed and I, and lots of the team, have our own very young children and know the importance of 'the village' to help raise them. We believe that trusting and meaningful relationships form over time and via good times and working through trickier ones. We want families to join us knowing that we will be on the journey of raising children together for the best part of two decades (and beyond). There is huge power in knowing that commitment is there.

You have both said publicly that the Reach model has been inspired from what you have seen in America. How were you able to replicate practice from the USA in Feltham, and what did you have to adapt for the local context?

EV: The main thing that we took from the States was the scale of the ambition and the entrepreneurship of those leaders. They created schools that were dramatically different to what was typical in their communities and were unashamedly focused on those schools being different. They had a focus on ensuring high levels of consistency and presented that as a justice issue – required for every child to flourish.

Was the motivation in the early days to transform a community, or simply to establish an excellent school?

EV: We wouldn't say that we want to transform our community because that suggests that it is wholly negative, which is not the case. We have always wanted to dramatically improve the opportunities and choices available to young people. For us that started with a school, but knowing how much home environment and the impact of poverty affects learning and academic success, we always had the aim of seeking a wider role in the community.

You have become one of the most well-known free schools in the country. How have you remained close to the local community and retained your commitment to recruiting disadvantaged pupils?

RC: Well, Ed and I still do duties on the gate most mornings! We love teaching and working with students and their families. I still teach in the school. So we stay connected through prioritising how we spend our time.

In terms of making sure that we enable access for those who need it the most – we changed our admissions policy a few years ago to prioritise those eligible for the Pupil Premium. We also changed our distance over-subscription criteria to a lottery system. We are committed to having the fairest system for those who are the most disadvantaged.

What advice would you give to somebody else embarking on their free school journey?

EV: The most important thing for us was building a strong team that was aligned around the vision and deciding what the most important priorities were at any one time. Starting a school is a huge undertaking and in the early years it is not possible to innovate and excel in every different area. We focused on culture and relationships and that worked for us, but it was important that everyone was on the same page about that.

What benefits could you foresee from expanding the Reach model to more communities?

EV: The free school model, for us, is about choice for communities and innovation in the system. I think an all-through, cradle to career model would be a new departure in many communities and could offer a path to that dramatic improvement in opportunities. Equally, Reach has, we think, had a catalytic effect on the wider system and we think could continue to do so as we grow into new communities and learn more about what works.



Star Academies



Star

Type: Mainstream

Phase: Five primary; 12 secondary

Location: Lancashire; West Yorkshire; Greater Manchester; West Midlands; London.

Ofsted: Outstanding

Free schools: Tauheedul Islam Boys' High School (2012); The Olive School Blackburn (2013); The Olive School Hackney (2013); Eden Boys' School Bolton (2014); Eden Girls' School Coventry (2014); Eden Girls' School Watham Forest (2014); Eden Boys' School, Birmingham (2015); Eden Boys' School, Preston (2015); Eden Boys' School, Slough (2015); The Olive School, Birmingham (2016); The Olive School, Preston (2016); The Olive School, Bolton (2016); Eden Boys' Leadership Academy, Manchester (2017); Eden Girls' Leadership Academy, Manchester (2017); Eden Boys' Leadership Academy, Birmingham East (2018); Eden Boys' Leadership Academy, Bradford (2019); Eden Girls' Leadership Academy, Birmingham (2019); Star Leadership Academy, Wolverhampton (pre-opening); Star Leadership Academy, Radcliffe (pre-opening); Star Leadership Academy, Salford (pre-opening); Star Leadership Academy, Rochdale (pre-opening); The Olive School Manchester (pre-opening)

Star Academies is one of the highest performing and most diverse academy trusts in the country. Star originally used freedoms afforded by the free school's programme in 2012 to establish Tauheedul Islam Boys' High School, a faith school located in Blackburn. Since then, Star has opened a further 17 free schools and has five in pre-opening.

In June 2021, Star Academies announced a ground-breaking agreement with Eton College with the intent to open three 16-19 free schools over the next five years, to support children from disadvantaged communities to top Russell Group universities.

Recently awarded a Knighthood in recognition of his outstanding services to education, Sir Mufti Hamid Patel CBE has led Star Academies since its inception in 2010. His vision for the trust was to raise the aspirations and outcomes of young people in areas of social and economic deprivation.

This interview is with Sir Mufti Hamid Patel CBE, who has led Star Academies since its inception in 2010.

What first inspired you to get involved with the free schools programme?

We recognised that pupils in some of the most disadvantaged parts of the country were not receiving education of good enough quality to remove them from the cycle of underachievement and poverty. We had established a strong educational model at Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School (TIGHS) that was yielding excellent outcomes and substantially raising girls' aspirations and improving their life chances. TIGHS had started as a small school, with scarce resources, in terraced housing in Blackburn. It showed us the possibility of establishing and developing outstanding provision. The free schools programme provided an excellent opportunity to expand this thinking more widely and meet recognised needs.

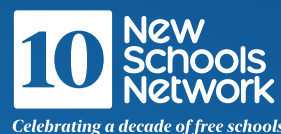
What was your original vision for Star Academies, and how has it been realised over time?

Our original vision was to develop a national network of outstanding schools to be hubs of excellence in areas of under-performance, that would raise standards across communities. This vision has not changed over time. Star Academies' commitment to 'nurturing today's young people and inspiring tomorrow's leaders,' combined with our STAR values of service, teamwork, ambition and respect, underpins all that we do. Quite simply we want to help young people realise their potential, not only in academic terms but also with regard to their character development.

You've offered a transformative education opportunity in areas where outcomes have traditionally been below national average. Have you seen other schools in your area adapt and evolve since Star schools emerged?

When outstanding provision becomes evident in an area, it is a great source of motivation for the community, and the winners are children and their parents. Outward facing schools with a commitment to raising standards look to each other to share practice. Star Academies works in partnership with other schools and trusts, including through the range of programmes offered by our professional development arm, Star Institute. We learn from each other's practice and celebrate each other's achievements. We have seen standards rise in some of the areas we serve where a sense of aspiration is strengthening.

We can never fall into the trap of thinking that the job is done though; there is no room for complacency. A focus on excellence has to permeate the work of every school, day in day out, and characterise interactions in every classroom.



One of the original visions of the free schools programme was to enable more faith schools into the sector. Some of your schools are faith school, some aren't. What is the biggest difference and how important is that variation to your trust?

We are extremely proud to be a mixed academy trust incorporating a blend of faith schools and secular schools. Our faith schools have some distinctive elements, most notably the opportunities for prayer that our pupils value greatly. However, as a trust we focus in what unites our schools rather than ways in which they are different.

Star operates over multiple regions from London to the Midlands to the North West. To what extent are the schools approaches able to be replicated across area, and how much has to be adapted for each local context?

The same vision and expectations underpin our work, irrespective of location, but we are also responsive to the needs of local communities. Different contextual challenges affect areas in which we operate to greater or lesser extents – staff recruitment and retention; primary to secondary school transition; higher education and employment patterns; the nature of disadvantage and civic structures. These all need to be taken into account when establishing schools as integral parts of the community.

Our Star family hubs are a good example of how we aim to serve the communities in which we are located by supporting some of the most disadvantaged family members who are experiencing poverty and isolation. We build relationships with our communities: Star is about much more than academic excellence.

Are there any critical challenges and differences setting up a primary school in comparison to setting a secondary school and vice versa? What are the key considerations for each?

It is important to understand the unique issues relating to primary and secondary education. We have engaged phase-specific specialists to help us develop our models. We did not assume that we would be able to operate highly effective primary schools simply because our secondary schools were successful.

Staffing needs in primary and secondary schools are different, particularly with regard to subject specialism and this needs to be factored into planning. There are different financial challenges too. The key is to have a detailed understanding of how each phase operates and to develop and embed quality standards for every aspect of their work.

Does the process of establishing a new school get easier for you with each free school wave? What lessons have you learnt over time since your first free school application?

The process has become easier as we have developed a model and a route map for the opening of our schools. We started with a theoretical model from which we developed a project plan. Every time we open a school we revise our plan. We have made mistakes along the way and learned from them so each plan is more sophisticated than the previous one. Over time we have developed a small team of people with vast expertise in free school development. We have also become adept at risk assessment so we can anticipate problems and put in place steps to mitigate them. Maintaining and monitoring a risk register is a key element of successful planning.

Staff orientation, induction and training are essential. It is crucial that school staff understand our modus operandi and implement our systems and policies; this requires hands-on support from the central team so that schools operate with fidelity to our model.

Free schools are high pressured environments that can seem overwhelming. They start as relatively small schools with a trajectory of growth that has to be planned carefully. As the number of staff increases to accommodate growing pupil numbers, there is a continuing cycle of on-boarding and adaptation. Attending to wellbeing and work-life balance of individuals and teams really matters and can be difficult to achieve in a new start-up.

What's next for Star Academies?

We will continue to develop innovative provision through partnerships that address challenges that have often beset our communities for generations. Our focus remains providing the highest possible quality of education for young people. In the short term, this means continuing relentless work on recovery in the aftermath of disruption caused by the pandemic.

We are strengthening provision in our five partnership areas by developing an infrastructure that gives them increased autonomy. Cluster-based collaboration will support the development of enrichment experiences for young people.

We have a number of schools in the pipeline in the north of England and we look forward to seeing them open. We are exploring opportunities for other schools and small trusts to join our family within the national direction of travel that recognises the significance of successful trusts as agents of sector-wide school improvement.

What advice would you give to somebody else embarking on their free school journey?

Have a clear vision as to what you want to achieve and do not underestimate, or be daunted by, the enormity of the task. Opening free schools is not for the faint-hearted. You will have setbacks and will need resilience to weather inevitable storms. Your mistakes will aid your growth if you are a learning organisation, so be honest when you falter and consistently reflect on how to improve your model.

XP School Trust



Type: Mainstream

Phase: Secondary

Location: Doncaster; Gateshead

Ofsted: Outstanding

Free schools: XP School (2014); XP East (2017); XP Gateshead (2021)

XP School Trust comprises eight schools, including three free schools. The trust has a particular focus on students' character growth and beautiful work. Based on innovative models from the US, XP schools offer unique learning expeditions allowing students to work collaboratively across subjects. These innovative education models have been designed to deepen subject knowledge, and widen skills and competencies for pupils to be successful in the 21st century.

The Trust ethos is "above all, compassion" – an illustration of the schools focus which transcends beyond academic outcomes, to the character growth of pupils.

We spoke to founders Gwyn ap Harri and Andy Sprakes who, for the first time, opened a new school outside of Doncaster in 2021, bringing its highly successful education model to Gateshead.

What first inspired you to get involved with the free schools programme?

We saw High Tech High and Expeditionary Learning schools in the USA and we couldn't just go back to what we were doing. Students at these schools articulated their learning in a sophisticated and purposeful way. We asked ourselves whether our pupils back home could do the same. The answer was, at that point, a resounding 'no.'

We figured the only way we could replicate this work in England was not through existing schools, but creating a new one from scratch. Although we were not the likeliest of free school founders, the programme allowed us the freedom to establish a school which measured pupils beyond academic outcomes, so that our students become beautiful people, create beautiful work, and make the world a better place.

A signature element of XP is study through cross-subject Learning Expeditions. How does this benefit and develop pupils academically and socially?

Students make connections between their learning that they would not necessarily make, and with a curriculum that has threads running through every expedition of diversity, belonging, social justice and the climate emergency, students understand that they are important and that they can affect the change that they want to see in the world.

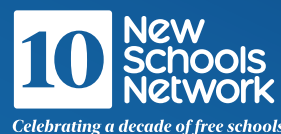
It is important to note that none of this would be possible without 'Crew', our pastoral system which underpins everything that we do. If we get Crew right, we get everything right. Crew and community meetings enable students to express who they are through praise, apology, pledges and stands. Crews of 12-13 meet for extended periods of time every day to support and challenge each other in a familial relationship, where the success of every crew member is the ultimate goal.

What has been the most rewarding moment since opening your free schools?

First and foremost, seeing the growth in character of students and following them through to graduation. When we see our pupil success we know they've reached their post-school destination by exploring and expressing who they are, respectfully, through their work.

While our inspirations are many, we've developed our model from scratch so it's incredibly gratifying knowing that it works on all fronts: high grades, high attendance, massive demand from parents, no permanent exclusions, Outstanding Ofsted reports, financially sound.

From the school's inception it was important that this model worked for all students. We wanted to create a school that was inclusive and worked for all kinds of students, from high performing to vulnerable and everyone in between.



There are two open XP free schools which are both located in Doncaster. To what extent is your approach to the school in Gateshead tailored to the new community you're entering into, and to what extent is it dictated by the tried and tested model?

The decision to open a school in Gateshead is not accidental. Gateshead was chosen specifically because of our knowledge of the area within the trust, and the similarity in socioeconomic make-up and therefore the cohort of the Doncaster free schools. But more importantly than that, because we are passionate about families in Gateshead being able to have this type of education for their children.

We have high fidelity to the Trust model but also a willingness to build on Trust strength and what the Trust has learned over the years. In a sense we are XP 3.0, so we want to develop on the original concept of the XP schools. We are benefitting from a lot of thinking and development work on curriculum although we will be contextualising curriculum and expeditions to the local context. Just as is the case in Doncaster, we hope to make Gateshead a new hub for XP and to 'infect the system'.

What has been the biggest challenge of opening a free school in a new area?

Gateshead local authority and the Department for Education have been incredibly helpful and indeed excited to be getting a new, and in many ways different, school in their area, but the timescale was incredibly tight. This project has only happened because everyone has pulled together in the same direction.

XP Gateshead was approved to open earlier this year, and opened in September. A new school can take years from approval to opening. How have you mobilised in such a short timeframe?

It has been helpful to have a model to build on and Trust support where much of the documentation/policies etc. have already been in place. And the Trust having completed previous free school applications many times has meant we could build from those experiences. It has been invaluable having access to experienced leaders with high fidelity to the XP model and good understanding of how to put this model into practice.

Although the XP Trust has opened free schools prior to XP Gateshead, there are many new dynamics which we've had to work around, especially when opening a free school in a new location. It has been key to have people "on the ground" with good working knowledge of the local area and existing relationships with stakeholders. The speed at which we've moved has been aided by a real partnership between the Trust, Local Authority and Department for Education; a willingness to work together to get the school opened, and real support from the local delivery team and a community who very much wanted to engage. All of this, in addition to support from NSN at every stage of process, has shown the power of collaborative working.

How has your experience of setting up a free school changed from establishing the original XP free school to now?

This is not just draft three of opening a school, but after seven years of XP School opening it is also draft eight of having a Year 7 cohort. There is so much professional learning that we have been able to draw from that has helped us this time around. Along with Gwyn ap Harri as CEO, the authors of the application were new, and the strength of the application is testament to the great work and foundation that has been set in

Doncaster over the last seven years. Unlike previous free school applications we've submitted, in Gateshead there was an existing school building; we have had to be clear from the outset that we were different to what existed there previously and that we are a school for all of Gateshead and the surrounding area.

The free schools programme has yet to benefit the North East as much as the South East. How important is it for XP to work in areas typically characterised as 'left behind'?

It is important for XP to work full-stop. We want parents to demand this type of education for their children and to affect systemic change. It is highly likely that this model would be even more successful in leafy suburbs if exam grades are how you judge success, but in Doncaster and now in Gateshead we are proving that the segregation of children by any means, whether setting or streaming, selective grammar schools or quality of school by postcode lottery, is something that can be overcome.

What would you like the free schools programme to look like in 10 years' time?

There will always be a need for new schools whilst we have a growing population. New schools need to be placed where they are needed through basic need and/or chronic underperformance in an area. The latter has not always been the case nationally and the North East for example has not benefited from successful new schools in the same way as other areas of the country.

What advice would you give to somebody else embarking on their free school journey?

Be brave. If you are certain that your vision will make a difference to the lives of young people, have the courage to stick to your convictions as there will be trials and tribulations along the way. Know what you're playing with and the rules you are given. Do not take them for granted, but do not be a slave to them either. Lots of schools do not take advantage of their autonomy.



Conclusion:

Where next?

After ten years of the free school programme, there are more than 600 open across the country.

The early days of the policy saw some challenges, which were rightly documented and used to refine the process – but in just a decade, the vast majority of free schools have flourished and now represent the highest performing type of state school at GCSE and A level, the most popular with parents, and the biggest cohort rated Outstanding by Ofsted.

Like the lessons learnt from the early days, the next decade needs to build on the experiences of open free schools to extend their reach to more young people, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas.

NSN has previously published two major reports exploring the future of the free schools programme: in 2019, *Free schools: the next 10 years* and in 2021, *Lost Learning: Why we need to level up education* (in collaboration with the think tank Onward). In both, the key argument is simple – more free schools need to be opened, of all types and phase, in all areas of the country. This means encouraging collaboration between proposer groups and local authorities, between existing free schools and communities that deserve better, between academy trusts and standalone schools, between educationalists and organisations from other sectors: science, arts, sports. Collaboration to drive forward a school system that means wherever you are born and whatever your background, you have the opportunity to attend a good school.

But to do so also requires Government commitment and an adapted process.

NSN has heard from countless free school leaders that they want to open more free schools – either as part of their trust, or through supporting others new to the system to navigate the complexities of the programme – but the Department for Education has become too risk averse in recent years, favouring established chains replicating their existing provision rather than making space for innovative providers like those featured in this publication.

We know there is a desperate need for more alternative provision free schools, but the local authority special and alternative provision waves presented too many financial disincentives, resulting in just two AP free schools approved compared to 45 special.

We know securing a site remains the single biggest hurdle for free schools after they have been approved, with 205 currently in the pre-opening period – of which 104 have languished since 2017 or earlier (going as far back as 2013). It is clear that there are pockets across the country where each generation continues to have no choice but to attend a failing school, and intervention after intervention has failed to generate change.

Establishing a new school is no mean feat. It is a rigorous, complex process and places huge demands on a small group of people submitting an application because they believe children in their community deserve

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something different, something better. But the schools featured in this report, along with the other 600 or so already open, show it is possible.

In just ten years, they have positively disrupted the education landscape providing some of the highest quality provision. Yet, the reality is most of the schools featured would not have been approved had they applied in recent application waves.

As the Government refocuses its attention to ‘levelling up’ and ‘building back better’, free schools provide a tried and tested method of tangible change. The next decade should welcome huge numbers of free schools opening – in all areas of need, of all types, with all manner of specialisms – because we know they work, and revolutionise the life chances of children, particularly the most disadvantaged.

There should also be a renewed focus on ensuring those approved but still not yet open, throw open their doors as soon as possible. NSN has argued before that the Government should legislate to compel local authorities to set aside land for new schools, rather than allow them to stifle plans due to political opposition, which is too often the case. This would see over 100,000 places become available to families across the breadth of the country – places that have already been approved through the demanding application process.

AP applications should again be handled through the Department’s central application route, to ensure the financial obligations put on local authorities through special and AP waves do not limit the likelihood of more AP free schools opening to provide the second chance they do for so many young people.

As the programme matures, rather than shy away from its success, the Government and Department for Education must champion it as a domestic policy beacon. Fundamentally, the next decade needs to see the free schools programme reignited and recognised as the engine of social mobility that it has proven that it is.

‘Building back better’ demands an ambitious vision, with education at its core. There is a new generation of free school leaders in waiting, with the drive, talent, and vision to establish the next cohort of the highest quality schools; it is time we enable them to build upon the foundation of the free school trailblazers and play their part in growing a self-improving, autonomous school system. That is how communities will truly be levelled up. This is what will enable us all to celebrate in another 10 years, thousands more children finally accessing a good school.



Celebrating a decade of free schools