

Everything flows from administration

Turn this dramatic statement around and it suggests that if you want to make an improvement in the way your school operates, then you need to improve the administration of the school. Make the school's administration more efficient, and everything else in the school improves.

This is a radically different stance from that which has governed the approach to schooling for at least 100 years. During all this time it has been thought that the way to improve schools is through the improving of the teaching and learning on one hand and the behaviour and discipline on the other.

Why should this approach now be overturned?

Over the years change has taken place on several fronts – most notably in terms of:

- The broad vision of educationalists and commentators on how schools should change
- The vision of the government in terms of education
- Society's expectation of what schooling should be doing in our society
- What actually happens in the classroom
- The rise of the concept of the School Administrator as an influence on the school.

We need to look very briefly at each of these in order to be able to understand why it is time for a significant change in the way schools are run, and why it is appropriate to put the school's administration at the heart of this change.

- **The broad vision of educationalists and commentators on how schools should change**

Commentators and educationalists – that is people who do not work in schools but who have a vision of schooling that goes beyond the everyday opinions expressed in newspapers and on phone-in programmes – have always had opinions about education. Removed as they are from the everyday requirement to keep order, teach lessons, purchase products and handle the finances, they concern themselves with what schools should be doing, and how they should do it. Quite often they consider the outcome in terms of the pupils: how well they will function within our society, how much contribution they will make economically, politically, socially or artistically, how content they will be within themselves, and whether they are more likely to become hard working decent citizens, manic depressives, or criminals (to take but three outcomes).

Within such debate there are then further debates about how much influence schools can have on the future lives of pupils and students – whether, for example, the future of an individual is more affected by personality, family, upbringing, native intelligence, economic circumstances, etc, than by the school.

These are the areas of concern for such commentators – and it has always been thus. To go back just a short period, many commentators in the west saw the launch of the Russian space programme in the 1950s as a reflection of the poverty of western education. It was argued that the Russians were technologically more advanced than we were because their schooling was more focussed. We were producing teenagers who preferred to hang around in coffee bars listening to rock n roll, rather than the physicists and technologists who could take us to the moon. Such concerns have arisen in response to virtually every social and political change that has happened within our society. When something goes wrong (for example, rioting on the streets or a perceived disaffection with our forms of government) schooling is often seen as being partly to blame.

Solutions have varied. The methods of teaching which are most effective in generating desired outcomes have been suggested. The way in which behaviour and discipline is arranged, and the emphasis put on it by the school, has been a point of focus. The School Effectiveness programme has sought to analyse the way in which successful schools work, so that other schools can copy these methods. The School Improvement movement emphasised the need for all teachers in a school to unite in evolving their own solutions to their specific problems under the paternal guidance of experts based in universities.

Each programme has had some success – but none has produced the major transformation of school life that the exponents hoped for.

- **The vision of the government in terms of education**

From the moment that Tony Blair declared his three priorities were, “education, education, education” it was clear that changes in education were afoot.

Of course, there had been many changes prior to this with, for example, amendments to the exam system as O Levels and CSEs were replaced by GCSEs. In more recent years SATs have been introduced and Diplomas added to A Levels as the exams to take at 18 and 19.

The government in England has also, over the years, pushed ahead with a national curriculum which told teachers what to teach, although not how to teach it. There has also been a major investment in IT into schools in England, and schools have been encouraged to participate in work relating to healthy eating, more physical activity, and more cultural activity.

The government has also expressed its desire to improve the outcomes of schooling with an expansion of the school day, personalised learning, a greater number of students from lower socio-economic groups attending university and the punishment of parents who fail to ensure that their children attend school.

- **Society's expectation of what schooling should be doing in our society**

Social comment on schooling and its outcome tends to focus on negatives – that is to say schools are blamed when things go wrong and not given much credit when things go well. Thus, when young people are seen to be drinking too much alcohol or engaging in “happy slapping” it is sometimes argued by journalists that this is due to poor schooling. On the other hand when A level results improve year after year it is argued that this is a clear sign that the exams are getting easier.

- **What actually happens in the classroom**

Over the years schooling has grown in complexity. 50 years ago the way a school operated hardly changed from one year to the next. Teaching methods remained the same; the behaviour of the pupils was much the same; disciplinary procedures were well established and did not change. Everyone knew how schools worked, and by and large everything continued as it had the year before.

By the 1970s, however, change was afoot. Schools were finding themselves faced with two major challenges: the behavioural patterns of the pupils were changing radically, and teaching was no longer seen as a job for the dedicated professional. Staff came and went. Turnover of teachers in some urban schools reached 50% per year. Parental and indeed social respect for teachers was starting to crumble. In many ways this was inevitable, for if schools were considered at least partially responsible for the ills of society, then the people who worked in them were also to blame. This connection is almost inevitable given that, unlike most organisations, schools spend 75% of their income on staffing. In essence, there seemed to be no one else to blame.

By the 1990s the IT revolution was in full swing – a change so fundamental that it affected every aspect of what happened in schools. This development allowed government ministers to make it clear that they expected results. They were increasing the investment in schools dramatically (the amount spent on education doubling between 1985 and 2005) and they wanted to see something new happening.

And yet, what the government found was that students were not leaving school with ever greater understanding of themselves and the world around them. Academic standards (in terms of GCSE and A Level results) rose, but with an endless commentary in the media that the exams were getting easier. Crime rates (argued by many to be a valid reflection of how well children were taught the values of our society) at best remained static. Literacy and numeracy rates seemed static.

As a result an interesting tug of war developed. The government demanded ever more improvement while teachers and their union leaders repeatedly demanded that the government should leave them alone to get on with teaching. The complaint was that the endless changes made by the state meant that schools were spending so much time implementing them that they could not focus on making the improvements everyone wanted.

This conflict is always played out in the public arena, not just because of the huge sums spent on education each year, but because everyone has a view on education. We've all been to school, and most of us either have had, or currently have, children at school. There is also the fact that many of us, as we get older, tend to look back affectionately on our school days, while being concerned about the stories told by children and journalists about events today.

- **The rise of the concept of the School Administrator as an influence on the school**

In the early 21st century however a new approach emerged. It was an approach that began to look at the school as an organisation. The organisation self - evidently included pupils, teachers, managers, administrators and support staff. It was an organisation with strong interactions with the local community, with the local authority, with the state, with commercial suppliers and with opinion formers, such as journalists.

When stated in this straightforward way the idea of the school as an organisation seems an obvious concept to consider. And yet in the 20th century it was by and large ignored. The school was thought to be primarily about teachers and the teachers' interaction with the pupils. When those interested in school improvement came to the school this was what they looked at. Efficiency was not on the agenda.

Yet the concept of efficiency in obtaining desired ends is one that has long been used in looking at organisations of other types (businesses, associations, charities, councils, etc). It is an approach which considers the organisation as a whole and asks questions such as: what is the purpose of this organisation, and how can we make this organisation work more effectively and efficiently?

With schools, however, there is a big problem in considering the opening question: "what is the purpose of this organisation?" for historically there has been no unified answer. Those involved in running a small business the size of a school might answer by saying, "the purpose of our company is to make a profit, to give everyone working here at worst an acceptable and at best an enjoyable way of earning a decent salary, and to produce products that purchasers deem to be worthwhile and reasonable value for money". But while many people employed in schools will be able to give answers concerning the purpose of the school (helping children achieve their potential, providing teenagers with the skills to go to university or to get a decent job, helping children learn what they need to know as part of their life-long learning, teaching the children the morality of our society, encouraging co-operation rather than selfishness, getting the children through exams, teaching middle class values, perpetuating capitalism by encouraging children to see lifelong employment as good, getting more children to the next target, providing something for children and teenagers to do during the day when they are not allowed to be at work, providing employment for teachers...) it is harder to find agreement in a school on which issues are the most important, than it is in most businesses.

While some of those statements above may seem far removed from education in the 21st century, it is worth considering this event which happened at one primary school I visited. The staff were aware of numerous problems that arose in their school at lunchtime, caused by the fact that the playgrounds were too small to accommodate the number of children in the school. Attempts to run lunch times at different periods were unsuccessful since most classrooms overlooked the playground, and thus the noise from outside distracted those working inside. Furthermore, the teachers noted that the quality of learning that took place in the first lesson in the afternoon was significantly lower than at other times.

A plan was therefore devised through which lunchtime was to be reduced by half an hour with lunchtime clubs being run after school. The local authority insisted that the proposal was put to parents, who by a vote of 95% to 5% rejected the plan, mostly on the grounds that the earlier end to the day would interfere with their work patterns. Of course, a single example does not reveal a national feeling, but it is clear that in this one location the parents were seeing school, at least in part, as a place where the children would be looked after while they worked.

Thus the lack of agreement as to why schools exist can be seen to have inhibited the search for a way of making schools more efficient – it is, after all, harder to make an organisation more efficient when you cannot agree what the organisation is there for.

However, this need not stop a drive for efficiency, for even if one cannot agree on the purpose of the school one can consider some of the tasks carried out by people in the school and pose the simple question, “this is what you hope to achieve here – but are you going about it the best way?”

It can be answered by looking at the organisation at a larger level and asking, “is this really the best way to do the things that these people do?”

Posing these questions pushes the broader question, “what is the purpose of this school?” into the background. It does not have to stay there forever – for once one has started to probe the second of the two questions above it will begin once more to edge into the frame – but it does allow us to make progress.

The government in England itself became a player in this new approach to efficiency in the early 21st century when it opened up the Centre for Procurement Performance and the Education Procurement Centre. These bodies had the job of saving the state £3 billion a year through more efficient purchasing procedures. Thus far the Centre has focussed mostly on forcing prices down by getting schools and local authorities to place block orders for services such as insurance, and we wait with interest to see what will happen next.

Elsewhere the government in England set up the National College for School Leadership wherein bursars and others could be trained in the application of

business methodology to schools. However, within the courses that the NCSL runs there is little reference to efficiency, thus far.

The approach to efficiency which focuses on the small scale questions of undertaking specific tasks in a more cost-effective manner puts the centre of reform in the school office. However, inevitably, as issues are raised and reforms made, the arena of investigation and reform spreads outwards, taking in the work of the school managers and eventually the teachers.

At the start of the exercise the question that is posed might be, “what is the most efficient way of meeting the school’s need to follow up unauthorised absences.” This issue might stay within the realms of the school office, but it might also incorporate the work of teachers if it is found that registers are not always filled in correctly.

Later the issue might arise, “what is the most cost effective way of ensuring that the procurement of new goods and services is undertaken in such a way that the school gets the best value for money?” This is a much more complex issue since it involves judgements being made on which equipment is required, and from whom it should be bought. Temptations to buy the cheapest must be weighed against reliability, effectiveness, and any issues of future upgrades. These are issues which should bring the administrator and the manager together – for it is unlikely that the administrator will know how the equipment or facility is to be used, while it is unlikely that the head of department will have the time or knowledge to investigate comparative costs and reliability records. At this point what is needed is a comparison of equipment reliability – something which may not be instantly available.

Conclusion

We are only just starting to examine the implications of thinking about efficiency in schools in this way, and undoubtedly many new topics and ideas will appear in the next few years. While it is on the one hand frustrating that all the answers are not readily available as yet, it is exciting to be involved in such a development at the very beginning.