

Cover

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Malcolm McLean was a truck driver who spent his life delivering bales of cotton to ports in North Carolina. Unable to leave until his cargo was safely loaded, for years he wasted hours watching dozens of dockhands load thousands of small packages on to ships.

In a moment of inspiration, McLean came up with the idea of a shipping container. He started his own business in 1956 and two decades later he ran a fleet of more than 4,000 container ships. This simple breakthrough revolutionised the global economy and enormously accelerated international trade.

McLean saw things with a third eye, took a leap of faith, and then enabled others to do differently.

At the height of Covid lockdowns there were many zoom discussions where school and system leaders home and abroad vowed to refresh, ditch or keep historic practices once the pandemic was over.

Yet the inclination to revert to the old normal is just too tempting. Schools are, in so many ways, happily conservative places. Schools are about preserving the best traditions. Doing differently with established routines does not come easy.

But all schools, especially secondary, should do differently post-pandemic when it comes to 'covering' for absent teachers. The very word 'cover' needs discarding.

What have teachers learned over the past couple of years? That most children and young people will respond readily to independent learning if that learning is well structured and purposeful. And working independently is key here.

The average secondary school spends £40,000 per annum on general supply cover (not to mention on long-term supply). Many spend much more than that. And to what end? Much - not all - cover provision in schools is patchy in quality and certainly not good value for money. Why do we perpetuate the agency approach to such an important matter as high quality teaching?

One secondary school I visited this year had decided to implement a different way of doing, prompted by the headteacher's McLean moment. The large dining hall can comfortably accommodate 250 students - that's ten classes on a bad day in November. And the head had seen similar on a month's sabbatical to the US: if the teacher doesn't arrive within five minutes of start of lesson, adjourn to the refectory.

Create excellent general supervision, proper digital infrastructure, high expectations of what teachers set as assignments, and expect students to work independently - the cocktail has cut the school's supply cover to almost zero and instead established a Study Centre of distinction.

As the head commented: 'Permanent supply is one thing, but temporary supply no longer features at this school. And the impact on students' independence as learners has been significant. Why are we waiting until they enter the sixth-form to press home the message about independent study skills?'

Such a recipe is more difficult to put into practise in the primary sector, given dining halls are gyms are assembly halls are precious spaces for teaching, though one large primary I know has plans afoot for September to turn a former dining space into an independent learning zone.

Architects shape lives - and nowhere more so than in school design. But where there is space, where there is a will to do differently, our traditional notion of 'supply cover' must surely become historic.

The contemporary school must not waste precious funds on agency staff, nor have low expectations of how students should use their time when their teacher is absent. If any leader needs persuading, just ask students what the general quality of supply teaching is compared to their regular teacher's quality!