

GUEST COLUMN – April 2024

The A - Z of School Improvement Tim Coulson

An extract from the opening chapter: **Ambition**

Successful leaders don't just improve schools, they transform them. Everyone wants to lead a good and effective school. Everyone taking over a school in trouble wants it to recover and return respectability to the education it provides to its children. However, some leaders set ambitions that achieve these aims more effectively or quicker. Conversely, school improvement is often limited by leaders' lack of ambition. Rarely do schools achieve their aims better or quicker than the ambitions that their leaders have set.

A school leader sets the weather - if everything is too difficult, the leader should not be surprised if staff are noticeably negative and doubtful of new-fangled ideas achieving much. When leaders are upbeat and positive despite the challenges of the week, it's not surprising to see staff go the extra mile for colleagues and children.

We can all recognise someone with an ambitious mindset. However, unless their ambitions are coherently articulated and spelled out there is a risk that they lead to too many disparate improvement efforts. These may be individually worthy, but together they will not add up to a changed school. Ambition cannot be over-communicated. Tell people what you are going to say, tell people what you want them to hear, and tell people what you have just said. A school leader knows that their communication about their ambition for their school has been effective when she or he hears it told back to them by someone unaware that it was the leader's idea in the first place.

We became teachers to change the world. We know that education provides opportunities and at its best can level the world's unfair playing field. Too much of school performance correlates with their social mix and the prior attainment of its children. Our job is to break the glass ceiling of what we believe is possible - if we don't aspire to this, it undoubtedly won't happen. We want to change the world for those children whose destiny otherwise feels defined by limits on what they can achieve, limits on what they can dream.

Scandals persist - social and racial inequality exists and cannot simply be wished away. A young black girl can be encouraged by teachers to do whatever she

wants, whether it is to be a professional in some regard or even an astronaut. However, in reality the chance of her becoming a headteacher is many times less likely than her white friend even if she is much brighter and more suited. With the ambition for social justice comes the dream of change. Without the ambition for social justice the status quo remains by default.

[The A - Z of School Improvement](#) is published by John Catt Education

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