

# The Restless School

**Roy Blatchford**

**SAMPLE  
CHAPTER**



A John Catt Publication



## Chapter 11

# Excellence as Standard

*We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.*

*Aristotle*

### **The standard operation**

The American political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his seminal work *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) argued that the world-wide spread of liberal democracies marked the end point of humanity's social evolution. In essence, Fukuyama contested that the final form of government had arrived. Is there a similar sense in which we know today what we need to know about creating great schools? A thread running through this book has certainly been to suggest that in large measure we do.

Widely shared across the world is that great *school systems* deploy globally benchmarked standards and see the effective use of data and sharp accountability as key to success. These systems can demonstrate that 'no child is left behind'. There is significant investment in recruiting great people to teach and in their training and development over time. In turn, great leaders are grown who are able to lead, manage and change local educational communities to be outstanding in performance. That's the virtuous and, many would contest, the proven narrative.

As to great *schools*, international educators would argue that the following key ingredients make up the professional cocktail: schools excel at what they do in a consistent manner; they have strong values and high expectations; their achievements do not happen by chance but through highly reflective, carefully planned strategies; there is a high degree of internal consistency; leadership is well distributed and ambitious to move the school forward.

But let me move beyond the researchers' well-grounded findings and beyond the inspectors' lexicon of judging schools to be poor, satisfactory, good or outstanding. My contention here is that what needs to emerge across school systems is, to borrow from the medical profession, 'the standard operation'. As a patient entering an established hospital for an appendectomy, a hip replacement, or a kidney transplant – operations of increasing complexity – wherever in the world we are, doctors will swing into action with the standard operation. Barring complications and assuming competent physicians, the patient will leave hospital with a body refreshed.

Before the reader responds in thought with examples of flawed operations let me at once – in the tradition of best teaching – indulge in a purposeful digression. For a number of years I chaired tribunals for the Thames Valley Health Authority,

investigating alleged medical malpractice. In concluding these tribunals, without exception, patients wanted (a) an apology; (b) an explanation as to what had happened in the treatment process; (c) a reassurance from those in charge that future patients would not suffer similarly.

Yes, mistakes in the standard operation do happen, but very rarely are they wilful. If you read no other account on this subject, and of what it is to be a leading surgeon and public servant, then read Henry Marsh's *Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death and Brain Surgery*. Having personally experienced both the following medical trauma, I was tickled by his own tale of being struck by a retina detachment and then, partially sighted, falling downstairs and breaking a leg. This led to his first experience, aged 56, of a sleepless night in an NHS hospital ward!

That is all on the lighter side. When he turns to his work proper, the narrative is utterly compelling:

*I often have to cut into the brain and it is something I hate doing. With a pair of diathermy forceps I coagulate the beautiful and intricate red blood vessels that lie on the brain's shining surface. I cut into it with a small scalpel and make a hole through which I push with a fine sucker. The idea that my sucker is moving through thought itself, though emotion and reason, that memories, dreams and reflections should consist of jelly, is simply too strange to understand. All I can see in front of me is matter. Yet I know if I stray into the wrong area, into what neurosurgeons call eloquent brain, I will be faced by a damaged and disabled patient when I go round to the recovery ward.*

*Brain surgery is dangerous, and modern technology has only reduced the risk to a certain extent. Much of what happens in hospitals is a matter of luck, both good and bad; success and failure are often out of the doctor's control.*

Henry Marsh

### **Excellence as standard for schools**

Much of this book has focused on teachers and leaders. But what about schools from the consumers' viewpoint? What might 'the standard operation' look like, wherever in the world you are? We might reasonably expect, in a wealthy and highly developed society, that what I'll title as *Excellence as Standard* would be the norm for a school. I shall try to describe its features.

*'The bearer of these presents is Michelangelo, the Sculptor. His nature is such that he has to be drawn out by kindness and encouragement, but if he be treated well, and love be shown to him, he will accomplish things that will make the whole world wonder.'*

Michelangelo's testimonial to the Pope

Schools are a people business. The inner belief and commitment to realising excellence by those who lead schools is *the* starting point. At its beating heart

the excellent school *is* a place where people care more than others think is wise, risk more than others think is safe, dream more than others think is practical, and expect more than others think is possible.

The following is an extract from a thoughtfully worded advertisement for new employees to join a five-star international hotel and restaurant:

**'The type of person we are looking for can demonstrate:**

- **A desire to improve themselves in terms of skills, knowledge and experience**
- **Good organizational skills and high service standards**
- **Patience, a sense of humour and an ability to accept and act on constructive feedback**
- **An ability to work on their own initiative and also to be a good team player**
- **Excellent and pro-active communication skills**
- **An eye for detail and a willingness to improve all aspects of the service we offer**
- **A positive attitude to all aspects of the job including enthusiasm, a professional and common sense approach and a dedication to the interests of the business.'**

The excellent school sets out its stall to employ such people in the same way that any five-star business does. The particular skills and knowledge required of a teacher are non-negotiable; so are attitudes, dispositions and high service standards.

The excellent school is a first choice for families, and an employer of first choice for staff. Academic standards reflect the fact that, whatever their starting points, children and young people make very good progress through their school years, and achieve as well as they can in public examinations. Children feel good about themselves within the school; their talents and gifts – whatever they may be – are spotted and nourished. The wider community wants to be associated with the school's successes.

The environment which children enter each day is attractive, light, clean, safe and welcoming; young children run into the playground at the start of the day, with barely a glimpse back to their parent. Older children arrive in good time at the start of the school day and stay on at the end, perhaps to sit in the library or café area. Physical space – and care for that space – matters.

Throughout the school day there is a sense of calm and purpose, because staff have clear expectations about behaviour and attitudes to learning. There is very little ‘white noise’ to distract staff and students going about their business. Day-to-day organisation is unfussy. No one complicates matters. The school resists passing educational fads and fashions, confident in its tried and tested practices for the community of learners it serves.

Time is well used. The curriculum and lessons motivate the children, as does the co-curricular programme of sports, drama, arts and music. Students produce work and create performances which are of *real* quality, whether in the sciences, the humanities or the arts. They ask deep questions of themselves, take risks in their learning and develop collaborative skills. Students make a difference every day, whether in their own unique progress or to the work and well-being of others and the school community. Each child is valued and understood as an individual: academically, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and as a spiritual being. Staff recognise the profound importance of childhood as captured in J.M. Barrie’s words from *Peter Pan*:

*‘On these magic shores children at play are for ever beaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more.’*

Those who lead the school are optimistic, approachable and in clear, quiet command. Their craftsmanship, if you like, is of great simplicity and strength. Their instincts and intuitions are always asking what they can do to make the school better. And if they are ‘trail blazing’ in the external educational world, they never forget that tweaking and revising everyday matters in the school corridors and hallways is vital. Leaders ensure that staff are well looked after pastorally and professionally, so that a trademark of the school is staff continuity. Staff know at all times that they are servants of the school. Those who leave do so for good reason and are warmly thanked and recognised by parents, children and governors for their significant contributions to the school community.

An excellent school is high performing in all aspects of its life and work. It has a distinctive impact on children’s and young people’s lives. Attention to detail matters. Staff will always go that extra mile to ensure an upset child is cared for, or best prepared for an interview or examination. Staff believe almost anything is possible: whatever the barrier a child may present, excellent schools find a way through. Decisions are made in the best interests of the child, not the staff. And look behind the front-desk for just a moment: the school telephone is answered promptly and courteously; the school nurse rota is clear to students; someone is checking carefully the grammar of the school newsletter.

*Excellence as Standard* in schools is about an embedded culture of thinking and doing. Those leading and teaching in the school do care, risk, dream and expect more than others think is possible. They do so every day the school is open, and

as much again in holiday periods. They have a passion to be the best they can be. They strive to be expert in as many ways as they can be, in nurturing young people's talents and aspirations, not some or most of the time, but *all* of the time. The quest for excellence becomes their habit and their purposeful practice.

One important qualifying note should be added to this notion of *Excellence as Standard*. Excellent schools vary in size, tradition, age-range, denomination, context, location and many other characteristics: each school's unique culture brings an added and vital dimension to its overall achievements and mission. Each school is excellent in generically similar and individually distinctive ways. Practices vary, but processes are steeped in the same five-star mould. Consistency yes, sameness no.

\*\*\*

In many aspects of our daily lives, notably with regard to the provision of core services in the community, we want excellence to meet our aspirations. Naturally we each have slightly different interpretations of what high quality means. *Excellence as Standard* as set out above could of course be codified, but that's what auditors do with relish and a particular purpose in mind.

Earlier in the book I quoted the teacher and social historian R.H. Tawney: 'What a wise parent would wish for their children, so the state must wish for all its children'. In the same way that the standard operation in hospital is a manifestation of the best medicine which can be offered to the patient, *Excellence as Standard* can become an equivalent kite-mark in our global schooling systems, today and for tomorrow. It is what parents and nations alike want for their children.

*An excellent school (and an excellent school system) delivers superior performance and has a high impact over a sustained period of time.*

Expectations rise ineluctably – that is the human condition, that is the global imperative. Echoing F. Scott Fitzgerald from my opening pages, definitions and descriptions of excellence in schools will not remain static, they will forever be boats beating on against the currents, 'borne back ceaselessly into the past.'



# The Restless School

## Order Form

| Title               | ISBN              | Qty | Price                                    | Total |
|---------------------|-------------------|-----|--|-------|
| The Restless School | 978-1-909717-07-7 |     | £12.99                                   |       |
|                     |                   |     | Sub total                                |       |
|                     |                   |     | P&P <small>£3 UK<br/>£5 Overseas</small> |       |
|                     |                   |     | Total                                    |       |

## Payment Details

### Method of payment

I enclose a cheque for £\_\_\_\_\_ made payable to John Catt Educational Ltd.

Please charge my Visa/Mastercard/Maestro Card No. \_\_\_\_\_

Expiry date \_\_\_\_\_

3 digit Security Code \_\_\_\_\_ Issue No. \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

### Cardholder's address:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Position \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Post/zip code \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

### Delivery address (if different):

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Position \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Post/zip code \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

### PLEASE COMPLETE AND RETURN TO:

John Catt Educational Ltd.  
12 Deben Mill Business Centre,  
Woodbridge, IP12 1BL, UK

t: +44 (0)1394 389850 f: +44 (0)1394 386893

w: [www.johncattbookshop.com](http://www.johncattbookshop.com)

e: [booksales@johncatt.com](mailto:booksales@johncatt.com)

### DATA PROTECTION

John Catt Educational Ltd. will store the information you supply on its electronic records in order that information about its activities, products and services may be sent to you by mail, telephone, email or fax.

If you DO NOT wish to receive information, please put a tick in the box