



## **Worshipful Company of Educators**

**Education Committee**

**DISCUSSION EVENINGS 2016**

**28 September 2016**

**'FREE SCHOOLS: THE CHALLENGE OF INDEPENDENCE'**

**Sarah Counter (CEO & Director, Canary Wharf College Trust)**

Educators and their guests were given a fascinating insight into the development of a free school from idea to inception when Sarah Counter opened the 2016 series of Discussion Evenings.

Sarah explained that her starting point had been her vision for a school that provided an independent-style education for free and from that grew the aim: *'To live, share and celebrate the love of learning in a Christian environment whilst welcoming those of other faiths and cultures.'* There are currently two primary schools within the trust with 50% of places for children of Christian families and 50% open/community places. The vision has been extended recently with a secondary school that opened in September 2016. All the schools are situated within the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Sarah was now very experienced in establishing new schools as she had opened four in the last seven years.

She identified some current issues as they impacted on schools. Children were familiar with IT and its applications from a very young age but she queried whether this actually got in the way of parents communicating with their children, particularly in the early years. By age 9 or thereabouts children may have seen material on TV or DVDs that would have introduced them to a world that would have been unknown to their parents. By time they were of secondary age there were all the challenges of the internet and social media. More parents required extended nursery provision because of the economic necessity of both parents being at work. She contrasted these developments with her experiences of working in Ecuador, Zambia and Maasai which had underpinned her vision for the schools in the trust and noted that *'the success of enabling a vision is built out of life's simple and profound experiences.'*

Sarah outlined the journey from the initial ideas and vision to the opening of the first school and explained that the concept of free schools enable groups of parents, teachers, charities, existing schools or other organisations to respond to a need for a new school in their particular area. Those needs could include raising standards or offering choice. It was very important that skilled people were recruited to help plan for the new school from an early stage. A suitable property had to be sought for the site of the school and that involved, quite literally, walking around the local area to identify suitable properties and discussions with developers. Financial forecasts had to be drafted and a business case designed for submission to the Department for Education (DfE). Sarah's experiences

highlighted that in the early stages of the free schools' initiative there was little or no relevant experience within the DfE. She stressed that intensive networking and challenging boundaries were important to succeeding with the first school. Tower Hamlets had been chosen as the area for the first school in the trust because of the perceived need for an innovative educational facility. There had to be very wide-ranging consultation with parents, the local authority, faith groups, local residents and businesses as well as the local headteachers' consultative group.

As part of the commitment to provide an independent-style education for free, the new school had particular characteristics:

- Small class sizes of 20
- High pupil:staff ratio
- Longer working day
- Streamlined morning timetable so children are settled by ability between classes
- Three hours sport each week
- Emphasis on maths, technology and IT
- Specialist teaching of science, music, French and PE
- Daily access to interactive whiteboards, touchscreen PCs and iPads
- Comprehensive extended day activity programme

Sarah stressed that the preparatory stages of planning for the new school were very intensive and it was critical to have a carefully written bid. She found that it was necessary to challenge the Education Funding Agency (EFA) regarding the purchase of a suitable site. It was a struggle to convince the EFA to purchase an East London site for £3 million for 1200 square metres, such is the state of the property market in this part of London. Care had also to be taken in the appointment of a suitable building contractor. She found that the school had to go ahead with the appointment of staff despite the funding agreement not being signed. Within five years the staffing number had increased from nine full-time staff to 65, in addition to part-time staff. Suppliers and contractors also had to be appointed. Ordering all the equipment and supplies for a new school was a big undertaking.

Setting the culture of the school and building the team were two very important tasks that were vital to the success of the school. Expectations must be made clear to the whole school community and these must be reflected in the school's policies and it was vital that in due course the school was given a good Ofsted rating. As a school that reflected the local community, it was also important to develop good and fruitful relationships and keep local people and businesses informed so that they felt it was their school.

There is much talk of schools' role in promoting social mobility and, based on her own personal experience, Sarah felt that we could learn from developing countries. She gave an example of a young student in Zambia who had been encouraged and enabled to be the first woman in that country to achieve a City & Guilds qualification in mechanical engineering and who was now passing on those skills to other people and contributing to the economy. She saw a role for universities to visit schools, or enable students to visit the universities, and inspire school students with particular subjects. Schools needed to prepare their students for adulthood with life skills and effective careers education from an early age. Despite the many misunderstandings between the independent and maintained sectors, there were many advantages to be gained by a far higher degree of co-operation in many areas. There was considerable value in staff co-operation, developing an understanding of different lifestyles and shared use of resources.

In concluding her presentation, Sarah answered her own question of 'how did I do it?' by sharing four key principles:

- Hold on to your faith
- Keep those who love you close
- Put in time for yourself
- Don't lose sight of the vision

She stressed that the success of the schools in the trust was because they were firmly located in their community, were for the community and enhanced the community. She did wonder whether small schools would survive in the future if they remained on their own and, similarly, whether small trusts would be able to cope. Increased pressure on finances had already meant that schools new to her trust had an increased average class size from the original planned number of 20 to 24.

There was then an opportunity for discussion. There was a question about whether the two primary schools in the trust had joined the Tower Hamlets Partnership. Sarah confirmed that they had although there had initially been some suspicion on the part of some of the other schools. Another questioner asked about movement from independent to maintained schools and vice versa. Sarah's view was that there was an emerging pattern with some parents moving their children to maintained schools because of increased school fees. She saw IT as having made a big impact because many books used in school were now available online and could thus be seen in virtually every home. Homework could also be submitted online.

A comment was made about a recent CBI survey which was critical of the school system and Sarah was asked about her experience of working with employers. She had found her experience to be mainly positive but noted that most interest was in what secondary schools were doing. The CBI survey had reported that employees did not want to work unpaid hours but all the staff at the Canary Wharf College Trust were employed on extended hours contracts (although they do have slightly longer holidays to compensate) so that the schools' aims could be achieved.

In response to another question about the relationship between independent and maintained schools Sarah's view was that developing the relationship would be increasingly important as each sector had something to learn from the other. They did have characteristics in common, for example effective schools recognised the need for good governance. However, she did think that parent governors could be something of a two-edged sword. It was important that governing bodies identified the skill sets that were needed to ensure the effectiveness of the governors.

There was a question about whether the New Schools' Network (NSN) had been of assistance when the school was being planned. Sarah noted that there were only four schools that were founded by individuals (and she was one) as opposed to those founded by groups. The NSN really came into its own when it came to writing the business case for early schools but not when submitting for the later schools. It was not entirely clear what the role of the NSN would be when most new schools were being started by experienced multi-academy trusts.

In reply to a question about how Sarah found the site for her school, she reiterated that looking around the locality was very important. Property developers could assist to find potential sites but they were not always helpful. Once a possible site was identified the Educational Funding Agency negotiated the best deal. She had started with a small group of six people who became the nucleus of the governing body which was enlarged once the school opened. The corporate form for the school was a company limited by guarantee.

There was a question about the Christian foundation of the school. Sarah responded that the locality was very diverse with 48 home languages amongst 420 children and for 58% of whom English was not their mother tongue. She was clear in her personal Christian commitment and that she wanted to set up a school with a non-denominational Christian ethos. 50% of the places in the school were open to anyone in the local community irrespective of faith commitment or none. With the Christian ethos the school delivered British values because these were based on the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The extended school day allowed for a very wide range of extra-curricular activities to be offered to all the children and the longer working day facilitated that.

The final questioner asked Sarah, given the very high level of her personal commitment, whether the school would survive if she left. She responded by emphasising the importance of having a robust succession plan in place. As part of this it was vital to build leadership potential from within the school, that is 'growing our own'.

In thanking Sarah for a compelling account of how she founded the trust and its schools, Martyn Coles (Lower Warden and Chair of the Education Committee) acknowledged Sarah's vision and great commitment to building and developing the schools. These values had come through very clearly in everything that she had said as she had recounted her journey while she engaged with the local community. That there had been so many questions afterwards was a tribute to what she had achieved and there was much that members would be able to reflect upon.