

Restless for Excellence

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Leaders in education never cease to amaze me.

Over the past two in-service training weeks I have worked with local authority directors, trust CEOs and headteachers. This has been in-person in the UK, and 'virtually' abroad - we have something distinctive to learn from the depth and breadth of induction in international schools.

The best leaders are incorrigibly optimistic, sharing compelling stories with staff about what was achieved last academic year and reinforcing just what is possible for the coming year. Just as great teachers give that well rehearsed September speech to students about their potential, leaders are restless for excellence, and realistic about delivery.

How are they defining excellence?

They are clear that their organisation should be an employer of first choice, with working conditions and professional development opportunities the best they can be within financial and operational limits.

Headteachers are ambitious that their school should be a first choice for families, that no parents push a buggy, cycle or drive past their school gates to travel to another setting.

Leaders are united in their ambition to create environments for learning which are attractive, light, clean, safe - and that those environments exude a sense of calm and purpose rooted in staff's clear expectations about pupils' wellbeing and attitudes to learning.

They are passionate about time being very well used every day, rooted in a curriculum which motivates children and young people to ask deep questions of themselves, take risks in their learning and develop collaborative skills.

Leaders never under-estimate that their own unique behaviours set a tone and style for those who follow. In the best schools those who lead at all levels are

intelligent, optimistic, approachable and in clear, quiet command. Their craft is, if you will, of great simplicity and strength. Their instinct and intuitions are always asking what they can do to make the organisation better.

Restless excellence is about an embedded culture of thinking and doing in which leaders:

- Care more than others think is wise
- Risk more than others think is safe
- Dream more than others think is practical
- Expect more than others think is possible.

(for more on this, see [‘The Three Minute Leader’](#) by Roy Blatchford)

And what have I learned in particular from school leaders in recent days? Four key points emerge:

1. They are preoccupied with the cost of living implications ahead for their school and staff. They are equally determined to manage these significant challenges in a way which does not deflect teachers’ attention from students’ learning needs.
2. They are determined that their thoughtfully created whole-school systems are applied *consistently* by all staff; consistency is their Holy Grail. Or in the words of one headteacher to her first staff meeting: ‘Let’s *all* have a good year at the same time’.
3. They are *joyously obsessive* about ensuring every child is reading in line with their actual age, putting in place remedies and extensions to ensure no child misses out. Many heads I work with across the country view this goal as fundamental.
4. They read about regional differences in GCSE attainment; they reflect again on ‘the forgotten third’ at 11+ and 16+; they attend meetings where ‘SEND provision in mainstream’ is regularly debated as *the* challenge in the national education system. And they try to think and act afresh so that this year *can* be different for many marginalised children.

Author Scott Fitzgerald created the memorable Jay Gatsby:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.....And one fine morning -

We need the equivalent of the constant green light in schools, especially in turbulent times.