

## GUEST COLUMN – May/June 2025

### The weather inside us Nick Soar

Soft cool sunshine and fresh birdsong abound this Spring morning. Hammersmith Bridge - long fractured and long debated in the council committee rooms north and south of the River Thames - is open again. Not for cars, but distinctly open. Runners, cyclists, walkers cross it now with a gentle rhythm, as if reclaiming something lost.

There is hope in this bridge. Though online, car drivers fume still - angry at the silence, perhaps, or at change that is not for them.

This is what it can mean to lead a school in difficulty: to hold space in your head for what is quietly needful while others clamour and fulminate for a different agenda. Taking over a school that has 'failed' is often about letting the light in through cracks for the children to see and for staff often deflated to be guided by.

Complex schools - those called 'challenging' by Ofsted inspection reports, tabloids, or the more wary heads and teachers at local conferences - are often more than just "schools in trouble." They are the fault-lines of our society, bearing the weight of its inequities, histories, and stubborn fractures between people.

It is no accident that a common phase in turnaround schools is "we leave the street at the gate." Thus, the school attempts to become a bulwark against knife crime and youth violence without, but also against the poverty of aspirations within.

The task of leadership here is not just about accountability. It's about tuning the school - not to perfection, but to resonance with its community - and to me in my leadership journey it has been about resonance with an organisation's own past. Can we use the echoes of the past to inspire the future?

The nub of turnaround schools is to help the spirit each day feel more like its community's potential than its inherited trauma. The weather inside such schools matters. And we, as a collective team, set it.

Some schools come with history baked into every corridor - into the wooden panels and the redbrick; the ghosts of both past glories or past grievances echo in the stairwells. Yet, you inherit not just a building, but a myth: what the school once was, what it failed to become, who it once served better or worse. And that weight can stifle or steady a leader.

But of schools with no history? Or where schools merge as they are in many cases in the independent sector. There is nothing for local people or for new staff to grab on to. That is another kind of challenge. The school can float at first - untethered, unfamiliar to the place it grows out of.

## Harris Tottenham

When we opened *Harris Tottenham* it was a blank slate. We were handed a blueprint, yes - but no backstory; a Harris Federation in a box scheme, but no soul. We had to write one. That meant walking the nearby marshes, speaking with people in corner shops, local residents, parents, charities, faith leaders and youth clubs, understanding what Tottenham means when it isn't just a name and a postcode.

The Harris *brand* brought with it concrete reputational assumptions. These attracted criticism from many who were opposed to market-driven school reform who saw us as part of a machine. They saw Harris as overly centralised and inflexible, with a 'command-and-control' approach to schools and leadership.

Indeed, to a vocal clique Harris was part of the oppressive institutional racism and endemic poverty that it tried to subvert. Children to these people were the least of our priorities.

What was needed was a founding myth to inspire and correct this brand. And our founding vision was built out of and responded in dialogue with the violence of the Tottenham riots and the urge to correct structural racial and social injustices. Those residents who pleaded in the aftermath of the riots for "a school for people like us" needed to be answered.

And this was and remains our mission at *Harris Tottenham*. 'It is a brand dream' as one visitor once said.

## Harris South Norwood

When I became Executive Principal at *Harris South Norwood* in 2016, I arrived at a school where the Federation had, for good reason, erased much of the past. The old school had become a byword for failure: safeguarding was weak, results were low-grade, ambition was absent.

And yet, in a cellar among the detritus of a forgotten identity, I found a set of oak panels listing in gold-leaf the names of former pupils who had died in the Great War and beyond hidden under paint pots and sheeting.

One of my first symbolic acts then was to restore this link with the school's former self - built by the inventor and philanthropist William Stanley. The architecture still spoke of science, artistry and creativity. Stanley, a man of industrial precision and purpose, seemed to me a kindred spirit to what Harris was trying to become and what our children needed.

They needed a school with a mission for doing for them what was needed to get employment, but also to give them a chance to create and enjoy the arts. I believed then - and still do - that the children of today benefit when we help them grasp the past and know the alumni whose footsteps they literally follow.

## Bishop Challoner

Previously, when I was entrusted to become the Executive Head at *Bishop Challoner* in the East End in 2014, I used the biography of its namesake to inspire the staff to, in his words, "do ordinary things, extraordinarily well," and to recall his deep, original spirit of service to the poor.

Dr Challoner ministered to the small number of Catholics in a hostile time, celebrating Mass secretly in obscure alehouses, cockpits - anywhere people could gather without notice. His defiant quietness, his faith in the small, radical act, became a guiding metaphor for that school's own reawakening.

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Many have written about the practical systematic things necessary for turning schools into orderly places where teachers can teach and pupils can learn. In this provocation I urge all leaders to find the resonance of your school and build a bridge that links the past with where you want your school to go. If you can do this, it is my conviction and experience that people will walk with you over that bridge.

Vision building is not just the perfume on the edgy world of inner-city schools. It helps all of us work for something more than what Jerry Muller calls 'the tyranny of metrics'.

**Nick Soar, Executive Principal with Harris Federation**