

May students thrive in their exam rooms

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Times columnist and secondary history teacher Harry Hudson wrote recently:

‘Exams remain the greatest leveller presently available. Unlike coursework, exams prevent hovering parents, siblings or tutors from just ‘casting an eye’ over a child’s work or ‘making a couple of suggestions’. For those without strong support networks outside school, we still haven’t devised anything fairer than exams.

‘None of which is to say that they are perfect, nor that they should be impervious to reform. Yet for all their flaws, exams are one of the last redoubts of proper thought. We would be failing children if we were to turn our backs on them.’

May is that start-of-exam-season month, the weeks when teachers must reluctantly let go and students must harness their proper thoughts.

I have had the excellent opportunity over the past two years to chair a number of Standards Boards in different schools, each with an unequivocal ambition to raise attainment in Year 11 and a special eye on the golden key of grades 4+ in English and maths.

What have we learned about effective Standards Boards?

- An unremitting focus on raising GCSE attainment in Year 11, with a *specific number* of students as the ambitious and plausible target: using individual students’ names, not percentages.
- A Board culture of appreciation, transparency, concision and precision.
- A small membership: the head/deputy; two senior governors; a trust executive leader.
- An independent chair who steers the agenda, notes agreed action points, and follows up actions robustly.
- ‘Less is more’ high quality paperwork written by school leaders.
- Regular meetings, including classroom visits and discussions with students: ‘what is your teacher doing that really helps you?’

- Holding nicely and optimistically to mutual account both the school leaders and the trust's executive leaders; collusion is the enemy.
- A September start and May completion date for the Board, with monthly meetings to champion 'progress against ambitions'.

What have we seen from staff and students which has proved effective and rewarding?

- Leadership at all levels embracing a culture of higher expectations of what *this* group of students can achieve.
- The studious preparation, refining and presentation of excellent maths/English Venn Diagrams, highlighting individual students and their progress.
- Agility with data to reset teaching and tutorial groups as needed.
- The vital importance of a Head of Year 11 (or similar) knowing every student, being an ambassador for them, and telling them regularly they can achieve more than they thought they were capable of.
- Rewards for students taking various forms, from cards to chocolates.
- Targeted students, linked in pairs/trios to senior leaders for bespoke pastoral and academic nurture; and listening to what they have to feedback.
- A consistently positive focus on attendance which has delivered powerfully across the Year 11 cohorts.
- High-quality, well-timed meetings with parents, to inform and cajole.
- Two sets of mocks with forensic analysis of students' performance on different papers, and on different aspects of their maths and English exam curriculum.
- High quality distributed leadership by Heads of Maths and English, working effectively with their teams to ensure 'no stone unturned' in classrooms and meaningful moderation across the departments.
- Harnessing creatively the additional teaching and coaching capacity provided by trusts.
- The provision of weekend, after-school and holiday catch-up and keep-up sessions.

The collective spirit within the schools has been a joy to be part of. In particular, high levels of attendance from students have said to the teachers: 'We really appreciate the extra mile you are running for us. We'll turn up and benefit'.

The torch is with the students now. We have put our confident predictions of grades to be achieved in sealed envelopes. As Board members we shall be as nervous as the students and teachers when August results day arrives.

Roy Blatchford is editor of ['The A – Z Series'](#).