

# About our schools: improving on previous best

## Part 1

By Professor Sir Tim Brighouse and Professor Mick Waters

*In the first of a series of articles written exclusively for Education Journal, two of the country's leading educationalists take a hard look at our education system and identify where it could be doing better.*

**W**hen we began writing our book *About Our Schools: Improving on Previous Best*, we thought we should clear up any differences of values/beliefs/prejudices – call it what you will. And we decided too to be open about it so that readers could filter for that - or ignore the book altogether.

We found immediately that we agreed that the teacher was the most important figure. Some researchers say that the 'teacher effect' is multiple-times more important than the 'school effect': variation in quality is greater within schools rather than between them. We therefore started with two quotations to make our case. Hain Ginot put the 'teacher effect' graphically 'I have come to the frightening conclusion; I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous.' Robert Fried elaborates when teaching goes well from the pupil's viewpoint 'Of those who inspired us most, we remember what they cared about and that they cared about us and the people we might become. It is this quality of caring – about ideas and values, this fascination for the potential of growth within people, the depth and fervour about doing things well and striving for excellence, that comes closest to what I mean in describing a 'passionate' teacher'.

The imagery of climate and weather permeates the book and our choices of reform in its final chapter because we think that the head of phase/department, the actions of the school's senior leadership team, the culture and practices of the Multi-Academy Trust and/or the Local Authority - all increase or decrease the likelihood of the teacher making good weather. Of course, other factors also affect that likelihood such as the family, the community and what is happening nationally. We look at all these issues and do not shy away from calling out policies which we think get in the way of the teacher having the best chance of unlocking the minds and opening the shut chambers of the hearts of the pupils they help develop.

We knew we agreed about other matters which might lead the reader to discount what we say. So we set out these beliefs as follows:

- Pupils need different approaches and experiences at different times, and teachers are in the best position to judge the approach and, with support from the school, secure those experiences.
- Teachers are at their best when pupils are persuaded to be striving always to see their previous best effort as a marker against which to improve, develop or extend, while giving due consideration to making sure their recent learning is secure.
- We therefore need to make it a top priority to secure and then continuously support high-quality teachers and support staff.
- What works for one teacher may not work in another context, with an equally good teacher, but some practices are better than others and research should provide the evidence.
- The context in which teachers work will vary their approach to teaching.
- The best teachers treat children as they might become rather than as they (sometimes infuriatingly) are.
- Schools should be seen by pupils and their families as inclusive places where they are keen to spend their time.

In our second article next week we shall explain how we collected evidence from interviews with over 100 witnesses and what we made of the 14 Secretaries of State among them.