

SUPERHEADS:

By
Nigel Graber

Saving our Schools

The controversial introduction of superheads into failing schools around the country has produced many success stories, but has the Labour government's initiative proven itself a worthy legacy?

Back in 2008, the then Schools Secretary Ed Balls announced that head teachers from grammar schools could double their pay to as much as £200,000 a year if they were prepared to take over the management of failing schools in their area.

Mr Balls introduced a private sector-style leadership regime into state schools, asking the body that sets teachers' pay to put forward a new system of rewards and incentives for 500 new National Leaders in Education (NLEs), or 'superheads'.

Speaking to The Times, he said, "I would like to see top rewards for the best head teachers so that they can deliver rising standards for all children and spread the benefits of their experience to other schools in their area."

At the time, head teachers' salaries in England and Wales started at £39,000 for the head of a small primary, rising to £105,000 for the head of an inner-London comprehensive. For a 1,000-pupil medium-sized secondary school in England, a head could expect to be paid around £70,000. In 2008, heads of independent schools commanded about £140,000.

Under the superheads scheme, a struggling school in a tough catchment area with lots of children could expect to reward its head with a salary of up to £200,000. Justifying the hike in wages, Mr Balls said, "In the private sector, when you identify the best leadership, you put that leadership to work. We want to make sure the pay is there in schools in order that [heads] have got incentives."

To qualify for the extra money, most heads remain at their current school as a superhead, with a deputy left in charge while they establish a new senior

management team at a nearby struggling school.

So, three years later, has the superheads scheme been a success in turning 'unteachable' children into superstars? And what measures have the heads introduced to justify their £120,000-plus salaries?

In London, Colin Hall, head teacher at Holland Park School in Kensington, insisted on a school uniform and zero tolerance of rudeness. Hall, who works over 80 hours a week for his £130,000 salary, took over the school in 2001 when it was rated 'unsatisfactory' by Ofsted. He's since taken the number of pupils achieving five good GCSEs from 24% to 67%.

One shining example is refugee Valmir Selimi who arrived from the former Yugoslavia aged 10 with very little English, yet achieved four A*s at A-level and is now studying medicine at Cambridge.

Hall, who's a big believer in order and structure, says, "I introduced a school uniform, a clear code of conduct and measures to regulate behaviour. It was no longer acceptable for students to be rude or to say what they wanted, when they wanted. I put the teachers back in charge of the classroom and made the students realise there was a time and place for everything.

"Some say we civilised the children, but I prefer to say we made them more sophisticated. We also switched from mixed-ability classes to setting and banding and introduced personalised learning plans. I am passionate about helping children to achieve their utmost."

Rebuilt

At 1250-pupil Mossbourne Community Academy in Hackney, Sir Michael Wishaw, who also works over 80 hours a week, oversaw a school completely rebuilt following the failure of the Hackney Downs School. Mossbourne is now rated by Ofsted as 'exceptional' within the 'outstanding' category, with 83% of pupils achieving five good GCSEs and ten current year 13 pupils proudly clutching offers from Oxbridge.

Sir Michael, knighted in 2000 for his services to education, turned the school around with a passionate commitment to literacy. He said, "We ferociously tackle literacy. I've seen pupils leapfrog from below to two levels above national average in just two years with our super-literacy classes."

This, plus an insistence on firm discipline and clear structures, with teachers who act as surrogate parents setting standards that don't necessarily exist in children's homes, has set the tone for success.

Elsewhere, the threat of Saturday detentions, among other measures, has helped Martin Tissot turn around St George's Catholic School in Maida Vale. Earning over £100,000 a year and working a 65-hour week, Tissot took over St George's in 2006 when it was rated 'inadequate' by Westminster.

Three years later, the school featured in the top-100 most improved schools nationwide, with the number of students achieving five good GCSEs soaring from 19% to 60% and Ofsted rating it 'outstanding'. One year-11 pupil with an alcoholic mother and absent father is on course for university. On the back of



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► Sir Michael Wilshaw, Principal of the Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, London. Photo by Mark Large/Associated Newspapers/Rex Features.

this success, Tissot was drafted in to St Thomas More in Wood Green in September 2010.

Meanwhile, in St John's Wood, Quintin Kynaston School had a 'notice to improve' in 2002 from Ofsted. After the appointment of Jo Shuter, the school is now rated as 'outstanding', with the number of pupils achieving five good GCSEs rising from 25% to 57%.

Shuter, who works a 65-hour week, including Saturday mornings, points out that, although English is not the first language of 80% of the pupils, every sixth-former has gone on to university in the past three years.

To achieve this success, Shuter identified the ten biggest trouble-makers and asked them what they wanted from school. She said, "I saw they had phenomenal energy and leadership potential and I made some of them prefects. If it had gone wrong, my head was on the block. I also rooted out underperforming teachers. In my first two terms, 90 staff left and were replaced by new staff who understood my vision."

Closure

In Great Barr, Birmingham, Liam Nolan, head at Perry Beeches School, was given one year to turn the school around by Ofsted after inspectors deemed the school to be 'failing' in 2007. The school had been threatened with closure, with only 21% of students achieving five good GCSEs.

Mr Nolan lifted the GCSE pass rate to 74% and earned Perry Beeches the tag of 'most improved school in the country'. Following this success, Mr Nolan was appointed an NLE to share the secrets of his success with struggling schools across the country.

But it's not all sunshine and roses. One education authority in Yorkshire, which spent more than £1m hiring a superhead, has complained about the 'unsustainable cost' and admitted it would use the scheme again only in exceptional circumstances.

North Yorkshire County Council commissioned Wakefield school Outwood Grange's chief executive Michael Wilkins to raise standards. But the payments



surrounding Outwood Grange's NLE work have been investigated by Wakefield Council auditors. And an investigation by The Yorkshire Post earlier this year revealed Outwood Grange received more than £3.2m for school improvements at five secondaries, including two in North Yorkshire.

According to Cynthia Welbourn, North Yorkshire County Council's director of children's services, the Wakefield head was appointed only because North Yorkshire's own school-improvement team was 'exceptionally stretched' at the time.

But she said that spending more than £1.2m at Harrogate High and Scalby School in Scarborough was justified because of the number of schools in North Yorkshire needing improvement work in 2007 and 2008.

The council now has a new strategy of relying on its own school-improvement staff and a network of senior teachers from around the county, as Ms Welbourn's departmental budget has shrunk from £26m to £23m.

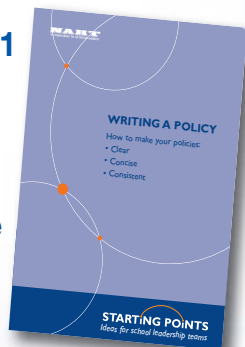
She said, "It would be unsustainable to rely on NLEs for school improvement because of the high cost. We could never rule out using NLEs in future but it would only be under exceptional circumstances." **EN**

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