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Generated by Alex Bigham while working for Ark Schools

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Ark

News

Ark Conway pupils have to master each concept in maths, making use of pictures to help to visualise problems, before moving to the next one

Free school founded three years ago is beating England's best

A tiny free school in a poor part of London has achieved the best results in the country, three years after it opened (Greg Hurst writes).

Every child achieved the expected standard or higher in mathematics at Ark Conway primary academy, the highest in England, and 93 per cent did so in English, which was equalled by one other school.

Its results were better than any others among the 15,000 primary schools in England and those prep schools that submit their results to the Department for Education. Among the schools it beat was one of the most highly selective independent prep schools, James Allen's Girls' School, which had the third highest results.

Damian McBeath, the founding head teacher, said its success was due to strong teaching. Each class has both a teacher and co-teacher, who is a graduate on a teacher training programme, which the school uses instead of classroom assistants. It also uses a maths curriculum adapted from Singapore, which ensures that children master each concept before moving to the next and makes heavy use of pictures and counting blocks that help children to visualise sums or calculations.

The school is housed in a disused library in Acton, near a busy trunk road a stone's throw from Wormwood Scrubs prison. Within three years it has become so popular that it had 140 applications for 30 places this term, of which 77 families listed it as their first choice.

This year, the children also achieved a 100 per cent pass rate in the phonics check, to test the reading of six- year-olds. The first group of pupils to arrive reached their biggest milestone in the spring when they sat the national primary school assessments, known as key stage one tests, which children sit at the age of seven. These are used to measure the progress that pupils make by the time they sit national curriculum tests at 11.

Ark Conway's use of co-teachers means that graduates who are in training to be teachers can intervene during lessons to help children who do not understand what is being taught. This is reversed in the afternoon: a co-teacher takes the class for half an hour while the main teacher works with pupils still struggling to understand.

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From 'Britain's brightest student' to slayer of education's sacred cows

Profile Daisy Christodoulou's Seven Myths has become one of teaching's most talked-about books in 20 years

Peter Wilby

When Daisy Christodoulou's Seven Myths About Education came out as an ebook last year, I didn't read it. Just another rightwing moan, I thought, saying schools should get back to the 1950s, teaching nothing but facts, grammar and multiplication tables. I'd heard it all before. Like so many other such rants, it would go big in the Telegraph and Mail, and be largely ignored elsewhere.

But the book became one of the most talked-about in education in the past 20 years. BBC Radio 4 gave her half an hour in its series The Educators. She was praised by the then education secretary, Michael Gove. A Sunday Times reviewer reckoned she had aimed "a heat-seeking missile" at "the heart of the educational establishment", and tipped her for head of Ofsted in 2021. This year Seven Myths came out in print.

So what's different about Christodoulou? First, she's young: barely 30, with just four years in secondary school classrooms behind her. Second, she writes in vigorous, jargon-free English. Third, though she makes her case with passion, she writes forensically, relying not on anecdote and assertion, but on evidence (or at least what she claims as evidence), drawing on the latest research in cognitive science, and scrupulously footnoting sources. Fourth, she focuses on classroom pedagogy, not on arguments about schools' resources or control. "We pay too little attention to the actual content of lessons: what gets taught and how," she writes.

Above all, she aims straight for the most sacred cows to which even Tory ministers sometimes pay obeisance. Claims that you can teach "transferable skills", that the 21st century changes everything and that "teacher-led instruction is passive" – all these are myths, she says. She is scathing about how Ofsted praises lessons where pupils do things "spontaneously", such as spelling French words correctly, as though it were unnecessary to instruct them on such things. She dares to chide Dickens for creating, through Hard Times' Thomas Gradgrind and his daughter, the myth that teaching facts turns children into emotionally stunted adults. As a West Ham supporter who played for Warwick University's women's football team, she even critiques how we develop young footballers, arguing that children shouldn't play 11-a-side matches on full-sized pitches until they've learned ball control.

I met Christodoulou at the London headquarters of the Ark academy chain, where she is research and development manager. Intense, articulate, dressed in black, she cuts a somewhat forbidding figure as she talks at bewildering speed. She argues that understanding, creativity, powers of analysis and so on cannot be learned in a vacuum: they must always be based on sound background knowledge, committed to long-term memory. "It's said that people can look things up to get facts. But when you look up a word in a dictionary, you need knowledge to understand the definition. I remember teaching a child who wrote 'I am good at football', and asking him to replace 'good'. He came back with 'I am congenial at football'. He'd found it in a thesaurus but his grasp of English was too weak to use it properly."

Learning to use words is like learning to drive, she says. "When you start, you rely entirely on working memory about how to change gear and so on. But you gradually commit that knowledge to long-term memory so you don't need to think about it. Which is just as well because you need your mind free to concentrate on where you're going and what's on the road. Nothing is learned properly until it's in long-term memory." Broadsheet newspapers, she says, assume a wide range of readers' knowledge about history, geography, politics, literature and culture generally. If you had to look up every reference, you would never get past the first paragraph.

Christodoulou is particularly critical of Ofsted for praising history lessons where pupils design heraldic coats of arms and English lessons where they make puppets of Romeo and Juliet. "It's a question of what they're thinking about in these lessons. And they're not thinking about history or literature. They're thinking about how to draw a crest shape and how to colour between the lines or about how to make puppets. Fine, if that's the aim of the lessons, but it isn't." Time spent on projects often means less time spent learning.

Discovery learning, she argues, is criminally wasteful. "It's very difficult to learn from the real world. Apples dropped from trees for centuries, but only Newton discovered the laws of gravity. As he said, we have to stand on the shoulders of giants."

Is she seriously suggesting that schools shouldn't teach skills and children should spend all day learning knowledge? "I'm trying to change views of the relation between knowledge and skills ... Skill is bound up with knowledge. Skills are domain specific. You can't play chess unless you've learned the moves. I absolutely agree that the end of education is skilled, creative, critical individuals who can sift evidence. It's a question of how we get there."

It is hereabouts that Christodoulou begins to lose me. She is adamant that there was never a golden age; she doesn't believe things were better in the 1950s. Nor does she think it's a matter of swinging a pendulum so that we have less skills teaching and more knowledge teaching. "Cutting-edge" research in cognitive science takes us into new territory, she says. Her book states: "If pupils commit knowledge to memory and practise retrieving it from memory, that will cause skilled performance ... Time that is given over to teaching skills ... won't actually improve skills ... Time spent imagining how to design a role play about complex moral issues in science is time not spent actually learning about atoms, compounds, mixtures and the states of matter."

Memory of knowledge will "cause" skilled performance? Just like that? What I think she means is that skills need to be rigorously connected to well-grounded knowledge if they are to be taught effectively. The error is to teach them in isolation, as abstract entities. Most teachers, however, would say that almost nobody tries to teach skills separately from knowledge and that the only evidence Christodoulou produces to show they do are passages from Ofsted reports, taken out of context, and a Royal Society of Arts programme adopted by a small number of schools. "The programme isn't anti-subjects or anti-knowledge," says Joe Hallgarten, the society's education director. "It's a framework through which to teach competencies in addition to knowledge."

Christodoulou was once the star – hailed by one newspaper as "Britain's brightest student" – in a winning University Challenge team, and I suspect her exceptional facility at retaining information makes it hard for her to understand other people's difficulties. I point out to her that the problem for most teachers is to engage children and the real issue is not that schools don't teach knowledge but that they often do so ineffectively. "I completely agree that pupils have to be engaged," she says. "The difficult thing is to provide activities that advance understanding and sustain interest. Primary teachers are very good at that. I often wish I'd trained as a primary teacher."

She comes from London's East End and grew up in a now-demolished tow block. Though her father (whose own father was a Cypriot immigrant) event ally qualified as an electrician and her mother as a therapist, the family also ran a stall in London's Petticoat Lane where she helped out. She went to a state primary but, under the Tories' assisted places scheme (abolished by New Labour), won a free scholarship the independent City of London Girls despite her father's fears that she wou turn into "a stuck-up so-and-so". I ask her how far her views on learning wer formed by her schooling but she says "we hear too much from people extra olating from their own experiences instead of looking at the evidence".

After a first in English at Warwick, she opted for the Teach First scheme and started at an inner-city London comprehensive, which went into spec measures in her second term. Difficul ties with the pupils led her to read mo about educational theory when she left after three years to take an MA in literature. "I found a body of research that hadn't got into teacher training a all and that views widely accepted in schools were directly opposed to wha the research showed." She went back teaching for a year, before working at the curriculum centre at Pimlico acad emy – part of Lord Nash's Future Acad emies chain – and then at Ark.

Though she comes from a Labour family, she's a member of the Liberal Democrats and once stood for an unw nable council seat. She doesn't want to talk politics, however, but sport. As she sees me out, she says she's a Surre county cricket club member and auth of an article on how test matches ech Greek tragedy, published in an upmar ket cricket quarterly. When I say I pre Lord's, where Middlesex play, to Sur rey's Oval ground, she peers at me wi alarming intensity and asks "what do you like about the Oval?" Perhaps she could be a writer or radio commentat on sport. But she denies journalistic, broadcasting, political or academic ambitions – and indeed ambitions at Ofsted – and insists she intends to do more school teaching. We shall see.

Attacking skills

Christodoulou's seven myths:

- Facts prevent understanding
- Teacher-led instruction is passive
- The 21st century fundamentally changes everything
- You can always just look it up
- We should teach transferable skills
- Projects and activities are the best way to learn
- Teaching knowledge is indoctrination

'It's difficult to learn from the real world. Apples dropped from trees for centuries but only Newton discovered the laws of gravity'

How Navy saved a sinking school

A SCHOOL has transformed pupils' bad behaviour after it drafted in former Royal Navy sailors to enforce discipline.

The team of three retired naval staff – including an ex-Royal Marine – were hired to patrol corridors, eject disruptive students from lessons and provide boys with positive male role models.

The sailors even drove to pupils' homes if they failed to show up at Charter Academy in Portsmouth and brought them to lessons.

The once-failing school has now been turned around, emerging last year as the second most improved in the country and the best-performing in Portsmouth. David Cameron praised the initiative yesterday as he visited the school to launch a series of measures to turn around failing schools.

Headteacher Dame Sharon Hollows, who brought in the staff as part of her dramatic improvement of the school, said: 'They were really useful members of staff because they were non-confrontational but have great personal presence.

'They also presented very positive male role models to the students and of course many of our students don't have positive male role models in their lives.'

2 Sun Tuesday, October 14, 2014

Marines' class act

A NEW headteacher used ex-Royal Marines to crack down on truancy and disruptive pupils – and turned her troubled school into one of the most improved in the UK.

David Cameron was told during a visit to the Charter Academy in Portsmouth yesterday how Dame Sharon Hollows cracked down after taking over five years ago.

And he met Royal Navy veterans who patrol the school to ensure children behave and visit the homes of those absent with no explanation.

The PM said: "They have played a key role in the dramatic turnaround at this school."

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12 · The Guardian | Monday 13 October 2014

National

One to watch American who wrote the latest classroom bible

Sally Weale on Doug Lemov, whose sometimes divisive ideas on education have spread to UK

How do you make teachers teach better? US educator Doug Lemov thinks he has some answers and has documented them in a book, Teach Like a Champion, which is informing a generation of teachers, first in America and now in the UK.

Lemov is a growing influence on education in the US, where he runs 16 charter schools across New York, New Jersey and Boston called Uncommon Schools. His influence is spreading to the UK, where politicians and education policymakers are lapping up his ideas.

Former education secretary Michael Gove, his successor, Nicky Morgan, and colleagues at the Department for Education will be familiar with Lemov's methods, while any young teacher on a Teach First programme is virtually obliged to have a copy of his book. An updated version is being published this year.

The book is intended to be a manual for teachers, providing practical knowledge and proven techniques that will make them teach better, and enable their students to get better results.

It is less Dead Poets Society, a harsh sceptic might say, than How to Teach for Dummies. One Chicago teacher blogged: "Lemov's book contributes to the de-professionalisation of teaching. He sends the message that anyone can do it – if they read the right manual."

Former Gove adviser Sam Freedman, a Teach First director, is more enthusiastic. "The reason Lemov's Teach Like a Champion is one of the most popular books for new teachers, including Teach First participants, is because there are so few other places to look for simple routines that will help develop a good behaviour culture, enable rapid assessment and so on."

Lemov is on a 10-week sabbatical in the UK, funded by the Ark Schools network, giving lectures to policymakers and workshops for teachers. Last month he delivered a lecture at the Policy Exchange, the right-wing thinktank set up by Gove in 2002; last week he held a two-day workshop for school leaders, costing £1,000 (£620) per person.

Teaching guru Doug Lemov at a workshop for newly qualified teachers at Walworth academy, south London Photograph: Graham Turner for the Guardian

Lemov had wanted to be a professor of English literature. His specialism was journals of scientific interest. Then he turned his attention to improving the educational achievement, and therefore life chances, of children from deprived communities in the US.

What makes him different is that he offers a practical approach to making teachers more effective in the classroom. It isn't magic. We don't have to go to Singapore and copy how they do it. Somewhere here, in a school in Market Harborough or Evesham or Hatfield, some teacher has come up with an idea that can make a real difference in the classroom. All we have to do is use the data from their results to find them, analyse how they've done it, then share it with others.

> We live in a different society. I would like to be unmeasured too, but it's not a defensible position

One problem here, it turns out, is that we do not have enough data. "We are way ahead of you," says Lemov. "In the last 10 years we've been able to measure annual progress of kids systematically. If there's one thing that would improve the UK education system, it's data."

How do teachers (and pupils) feel about that? People may like to think their work is immeasurable, says Lemov, but these days the price of failure is too high. "Teachers are very anxious about being measured, then they find out how useful data is, and teachers who use data come to love it.

"We live in a different society than we did 30 years ago. We had good working-class jobs in the US. They are gone now. It's a knowledge-based economy now and it's not right to say we are going to risk sending kids out there who are not prepared. I would like to be unmeasured too, but it's not a defensible position."

Lemov's book is subtitled "49 techniques that put students on the path to college", and even the most trivial classroom activities – such as handing out papers – are addressed. For example, Doug McCurry, founder of the Amistad academy in Connecticut, has perfected a technique for handing out materials swiftly and effectively that Lemov calculates could save 65 hours during a school year.

Another technique is "cold calling". The problem with teachers asking questions in class, waiting for children to put their hands up, is that the children decide whether to participate. Lemov favours a no-opt-out approach – there's no show of hands, everyone has to be prepared to answer. "I decide as the teacher who is going to say the answer out loud, but everyone in the room does the work. A very identifiable, actionable thing you can do to change the dynamics in the classroom.

"It's teaching as a craft – making it better. Teachers soldier on in anonymity, we never honour them. To me it's the most important work in society. Part of my goal is to make them visible."

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Educational reform

Viva la revolución

The British government must continue to push ahead with its bold school reforms

EVERYBODY knows how much schooling matters in the knowledge economy, but few governments have pounced on the idea of educational reform with much enthusiasm. Charter schools in America have shown a lot of promise, but their adoption has been patchy. Parts of Germany have got rid of underperforming schools and reformed technical education. Formerly Soviet Estonia has embraced new technology and data-management with impressive results. But the country that has seen the most radical structural reform is Britain.

Michael Gove, education secretary until earlier this year, faced down left-wing teaching unions and rapidly expanded the academies programme, introduced by the Labour government in the early 2000s to make schools independent of local-government bureaucracies. So far, two-thirds of all England's state-funded, non-selective comprehensive schools (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own systems) have been set free. Some 4,000 secondary schools therefore now control their own staffing, curriculum and budgets.

New evidence on the performance of the first pupils to pass through academies (see page 31) suggests that the programme is working. Although the picture is mixed, academy pupils' results have improved faster than those of pupils in mainstream schools; the longer schools have been academies, and the more autonomy they have gained, the better they do. Some of the improvements are startling: the ARK academy chain, for example, has turned around a school in a deprived part of Portsmouth which, in 2006, produced a 3% pass-rate in five key subjects at the national GCSE exams for 16-year-olds. This year the pass-rate was up to 79%. Such performances have inspired interest in the model from a clutch of developing countries, including India and Kenya.

Mr Gove has been shunted aside for fear that his bluntness and the intense loathing for him that many teachers feel, could be a liability at next May's general election. There are fears that the academy programme may therefore lose momentum. It would be a great shame if it did, not just because it seems to be improving schools, but also because experience so far suggests how it can be improved further.

For-profit prophets

The academies' performance varies wildly. Although some are brilliant, others are dreadful. They therefore need to be rigorously monitored. Ofsted, England's schools inspectorate, has recently won powers to examine English academy chains, which should help. A rising generation of head teachers, trained in the new breed of schools, should be bolder in speeding up changes and squeezing out weaker staff.

Better-run chains need clearer incentives to take over failing ones, but successful chains should not be encouraged to expand too far or too fast. The biggest problems have appeared in the biggest chains. That limits the potential speed of change, but faster change carries risks.

Perhaps most important—and controversially—for-profit providers should be allowed into the mix, as they are in America and Sweden. Public-sector reforms generally work best when the widest possible number of providers can compete to show they can do things better. There is clearly still room for new entrants, especially outside the main cities.

The academies have brought new energy to England's education system. They need refinement but not retreat. ■

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Education reform

The new school rules

The academies programme has transformed England's educational landscape

THE King Solomon Academy, a squat modern building overshadowed by social-housing tower blocks in central London, feels like the kind of inner-city school that reformers dream of creating. The mood is attentive, the walls festooned with quotes enjoining pupils to aim high.

The school, set up in 2007, is run by ARK, one of the charities, regulated by the government, that are reshaping English education. King Solomon says it wants to be "transformational" and, so far, it has succeeded. Fully 93% of the school's 16-year-olds gained five good pass grades in core subjects in their GCSE exams this year, compared with 64% in the capital as a whole, even though three-fifths of its pupils come from homes with low incomes.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to power aiming to improve England's dismal showing in global education rankings (it came 26th in the recent maths-centred round of PISA tests run by the OECD). It swiftly embarked on a mission to expand the conversion of state schools into so-called academies. The last Labour government began the project in 2002, creating non-selective schools financed from the public purse but outside the control of local authorities, which for decades had presided over a patchy system of state secondary schools, known as comprehensives.

It is uphill work. A country that funds education quite generously (13% of government spending, in the top third of outlays on schools in the developed world) lags far behind Asian high-performers such as South Korea, Japan and Hong Kong as well as improvers closer to home, such as Germany, which in the past decade has reversed its poor performance.

Under Michael Gove, a reformist education secretary, the coalition sought to speed up reforms, boosting the number of academies to about 4,000, almost 20 times as many as in 2010. That means about two-thirds of all English secondary schools now control their own staffing, curriculum and budgets. Mr Gove also created 250 free schools, with another 112 pending: usually new startups, set up by parents or community groups, with the same freedoms as academies but often smaller in scale. (Scotland and Wales have stayed aloof from the experiment, wary of the more fragmented educational landscape they fear it creates.)

The reforms have shown commendable vim, compared with the halting overhauls of other major public services such as health and welfare. An "unprecedented change in England's schools" is under way, says Stephen Machin, an economics professor at University College London. But with a general election due in May 2015, nervousness about the impact of the upheaval is apparent. In July the prime minister abruptly replaced the combative Mr Gove (who called opponents of his reforms "the blob"). His replacement, Nicky Morgan, has struck a more soothing tone. She has gone out of her way to express commitment to raising standards across the entire spectrum of schools. It is, however, the success of academies that will determine how impressive the coalition's reforms look to voters next May.

The dash for more autonomy has quickly created two varieties of academy. In 2010 all 203 academies were sponsored by businesses, religious groups or charities, and mainly set up to replace under-performing schools. Most of the more recent converters, by contrast, have not benefited from the external guidance of sponsors, whether individuals, other schools or charitable foundations. Instead, they are trying to change directly from being council-run schools to academies—a harder task.

On the up

The good news for the reformers is that, where academies are well-run, the results vindicate the argument for greater freedoms. Two new pieces of research, tracking pupils from schools which converted to academies before 2010, suggest that more freedoms for those who run schools can indeed raise results for both richer pupils and those from less well-off backgrounds (an important point, since many opponents on the left fret that academies attract middle-class parents and neglect the less privileged).

A report entitled "Chain Effect" for the Sutton Trust, which promotes social mobility, found that in the five leading academy chains, the proportion of poor pupils achieving five good GCSEs is at least 15 percentage points higher than the average for similar pupils in non-academy schools.

A separate study by Professor Machin and Andrew Eyles at the London School of Economics identified "beneficial effects" in schools becoming academies. Rates of improvement were also faster for more autonomous schools than for general secondary schools, and the biggest improvements were in schools converting from comprehensives, rather than from other types, such as church schools. "Autonomy", the authors conclude, "effectively acts to facilitate school improvement." Additional research shows that 43% of pupils entitled to free school meals in comprehensives that did not convert to the academy model gained five good GCSEs. That rose to 45% in those that did convert—a small increase, but achieved rapidly.

Half-full or half-empty?

Alas, this promising picture describes only about half of the schools set free from local authorities. There are strikingly large differences in the performances of academy chains. One, the E-ACT chain which ran over 30 schools, was ordered to hand ten back to central government control earlier this year. Sir David Bell, the most senior civil servant in charge of the school reforms in 2007-10, now vice-chancellor of Reading University, thinks larger chains can acquire some of the same problems that local authorities had, "being too big to have oversight over what happens in individual schools and too bureaucratic". Hopes that big providers might offer consistent quality at scale have faded, to be replaced by an acknowledgment that keeping chains small or medium-sized may prove more reliable.

Supporters of academies want to see the best chains expand, driving out bad ones. In practice this can be painfully slow, because the best chains tend to expand prudently rather than rush to create empires. Liam Nolan, who heads the Perry Beeches network of six academies and free schools around Birmingham, says he favours "close-knit families of schools" in geographically close areas, where staff can be swapped around or moved to more senior jobs within the group. Mr Nolan thinks success is achieved by "spreading an ethos as well as technical teaching tips". But this leaves post-Gove reformers wondering how to sustain a rapid pace of reform without compromising on quality.

This tension runs through school reforms in many countries. Germany, for example, is struggling to apply to other areas the changes it made to secondary education in Saxony, which closed poorly performing schools. A number of lessons from America's best charter schools (a forerunner of academies) might help. A study of the most successful ones by Roland Fryer of Harvard University found that the quality of school heads was closely monitored and underperformers were quickly ousted. Longer school days improved literacy and numeracy, especially among the less able. Performance data—still erratically used in English schools—were deployed to track pupils' progress.

The standard of inspectorates also matters. Sweden's free-school movement, for instance, was let down by poor follow-up from inspectors. Sir Michael Wilshaw, head of Ofsted, the British government's schools watchdog, has fought for more powers to examine academy chains—an overdue step.

Meanwhile the fate of the free-school programme looks less certain. The coalition's reformers hoped they would boost innovation by allowing parents or community groups to start schools. Few doubt that the momentum driving the creation of new free schools will falter if Labour, which is cool about the experiment, is elected in May, so many potential founders are rushing in their applications now. And even with the present government's backing, free schools represent a mere 4% of the total number of schools in 2014, rising to around 6% by 2015.

One reason the government talks less enthusiastically about free schools than it did is that they can cause headaches over accountability. In one dramatic example, the Muslim al-Madinah free school in the city of Derby closed this year after complaints of fundamentalist proselytising, intimidation of non-Muslim staff and poor teaching. The saga suggests that badly run schools can decline more quickly than national inspectors can monitor. Attempts to agree upon a middle tier of local accountability that does not involve handing power back to local authorities have been fraught.

No blobs here, Mr Gove

The words of the non-profits

But accountability is not the same as momentum, and some believe the best way to turbocharge the reforms would be to allow for-profit operators into the mix. Toby Young, a journalist who became one of the first free-school founders in London, argues that such a move would overcome regulatory and bureaucratic obstacles. Allowing for-profit chains to operate (as in America and Sweden) might well help expand the limited pool of people willing to start new schools. Allowing only non-profit groups to become new providers has encouraged the overexpansion of some chains, often with little competition. Ms Morgan says that she would like to revisit the argument, though she freely admits that "most people wouldn't like it".

One interim solution is to encourage other successful academic institutions to oversee academies. Birmingham University is launching an academy, which will also train new teachers. University College London has created a specialist science school. The private sector is also being encouraged to sponsor more academies: Wellington College, a leading private school, has added a primary school to the secondary school it already runs.

For all the gripes about academies, often from vested interests (notably teachers' unions) who prefer the state to dominate the provision of education, England's secondary-education system has adapted quickly to new freedoms. It needs to use more of them, driving out weaker heads and teachers and finding quicker ways of exposing and fixing failures. Yet a tour of the country's new breed of schools is, on the whole, an uplifting experience. It shows a more diverse system, one more firmly focused on improvement.

One lesson stands out: the culture of achievement, especially in literacy, has to be instilled before children reach their stroppy, secondary-school years. So fixing education should start younger, with more academies, like King Solomon, taking pupils from the age of three up to 18. For all their flaws and failings, the new schools have injected something exciting into a once-moribund education landscape: the belief that regardless of wealth or background, schools can transform lives. ■

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London Evening Standard

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Murakami mania
Japanese novel that became book of the summer
Pages 20 & 21

A MODERN MEDICI

BANKER WHO WANTS A RABBIT WARREN BASEMENT UNDER HIS THREE HOUSES
PAGE 9

FIRST FALL FOR 32 YEARS AFTER RE-SITS ARE SCRAPPED

SHOCK DROP IN A-LEVEL PASSES

BUT A* GRADES RISE AS RECORD NUMBERS GO TO UNIVERSITY

Anna Davis
education correspondent

THEA-level pass rate has dropped for the first time in more than three decades after tough new exam reforms began to take effect and teenagers turned to harder subjects.

A combination of re-sits being scrapped and a rise in students taking maths and science has led to the first fall in results for 32 years.

But despite the overall drop, the percentage of students achieving the top A* rose slightly. And a record of nearly 400,000 students have already been accepted on to university courses. Results released today show:

- The overall pass rate for all subjects has dropped by 0.1 per cent to 98 per cent – the first time since the 1980s.
- The proportion of exams graded A* increased slightly by 0.1 per cent to 8.2 per cent.
- The number of students taking exams in biology, chemistry and physics rose by two per cent. Maths and further maths were also up.
- But numbers taking English were down and there was a 24 per cent drop in numbers taking general studies.

Students receiving their results today are the first to feel the impact of reforms brought in by former Education Secretary Michael Gove.

This year all January A-level re-sits were abolished, forcing students to take exams at one sitting in the summer and reducing their chances to bump up grades.

Exam boards wrote to all schools today, warning them that the move may cause "volatility" in their results but

Continued on Page 6

Made the grade: Ark Putney Academy pupils Sara Khoshnaw, Omer Minhas and Marie Mathison are heading for university

Girl killed by her mother in parking accident
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Pride of 100m golden boy's family
PAGE 11

Child's nut allergy horror on plane
PAGE 13

'I fled from a war and now I'm going to Cambridge...I just can't believe it'

Josh Pettitt and Matt Watts

DELIGHTED Sara Khoshnaw today spoke of her joy after her A-level success, saying: "I just can't believe I'm going to Cambridge."

Sara, 18, from Southfields, south-west London, fled war-torn Kurdistan with her parents and two older sisters when she was just eight.

She is now going on from Ark Putney Academy to Cambridge to study medicine after achieving As in further maths, biology and chemistry and an A* in maths, and said: "There was a war going on and my parents decided to escape the country so we were asylum seekers when we arrived here. I never thought I would make it to Cambridge from that starting point.

"The situation there is obviously not great at the moment, so I'm really glad I'm here."

Fellow pupil Marie Mathison, 18, from Wimbledon, only came to London three years ago from Venezuela. Speaking no English, she quickly had to settle in and took all her GCSEs in one year.

Today she achieved A*s in biology, chemistry and Spanish and an A in maths and is going to study dentistry at Plymouth.

She said: "I was really nervous starting school and I had no idea what people were saying at first, so I just stood there and smiled. I had to do all my GCSEs in one year, so I've had to work really hard to get to this point.

"I'm so happy, I was not expecting these results at all. I was really worried about biology, but I somehow got an A* in it."

In Newham, Rumana Ali, 18, is set to be the first person in her family to go to university after winning a place to study history at Oxford. She said her taxi driver father and her mother, a housewife, were incredibly proud of her after she got two A*s and an A.

Rumana, a Newham Sixth Form College pupil, added: "For me to get to university really is a dream come true."

Gerda Kildisiute, 19, who also comes from Newham, has won a place at Oxford despite living on her ownand having to support herself working in a fruit and veg supermarket in Hackney.

She arrived from Lithuania two years ago to live with her father, but after a disagreement moved out and had been supporting herself since.

Her offer was for two A*s and an A, but she just got 3As. Fortunately she was still given her place by Oxford.

ALEX LENTATI

JEREMY SELWYN

University places: Sara Khoshnaw, left, who fled from war-torn Kurdistan with her family as a child, and Rumana Ali, above, and Gerda Kildisiute, below

Ark

Pilot scheme: Aisha Abdulsalam hopes to be her nation's first female flier

Young Kurd plans to be a high-flier

A PUTNEY girl hopes to become the first female Kurdish commercial pilot after passing two A-levels.

Aisha Abdulsalam, 18, from Ark Putney Academy passed maths and art and design A-levels and will take aviation pilot studies at Buckinghamshire New University after being inspired by her uncle, a pilot.

Aisha, who took her A-levels while caring for her mother, who has cancer, said: "In my country Iraq, there are no women pilots. So if I do become a pilot I will be the first Kurdish woman to become a pilot."

Aisha has been awarded a £3,000 bursary from Marshall Wace to help support her during her first year of studies. She said: "It means a lot because I live in a council flat. Money doesn't come easy. My mum doesn't work. It's really beneficial for me."

Anna Davis

19 August 2014

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A-Level Results Day 2014: Student Aisha Abdulsalam On Track To Become First Kurdish Female Pilot

The Huffington Post | By Tasha Kleeman

Posted: 14/08/2014 13:51 BST | Updated: 14/08/2014 13:59 BST

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Among the thousands receiving A-level results on Thursday was ARK Putney Academy student Aisha Abdulsalam, who is set to be the world's first Kurdish female Pilot.

After achieving A-levels in Maths and Art & Design, she has gained a place to study Aviation Pilot Studies at Buckinghamshire New University.

Aviation has always been a dream of Aisha's, inspired by her uncle, a pilot. "He used to tell me about planes and how fun it was," she explained.

However, it was joining the Air Cadets which made Aisha decide to turn her dream into a reality. "I started flying solo and then I felt the thrill of it and I was like, 'that's it. I want to be a pilot'. That's the day that I was definitely one hundred percent sure what I wanted to do."

Becoming a pilot is a big deal for Aisha. "In my country as well as in Iraq, there are no women pilots. So if I do become a pilot, I will be the first Kurdish woman to become a pilot."

Marshall Wace has awarded Aisha a £3,000 bursary to support her studies, a fund which she appreciates greatly.

"It means a lot because I live in a council flat. Money doesn't come easy as my mum doesn't work. I wouldn't know where else to get a loan from, and I know that if I get this bursary I don't need to pay it back when I'm older. It's really beneficial for me."

Aisha's dreams do not end with becoming a pilot, however. "I don't want to stop there. I want to retire early and then organise my own charity."

The charity she envisions would provide support to families and carers of those suffering from terminal illnesses, a topic close to her heart.

Last year, on top of juggling her A-levels, Aisha was caring for her mum who was diagnosed with cancer. "I would like people to be helped out so that the person can be looked after while they go and do whatever they want to do."

Aisha understands the importance of her education in realising her dream: "Education is your oyster. It takes you where you want to go. If you apply yourself to whatever you want to do and in your education then it will always be behind you one hundred percent."

Ark

Pupils do better at schools in academy chains

Greg Hurst Education Editor

Teenagers at academies run by the strongest sponsors outperform similar pupils at schools backed by the weakest by up to two grades in each GCSE, research has found.

Children in schools sponsored by top-performing academy chains might, therefore, achieve straight B grades in their GCSEs while teenagers of the same ability might get Ds at an academy with a weak sponsor.

The study, led by the University of Southampton, is the first to seek to measure the impact of academy chains on results.

Overall, it found that schools run by a multiple academy sponsor produced better results than single academy schools. This was based on averaged results across 10 groups of academies.

It found a bigger variance between school chains with different sponsors and even among schools within the same group. The most successful chains were those that used a hands-on, centralised approach such as setting targets for results, teaching support, training and senior appointments.

The Government is encouraging academies, which are independent of local authorities, have more autonomy and are centrally funded.

The study shows that the best academy chains, which share a single sponsor, are highly effective but raises questions about the worst performers.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, Ofsted's chief inspector, has pressed for powers to inspect head offices of academy chains but Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, has refused. Last month Ofsted instead inspected 16 academies sponsored by the E-ACT group.

The study's researchers did not identify the academy chains but it is understood E-ACT was the lowest performing. The best were Ark and the Harris Federation. Perhaps surprisingly the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) chain scored well in the first two years of results studied but not in the third, for which there was too little data. AET was the first chain barred from taking on new schools last year amid Government concerns about its performance.

Researchers looked at 72 schools that had been sponsored by a chain for at least three years, and compared their GCSE results with those in 72 academies with a single sponsor or governing body. Pupils were matched to find similar intakes by using their primary school results, deprivation where they lived and first language.

"Results show that being part of a chain was positively related to pupil outcomes, explaining up to 21 per cent of school-level variance in attainment," a paper on their research says. But there were also big differences in results at schools within chains, both between different sponsors and in some among schools within the same chain. "Centralisation was found to be significantly related to student attainment taking intake into account," the paper says.

Professor Chris Chapman, of the University of Manchester, who worked on the study with academics from the University of Southampton, said: "Poorer performing chains tend to replicate the characteristics of low performing local authorities. These include perceived lack of value for money by schools within the chains and ineffective monitoring and support for improvement. Therefore, to date, chains have failed to deliver a credible alternative to local authorities."

News

Academy chains outperform state schools

Greg Hurst Education Editor

Pupils in schools run by the best academy chains do significantly better than children at other state schools, research has shown. GCSE results were above average in schools run by nine academy sponsors, for poor children and other pupils, academics found.

The study, which looked at the performance of 31 academy chains, found a wide disparity, with children at several doing markedly worse. Some of these schools were offering a worse education to their poorest pupils, they said.

The research, commissioned by the Sutton Trust charity, was the largest attempt to date to quantify the performance of so-called chains that run three or more academies. There are 192 chains overall and they vary greatly, with AET, the largest, running 74 schools.

In general academy chains have taken over failing schools, whose results were much lower than average and which tend to be in poor areas.

Using figures from the national pupil database, the study looked at the results of poor children in samples of secondary schools that had been run by their sponsors for at least three years.

In addition to overall GCSE results, it looked at the progress made by disadvantaged pupils in English and maths in comparison with their test results on leaving primary school, a points score to measure achievement across all GCSE grades and results in core academic subjects in the government's "EBacc" measure.

Results were consistently well above average in academies run by five sponsors: ARK, Barnfield, the Corporation of London, Harris Federation and the Mercers' Company. Overall performance was above average in four other chains: Dixons City Academy trust in Bradford, Habersdashers' Aske's, Kent Catholic Schools Partnership and Leigh Academies trust, also in Kent.

Achievement among poorer pupils was improving faster than the national average rate in 18 academy chains, but the report said this was to be expected since, as underperforming schools, their starting point was a lower attainment base.

The authors, Professor Becky Francis, of King's College London, and Professor Merryn Hutchings, of London Metropolitan University, said some academy chains may have to neglect children from more affluent families, whose results barely improved.

Their report hailed the "striking success" of some chains but said the poor results of others was "a clear and urgent problem". Three of the worst were Church of England diocese, in Oxford, Salisbury and Leeds and Ripon, which is no longer a sponsor.

"Far from providing a solution to disadvantage, a few chains may be exacerbating it," they said.

They called on the Department for Education (DfE) to publish more data.

A DfE spokesman said: "We welcome the Sutton Trust's report which underlines the hugely valuable work being done by academy chains across the country to improve the lives of thousands of disadvantaged pupils."

Top of the form

Harris Federation 27 academies and free schools, mainly in south London
City of London Corporation three academies in Islington, Hackney and Southwark
Barnfield Education Partnership schools and colleges in Luton
Mercers' Company co-sponsors Thomas Telford School and three Midlands academies
ARK Schools 27 academies and free schools in London, Birmingham and Portsmouth

What works, what fails, in the bid to build good free schools?

Keen parents and individual charitable trusts are not enough to create a good primary school such as Ark Conway. Success comes with the expertise and skills of organisations that resemble the best education authorities

Daniel Boffey
POLICY EDITOR

The serenity of the lobby-cum-assembly hall at the first free school awarded an outstanding Ofsted report is as good a place as any for those seeking sanctuary from the political gnashing and wailing that has become a hallmark of Michael Gove's time as education secretary.

A stream of soothing orchestral music – compositions last week by the Russian pianist Sergei Rachmaninov – welcome the children, staff and visitors to the Ark Conway primary school's Grade II-listed building in East Acton, west London, a small former public library. "It's one of the things I think is really important that the children experience," said the headteacher, Damian McBeath. "Every child is exposed to classical music and we talk about how it makes them feel. It is about the ethos of the school."

In Potter class (each of the school's three classes is named after an author), year one pupils, in smart V-neck sky-blue jumpers and ties, are having a "maths mastery" lesson. Every so often the five- and six-year-olds' teacher, Rebecca Carver, cries maths "star position!" and the boys and girls sitting in allocated places on a "learning mat" adjust their posture, sit up and refocus.

It may not sound like much, but those who have worked for Ofsted say more often than not they can tell the calibre of a school in minutes by walking in, not least because of an atmosphere of calm. Staff at this school said that, in all security, they had looked forward to a visit from one of Ofsted's inspectors.

When the school received its outstanding judgment last year, Gove put it well: "Ark Conway has demonstrated how a brilliant school, with a culture of high expectations, great leadership and inspiring teachers, can be truly excellent across the board within two years."

This small school – outside the supervision of the local education authority – is doing extraordinarily well. "Every child is on target to do better than the national average, regardless of their background," McBeath said.

However, the secret of its success, along with that of a further eight outstanding free schools – and the failings of the four that have been deemed inadequate and the eight requiring improvement – may offer clues to how the work in an environment and sector where swift success is required, and also signposts the direction of travel for a free school programme that seems to be rejecting its radical, sometimes reckless, past. The schools that work do so with the backing of organisations that resemble – dare it be said – the best sort of local education authorities.

Emily Phillips, a professional songwriter and mother to two daughters, Scarlett, seven, and Celeste, three, worked for three years trying to get Conway primary school up and running when she became concerned by a lack of primary school places in her area, and Hammersmith and Fulham council's blasé assumption that this would be dealt with by "bulging" classes.

But the sheer pressure and weight of the bureaucracy, she admits today, came with a catastrophic impact on her life. That was when the highly successful academy chain, Ark, came in and lifted the burden and made the operation part. With Ark in place, offering staff better terms of pay and stability that comes with a track record of steering outstanding and good schools, the best teachers were willing to join Conway primary school's little revolution.

Today it educates 90 children, but will expand to a capacity of 210. Ark send their best headteachers to carry out unofficial Ofsteds at the 20-school chain; the 13 that have been inspected by Ofsted were all ranked good or outstanding. And there is a feeling of being part of an organisation that is unlikely to roll over and fold in response to a future disobliging report.

Cast one's gaze to the failures, and it is that support system that is missing. The document leaked to the Observer, written by civil servants for academies minister John Nash, today spells that out. "Experience has shown us that free schools in their first years of operation are different from other open academies, and face problems that are often not educational in origin," says its the document, marked confidential and sensitive. "These often include operating in temporary sites without a clear permanent home; new, inexperienced and often isolated [charitable] trusts needing to up-skill themselves to run a school for the first time; instability in principal appointments and senior leadership teams."

Examples of such difficulties, including findings, show that the support of a local education authority, are legion. Former parents at CET Primary School Westminster, which recently received a "requires improvement" Ofsted rating, complained that the school had been set up temporarily in an office block without any outdoor space. "A school with no provision for this will eventually end up with sick children who are unable to focus," said one parent, who did not want to be named.

When it comes to isolated trusts incapable of dealing with the challenges of establishing a school, critics need go no further than Discovery New School in Crawley, west Sussex, which shut its doors last week because of concerns over teaching standards. "Poor governance was a big issue," admitted one of the school's founders, Andrew Snowdon, whose wife had also been the headteacher until she was suspended over what had described as a "vitriolic" Ofsted report. "The sheer weight of bureaucracy was also incredible."

Then there is the concomitant instability at the top of schools. Inexperienced and unsupported staff contributed to the failure of Derby's Al-Madinah free school, ordered to shut down in February, which was not part of a wider chain. Snowdon's wife at the Discovery New School was suspended by a nervous governing body which replaced her with a woman on twice the salary before calling in an early Ofsted inspection when the school was not ready. And Sherry Zand, who was appointed to lead IES Brackland School in Ipswich, Suffolk, which was rated inadequate this month, despite never having had experience of deputy headship, left after just one year.

In each of these schools, a support network one would normally find in the local education authority has not been replaced adequately – in the case of IES Brackland because that support body was in Swindon, where the rest of its schools are based.

Richard Sinnott, chair of CET Primary School Westminster, dismisses the concerns about his school of some parents, whom he believes have private, unshared gripes, but admits that he has always believed his school needs to be in a chain of five to 10 schools to be a viable proposition (there are currently two CET primary schools). In Crawley, Snowdon complains that Ofsted, whose series of terrible reports essentially closed Discovery New School down, was not willing to make exceptions for a place which he says was doing things in a different way. "The free school programme will work, but not as was originally intended," he said.

It would seem that if Gove's flagship policy is to succeed – as today's revelations about the "political ramifications" of failure being central to Department for Education thinking suggests that, for the government's sake, it must – then it may well do so in a form that observers of this country's education system would recognise.

Natalie Evans, director of the New Schools Network charity, given responsibility by Gove for helping parents and teachers to set up free schools, admits that the programme is indeed evolving. But she believes that the big choices will not dominate – as some forecast – and that the government is not just recreating local education authorities and the dead hand of innovation that many suggest they represent.

"I think we are certainly seeing an evolution of the programme," she said. "There is no question that the application is rigorous because this is about setting up new schools. I don't think anyone would say that the process shouldn't be rigorous. And it has evolved over the last four years to be extremely testing.

"You have to have educational expertise of some form within your group. You have to have financial understanding, a set out governance structure. There is no question it is a difficult process.

"We are seeing the development of small chains. Perhaps in the free school programme we are seeing the development of more chains of three to eight schools."

Back in East Acton, Ark Conway's headteacher does not even think of it as a free school now. It's an academy, part of a chain. McBeath adds: "Ark doesn't like to be described as a local education authority. From my experience of local authorities, there is an extra degree of professionalism here. I'm not sitting at meetings and hearing people complain. We are really focusing on what counts and how we can take things forward."

But Phillips, sitting in the playground, surrounded by happy children, does worry that the rise of chains could sound the death knell for her initial vision of independent institutions sprouting up, offering independent takes on education. That was surely also Gove's vision when in 2011 he said: "Free schools offer a genuine alternative – and they have the freedom to be different ... We are not being prescriptive about free schools, so they come in all shapes and sizes."

As the school bell rings, though, and the children politely line up to re-enter their classrooms, Phillips reflects: "I couldn't have done it on my own. Ark had the resources that got this school working."

Schools 'use dirty tricks' in battle for sixth-form pupils

by Daniel Boffey
Policy Editor

Schools desperate to encourage pupils to stay on for the sixth form are binning brochures sent by post-16 colleges, arranging school outings to coincide with open days at rival institutions and offering incomplete careers advice, according to members of the Association of Colleges.

Secondary schools that cater for pupils from 11 to 18 are engaging in an assortment of "protective measures" to ensure that they do not lose their students to colleges. A college principal, who wished to remain anonymous, said one school in the south-west arranged an ice-skating trip for pupils on the date of the local college's open day. That school also failed to give out copies if the college's brochures until after the deadline for applications to its own sixth form.

Schools are even deceiving pupils by "selling their students that the raising of the participation age means that you have to stay on at school", when the pupils do have the choice of moving on to a college to do A-levels or vocational qualifications, according to Joy Mercer, the AoC's director of policy.

The full scale of the tactics being deployed has been revealed in a survey of members of the AoC, which represents sixth-form colleges and colleges offering vocational courses.

A report to be published next week claims that the schools are aided in their sometimes duplicitous behaviour by the decision to cut funding to the Connexions careers advice service for teenagers, and the decision to make schools responsible for providing advice and information.

The report says: "They [pupils] stay on at school to do A-levels because that is what they are told, is their best option, but many drop out after their AS-levels when it becomes clear to them – and often to the school – that they are not going to pass their exams.

"What happens next is that they either end up not in employment, education or training or they find their way to a college where they are able to pursue a qualification that suits them, whether that be academic, vocational or a mixture of both. However, they could have gone straight to college if they'd been given information about the full range of options available."

It adds: "Colleges still find it difficult to get schools to allow them access to all their pupils to tell them about their options. Schools offer 'cherry-pick' the students they will allow colleges to speak to – usually those considered 'less academic' – or do not allow pupils time away from school to attend open days."

Nine out of 10 members of the AoC said schools were trying to retain students for their own sixth forms and about half felt there was a lack of careers information for pupils from outside the secondary schools.

The survey found that 74% of the AoC's 341 sixth-form and further education member colleges in England felt information, advice and guidance had worsened because schools want to keep the more academic students to bolster their performance tables, regardless of what is in the best interests of the individuals.

David Walrond, principal of Truro and Penwith College, said he had expressed his concerns to the minister for skills, Matthew Hancock. "When we carry out a survey of our students and ask about the quality of advice and guidance concerning the college's offer and opportunities post-16 generally, about two-thirds of the students in 11-16 [age group] schools say they thought it was adequate. But only a third say that in 11-18 schools," explained Walrond.

"With schools, whether it is sometimes tran't do' because they were left with the duty to give advice and guidance without the resources to do it, or whether it is 'won't do' because small schools are engaging in protective behaviour, the outcome is the same.

"But we notice that whereas 11-16 schools will invite us in, give out our prospectus, offer taster days and talk about apprenticeships and vocational qualifications, generally the 11-18 schools won't because it is not in their interests. They have a financial imperative to put more bums on seats".

Ark

Tycoon's son and ex-gang member team up for peak performance

High in the Alps above Chamonix, the mood was turning sour. "All I could hear was: 'You guys are not my friends,'" says Sam Branson, son of Sir Richard, "and I thought: 'This could be the worst charity backfire of all time. I'm climbing Mont Blanc with a gangster from south London who clearly doesn't like me very much at the moment, and I've given him an ice-axe.'"

Sam, 28, laughs at the memory – and then grins at 24-year-old Karl Lokko, who is sitting next to him: "But we got you through, didn't we? Step by step."

Karl, now a youth ambassador at Kids Company, throws back: "And then, three days later, when you were fed up and struggling, I helped you." There is a distinct whiff of bromance in the air when we meet at the ARK Burlington Danes Academy in White City, west London. Here, the two young men from very different backgrounds are launching the Virgin Strive challenge: a month-long endurance event starting today, which will see them join a small team running, rowing, cycling and climbing from the London O_2 Arena to the top of the Matterhorn.

While the group will include explorers and elite athletes, such as former Wimbledon champion Marion Bartoli, Sam's elder sister Holly will not be joining them. It was announced via a blog yesterday that she and her husband Freddie Andrewes are expecting twins, making Sam an uncle, and Sir Richard a grandfather.

ANDREW CROWLEY

'Cynicism is destructive': Sam Branson and Karl Lokko in training for the Strive challenge

However, the team will not lack star power: celebrities, ranging from Jack Whitehall and Jamie Oliver to Princess Beatrice and Prof Brian Cox, will all be taking part en route.

The challenge will raise money for Big Change, a charity founded by Sam and the princess in 2010, designed to help raise young people above their circumstances through positive support and guidance. The team also hopes that Strive will inspire children all over the country to develop better life skills, such as communication and self-confidence, by seeing the value of setting goals and striving to achieve them.

For Karl, this has meant walking away from a violent adolescence as part of London's gang culture. He now studies politics at Queen Mary University of London, is a poet and a popular mentor in his community.

Sam's experience was not as dramatic, but challenging nonetheless: how do you grow up as the son of a maverick billionaire businessman, and develop your own identity, while avoiding the pitfalls of being young, good-looking, well-connected and rich?

Though his mother, Joan, kept Sam and Holly firmly out of the limelight growing up, this didn't make decisions easy – and Sam wavered about his future at first. After attending St Edward's School, Oxford, he dropped out of university, taking Cordon Bleu classes, picking up modelling work and spending three months in LA on a music course.

Direction came via his first big adventure: a trip to the Arctic, aged 22, when he joined a 1,200-mile, four-month trek across Baffin Island.

"It taught me about what you can achieve if you push yourself," Sam says of the trip. "I went through a lot of soul-searching, trying to understand what my purpose was. I went away a boy, came back a man."

Gradually, his "self-awakening" has turned into a philosophy for life: every journey, he believes, is part of the achievement. "The message I want to spread is that every time you strive, you get a little bit closer to where and who you want to be."

The latest goal is his human-powered expedition to the top of an iconic mountain. "It's a pretty daunting thing," admits Sam, remarkably calm about the epic adventure ahead. "It will be equal parts fear and fun.

"In my family, we are always challenging ourselves. My parents taught me that you can go through life seeing everything as a miracle, or that nothing is."

Sam knows from his father's experience in the public eye that he will be judged – possibly harshly, often unfairly – as soon as he puts himself into the spotlight, as he is doing today. So far, his life has been relatively low-profile, though his 2013 wedding to Isabella Anstruther-Gough-Calthorpe, half-sister of Cressida Bonas, Prince Harry's recent ex-girlfriend, was photographed by *Hello!* magazine.

Sam shrugs off any suggestion that he leads a starry life. "My parents are humble," he says. "My family's idea of fun is to enjoy a dinner, or just have a cup of tea together. Of course, we have the confidence to stick our necks out, but still everyone can be shy.

"People get driven by fear to be judgmental. You have to have the confidence to be happy. I believe cynicism is incredibly destructive; I want to share as much positivity as possible."

Karl nods in agreement. He admits that in south London he is known as Mary Poppins, as he is liable to turn up anywhere he's needed to instil common sense and good behaviour into troubled youngsters. In which case, Sam should surely be nicknamed Pollyanna.

He is unrelentingly upbeat, charming and optimistic. "I'm part of a generation who aren't cynics," he says. "We don't care about the bull----, and we want to make change."

strivechallenge.com

Victoria Lambert

Ark

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY
5 JANUARY 2014

'The children used to throw chairs at people out of the window'

A failing school was turned around – with a little help from the Royal Navy – as Education Editor **Richard Garner** discovers

The school's motto – brought to the attention of its pupils daily – says it all: "Work hard, be nice and no excuses." It wasn't always so. Its principal, Dame Sharon Hollows, recalls trying to persuade a neighbouring school to use the school's swimming pool. "They said no," she said. "When I asked them why, they said that when they had used it in the past, the children used to throw chairs at them out of the third floor window and spit at them."

That was in the days of the former St Luke's Church of England school in Portsmouth. The school, which has become the Charter Academy, is viewed in national circles as an outstanding model for tackling the thorniest problem facing the UK's education system: how to address the poor performance of white working-class pupils.

The task facing Dame Sharon as the first head of the new academy five years ago was immense. Fourteen years ago, not a single pupil at the school achieved five A* to C grade passes at GCSE, including maths and English. A decade ago, the school was languishing in the bottom three of national school league tables with only 3 per cent.

Today it can boast 68 per cent A* to C – making it the top performing school in the city and above average for the country. Dame Sharon reckons the results could have been even better had the school not gained a reputation for coping with pupils transferring schools, sometimes because of behaviour problems, or newly moved to the area. Just over half the age cohort in the GCSE year were new arrivals at the school during that year.

In Dame Sharon, ARK Schools, sponsors of the school, had found someone with a proven track record for turning schools round. She had previously worked in the East End of London as a primary school head, running the most improved school in the country, Calverton in Newham.

"I have to say it has been different to my experience in London," she said. "There I've always worked with schools with very diverse ethnic school intakes. This one is not – this is predominantly white working class. The challenges are different.

"I met so many families here who just didn't have any expectations for anything other than generation on generation of dependence on the state.

"I was shocked at the time. I think you tackle it by constantly telling the children and the parents they can do it – by constantly giving them examples of people who had [made it]."

She added: "I'm used to having to teach English to those who come from other countries but this was a big shock – there were children arriving in the secondary school with a reading age of four."

Brought up in the cotton and mining communities of Burnley, Lancashire, she was able to draw on her own childhood to help lift their aspirations. Both my parents left school at 14," she said. "If it hadn't been for education, I would not have been able to pursue this fantastic career. That's what I keep telling the children."

It starts, though, with discipline and attendance, she said, so one of her first acts on taking over at Charter – apart from ensuring the motto was printed on the front of the school building for all to see when they arrived – was to insist on the wearing of a school uniform.

She also hired a team of pastoral support workers – ex-Royal Navy personnel – who patrolled the school sorting out problems. "The Navy is a very valuable source of personnel," she said. "Most of them retire from the navy in their early forties."

If children did not turn up at school, a car was immediately despatched to their home to bring the recalcitrant pupils into school. If it did not find them on the first visit, the car went back again.

Staff also patrol the school gate before and after school to make sure the pupils arrive and leave in an orderly fashion. The senior management team look in on every classroom every day to ensure everything is all right – and staff wear radio ear-pieces and carry walkie-talkies so they can communicate any problems.

The next priority was to tackle performance – particularly in maths and English. Dame Sharon hired two primary school teachers to help the children with a reading age of four to catch up. Extra lessons were laid on – the school has a longer school day than most, with lessons continuing to 4pm, to include extra English and maths. Homework can also be done on the premises by those children whose home circumstances are too difficult for them to study.

As a result, some of the slowest readers are now achieving B and C grades at GCSE.

The school is planning its next venture – opening a sixth form in September for pupils who would previously have turned their backs on education at 16. It has steadily built up from just over 300 pupils to 460 in the past five years, and hopes to recruit 200 to the sixth form.

Naomi Carter, a vice-principal at the school who worked at St Luke's before the changes, said: "It has been a real privilege working for this school. In the olden days, the staff weren't challenged, the kids weren't challenged. Now it's made clear. If you're going to come here, you're going to work."

SMILES AHEAD
Dame Sharon Hollows, of Charter Academy in Portsmouth
JAMIE LORRAMAN/SOLENT NEWS

BOTTOM OF THE CLASS

Concern over the educational performance of white working-class youths was raised in a number of publications last year. The education standards watchdog Ofsted revealed in a report last summer that only 26 per cent of white working-class boys from the UK obtained the holy grail of five A* to C grade passes at GCSE, including maths and English, and only 38 per cent of girls. Black Afro-Caribbean boys and girls were the next lowest performers with 32 per cent and 48 per cent. "Five years ago, Bangladeshi and black African pupils were trailing their white British counterparts," it said. "Now Bangladeshi pupils outperform their white British peers and black African pupils perform at a similar level."

The report was followed by another from the Centre for Social Justice – which said white working-class boys were in danger of becoming "an educational under-class".

That was followed by Tim Leunig, an adviser to the Lib Dem Schools Minister David Laws, saying that "being white" is now a problem in state schools and that more needed to be done to tackle the underachievement of the "dominant racial group" in schools if standards were to improve.

Few initiatives have so far targeted this group, though chief schools inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw (above) describes their performance as "an unacceptable waste of human potential". He believes we need to tackle a climate of low expectations on the part of too many teachers – and, of course, pupils and their parents.

However, other state schools in a similar situation come to Dame Sharon Hollows to learn from her. "They are very keen to see what we've done," she said. The key, she is telling them, is to put an end to any conscious or subconscious thought along the lines of "What can you expect from these kids?".

Richard Garner

Ark

King Solomon's minds: pupils in the 'Southampton' nursery class at the academy
CHARLIE FURGHAM-BAILEY

FROM HERE TO UNIVERSITY

At 'all-through' schools such as King Solomon Academy, children are educated from the ages of three all the way to 18. They're growing in number, but the system has its critics. By SARAH CASSIDY

It's a crisp winter morning and the children in the nursery at the King Solomon Academy in Holborn are taking part in their daily phonics lesson. It looks much like any other nursery class – though it is perhaps unusual that the name of the class seems to denote its location: "London".

Yet just down the corridor, miles contract into mere metres so that the Reception pupils find themselves in "Brighton" and "Southampton" classes, and by the time children are 11 they are in the environs of "Oxford" or "Cambridge".

The theme is continued on the classroom walls, where teachers wearing mortar boards smile down on their wards from their own graduation photographs.

"Every class is named after a university city," says Jonathan Molver, King Solomon's Primary head teacher. "Our over-arching ambition is to prepare each child for university and we start with the youngest children. Every teacher has their graduation photo on display in their classroom, and every class is named after a university and the year in which pupils will graduate from sixth form."

King Solomon Academy is a remarkable success story. More than four out of 10 KS4 students (43 per cent) are eligible for free school meals and more than three-quarters (77 per cent) speak English as an additional language.

Children join the school considerably behind expected attainment levels but, under the school's innovative curriculum, they quickly catch up and have made outstanding progress since the doors first opened in 2007.

King Solomon is also one of a growing number of so-called all-through schools: pupils can join the nursery aged three and, rather than progressing through primary school and then switching to a separate secondary, can stay at the same school until 18.

A review by Ark Schools of early years provision this month could also mean that such schools will be opened up to two-year-olds after calls for younger children to be admitted to school-based nurseries.

Vanessa Willms, the director of primary for Ark Schools and the founding primary head of King Solomon Academy, believes that the all-through model offers enormous benefits for both students and teachers. "I think the biggest advantage is about having a shared philosophy and ethos which ensures that there is greater consistency around expectations, pedagogy and the cultural ethos of the school," Ms Willms says.

"In a typical secondary or primary school, you have certain ways of behaving or ways of interacting with each other or staff. Having them all the way through is an incredible advantage. The children are not moving between different settings with different expectations.

"I think that is the advantage of working in an all-through school – we are able to get teachers working together above and below all the time. I think that raises the game for everyone – children aren't able to fall through the gaps."

In 2009, there were only 13 all-through academies or schools in England but this has risen with the opening of new academies and free schools as well as the amalgamation of existing primaries and secondaries. In these times of austerity, all-through schools can also cut costs with economies of scale.

Many educationalists favour this model of schooling because it eliminates any unsettling transition between the primary and secondary stages. Having all ages on one site also enables older pupils to act as mentors for younger children, while primary pupils benefit from having specialist science and language available and sharing sports facilities that stand-alone primaries can only dream about.

In November, Baroness Morgan of Huyton, the chair of Ofsted, praised the work of all-through schools and sparked controversy by calling for more children to be enrolled in school-based nurseries, saying that radical action was needed to close the achievement gap between rich and poor children by the time they start school.

"I think we need to see a big, bold, brave move on the under-fives agenda to target funding heavily on the children who will benefit most and – increasingly I think – to look to strong providers to go further down the system," she told a conference in London.

Ark Schools is interested in how the idea could benefit its students, and next month will launch a review of its nursery provision to consider whether to admit children as young as two. But critics of the plan are concerned at the growing "schoolification" of the early years and warn that the enormous institutions of all-through schools may not be the best environment for very young children. Sue Palmer, a literacy specialist and author of the book *Toxic Childhood*, says: "The difference between a two- or three-year-old and an 18-year-old is so enormous that the idea of trying to make some sort of seamless transition is bizarre.

"It is a totally different business caring for small children and teaching people who are about to go to university so why should it have to go

All ages: Year 11 students in the 'USE' class at the King Solomon Academy (above); Jonathan Molver, KSA's primary headteacher (right)

Ark

Go figure

Countries that excel at problem-solving encourage critical thinking as well as factual learning, writes **Jeevan Vasagar**

Maths lessons have changed since Tom Ding was at school. Recalling his favourite subject, Ding remembers: "A big pile of textbooks, the teacher talking you through an example, giving you a bit of context and then telling you what page to open the book at."

So he was surprised to enter a classroom as a trainee maths teacher to find the textbooks on a shelf while pupils grappled with questions such as: "Does speaking a different language mean you count differently?" In another lesson, students debated the best way to represent a number – was it as a fraction, a decimal or a percentage?

Ding, who gave up a career in advertising to train as a teacher with the UK state school chain Ark, says that such questions are a way for students to move beyond rote learning. "If something is learned too much by rote, there's a chance those broader concepts are lost."

Education is under pressure to respond to a changing world. As repetitive tasks are eroded by technology and outsourcing, the ability to solve novel problems has become increasingly vital.

The origin of the word computer is an indication of the shift. The first computers were not machines but groups of people, each working on part of a complex calculation.

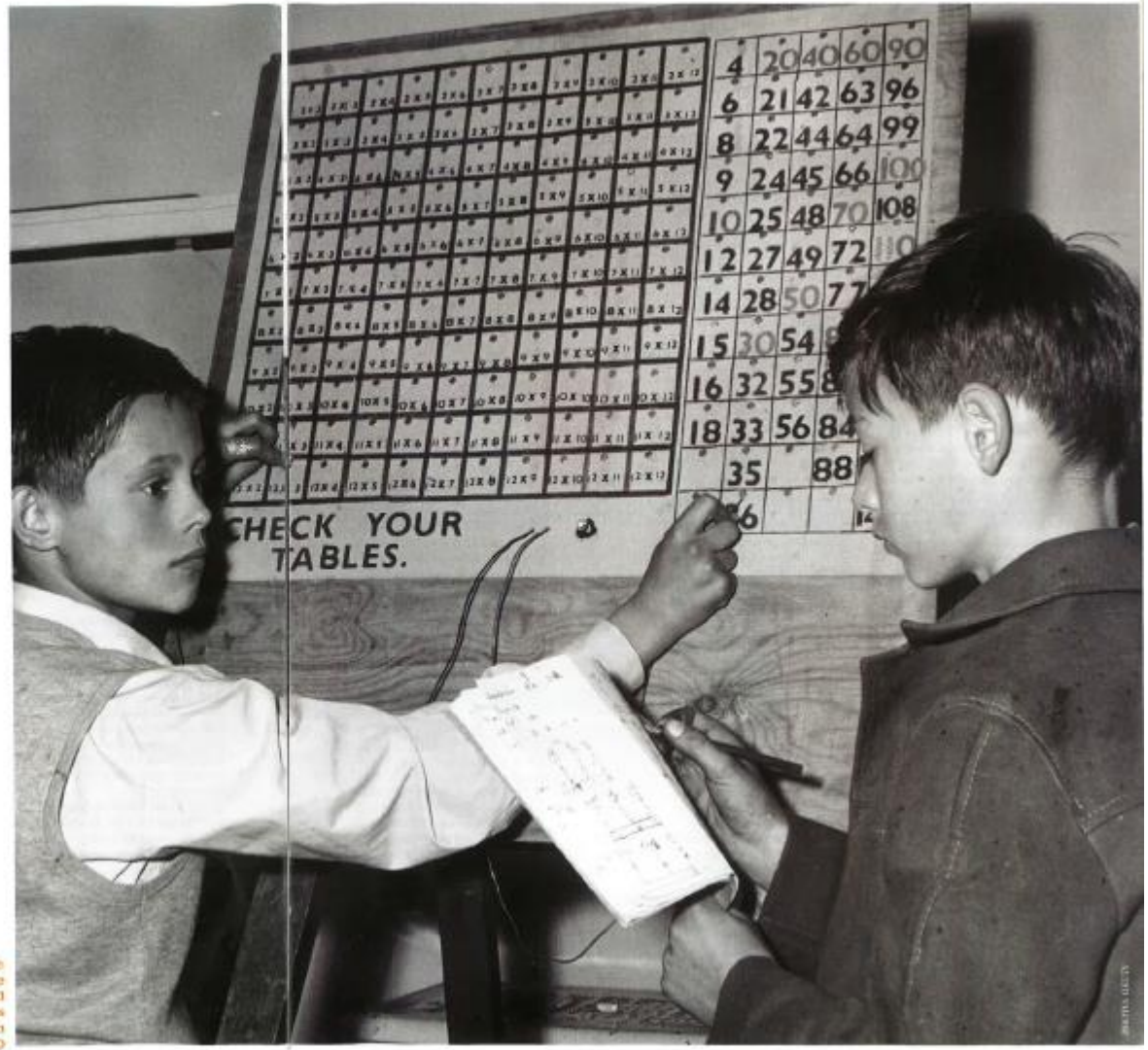
As computers have grown more powerful, humans are no longer needed to crunch the numbers. Instead the role of people is to work out which mathematical model approximates best to a real life situation – whether that is the fastest way to deliver Christmas shopping, or organising relief in a disaster zone.

As the rise of tech companies shows, there are high salaries for those most able to organise the world's messy information. The challenge for schools is to combine the teaching of knowledge with the ability to marshal those facts in unfamiliar situations. How well are they doing it? And can they do better?

The first of those questions was answered in April this year, when the OECD published an assessment of the problem-solving skills of teenagers around the world.

About 85,000 teenagers in 44 countries and regions took the tests for the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment study. The tests expected them to devise strategies for tackling unfamiliar problems. In one, they were shown a map of routes linking the suburbs of a fictional city and asked to suggest a place where three people could meet but no one would have to travel for more than 15 minutes.

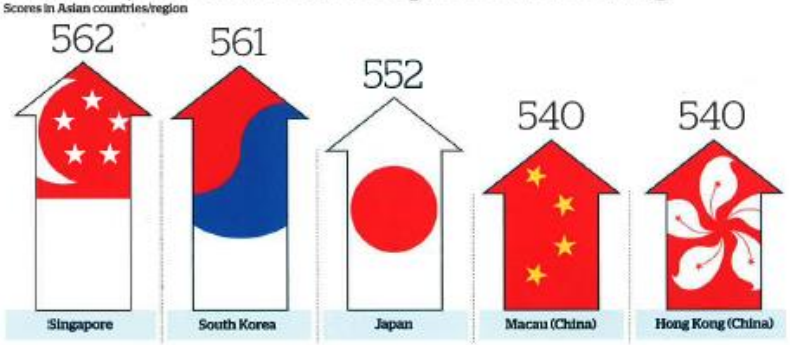
They faced situations where the information was incomplete, such as dealing with a new digital device: "You have no instructions for your new air conditioner. You need to work out how to use it."



OK computer: a unique table enabled pupils learn maths in the UK in 1960

How 15-year-olds score at problem solving

Scores in Asian countries/region



Scores in European countries

The score is a mean score that compares with an average of 500 across all the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The students were set a number of exercises, as part of the OECD's triennial Programme for School Assessment (Pisa). The 2012 study assessed real-life creative problem-solving skills for the first time. The countries or regions in the chart have the highest scores in Asia and Europe

GRAPHIC: ERIPA PANCHOLI. SOURCE: OECD

And they had to cope with surprises. In another problem, students were told to buy a number of tickets at a concession fare from a ticket machine, only to discover that the concession was not available.

Schools in Europe are frequently criticised by business leaders as "exam factories" that churn out students unable to cope with life beyond the classroom. But the lesson to be drawn from international comparison is that Europe's schools are far better at teaching creative thought than this criticism implies.

Students from the main western European countries – England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Belgium – all performed above the average, as did pupils from the Czech Republic and Estonia. In the rest of the rich world, the US, Canada and Australia also performed above average. But the laurels were taken by east Asian territories; Singapore and South Korea performed best, followed by Japan, and the Chinese regions of Macau and Hong Kong.

That result poses a challenge to schools in the west. Critics of east Asian education systems attribute their success at maths and science to rote learning.

But the OECD's assessment suggests that schools in east Asia are developing thinking skills as well as providing a solid grounding in core subjects.

Across the world, the OECD study found a strong and positive correlation between performance in problem solving and performance in maths, reading and science.

In general, the high-performing students were also the ones best able to cope with unfamiliar situations.

But there were interesting exceptions to the rule. When Japanese students were compared with children in other countries of similar performance in maths, science and reading, the Japanese teenagers showed better problem-solving abilities.

This, the OECD suggested, might be explained by Japan's focus on developing problem-solving skills through cross-curricular, student-led projects.

While there is agreement about the goal, there is a divide over how best to teach children the skill of critical thinking. Daisy Christodoulou, an educationalist and the author of *Seven Myths about Education*, argues that such skills are domain specific – they cannot be transferred to an area where our knowledge is limited.

"Trying to teach abstract strategies that can apply across domains, there isn't much evidence for that," she says.

"The farther away from the original domain you are, the weaker the transfer is. In our lives this does ring true. We all know people who are good at thinking critically about a historical problem, and not very good at thinking critically about a mathematical problem."

Critical thinking is a skill that is impossible to teach directly but must be intertwined with content, Christodoulou argues. Shakespeare, lauded for breaking rules, was the product of a rigidly traditional education.

"We have a good idea of what Shakespeare's education was like," she says. "He would have learned figures of speech by heart, in Latin." And the rhetorical devices that he learned as a schoolboy are deployed with increasing confidence in his plays.

"In his early plays, it is quite mechanical, and as he goes on he is playing with these figures of speech and using them in a creative way. Learning by rote, far from stifling creativity, enabled it," Christodoulou says.

Some argue that placing too strong an emphasis on children acquiring knowledge alone leaves them struggling when faced with more complex problems.

Tim Taylor, a former primary school teacher who now trains teachers, says: "If you front-load knowledge and leave all the thinking and critical questioning until later, children don't develop as effective learners."

There are some generic tools that transfer across disciplines, Taylor argues. "What is reading if not a cognitive tool? And that is clearly 'transferable'."

The style of teaching that he coaches, called Mantle of the Expert, encourages children to pose as experts faced with an imaginary scenario; aiming to engage their imaginations and help them figure out how they would get access to the information they need.

In a class studying the Great Fire of London, for example, pupils will play the parts of experts helping a museum create an exhibition about the fire. "It's a way of making content more meaningful," Taylor says.

The way to teach generic skills is to be "mindful of it as a teacher", Taylor suggests. "You create opportunities to keep that in the forefront of what you are doing – how is this helping us? How can we use this in another context? That is the point of education, to develop a 'growth mindset'," he states.

It is hard to know how much of the advantage east Asian pupils have in international comparisons comes from the academic rigour of their schools, and how much is derived from recent reforms in the countries that have sought to give students a more holistic education.

The OECD suggests that those countries where students do best at problem solving, are not only good at teaching the core subjects, but are good at providing learning opportunities that prepare students well for complex, real-life problems.

Ding, the trainee maths teacher, says the school where he works in north London attempts to sidestep the debate between facts and skills by pursuing both with equal relish.

"On the one hand, our maths lessons begin with times table drills," says Ding. "We put a lot of emphasis on repetition, and frequent testing means students are regularly rehearsing and assessing what they know."

"On the other hand, we also try to use rich, open questions to structure the units of work, making them more enjoyable and memorable for students, and allowing us to avoid shallow rote learning and discuss higher-order concepts along the way." ■

Something doesn't add up: rote learning alone leaves pupils less able to solve problems

PHOTO: GETTY

OFSTED THUMBS UP FOR BOLINGBROKE ACADEMY

Bolingbroke Academy, a new free school in the area, has been granted 'good school' status from education inspectors Ofsted. Steered by principal Claire Edis, the school has been open for 15 months and is operated by ARK, an organisation responsible for running 27 academies across the country.

For more information about the school and to read the full Ofsted report, visit arkbolingbrokeacademy.org

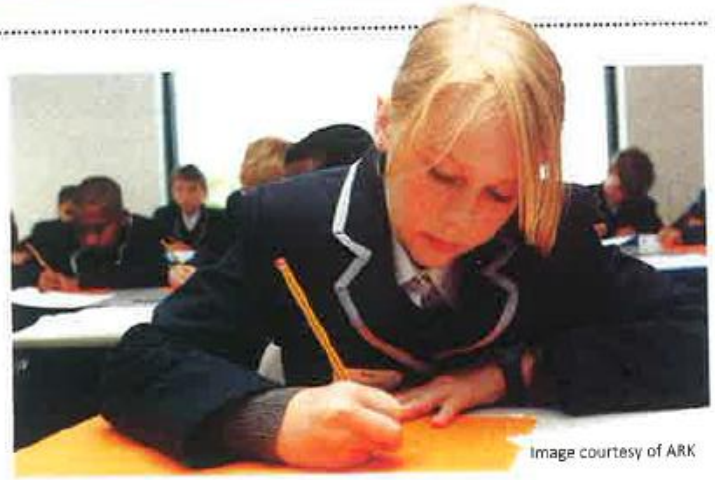


Image courtesy of ARK

Ark

NEWS

Time flies at Swift Academy

NEW BEGINNING: Teaching mentor and chess coach Kwasi Frempong, joins the victorious chess team and other pupils at Ark Swift Academy

Photo by Shane Dempsey www.buyaphotoims.co.uk WL20137247_01

A PRIMARY school that was labelled as failing has marked its 50th day since it became an academy.

Canberra Primary School, in White City, was renamed ARK Swift Primary Academy in September in response to concerns from Hammersmith and Fulham Council that it was not improving quickly enough to come out of special measures.

Headteacher Michael O'Grady, who was brought in to raise standards last year, said: "Things are definitely looking up.

"The children have a brand new uniform and a new academy code of conduct.

"They have all been behaving with respect and following the new rules and regulations.

"We've also put in place lots of new teaching programmes which are being backed by international research.

"It's a really positive start for the school."

Swift Primary's chess team topped the ARK schools London-wide competition in October.

Ark

New school's headteacher promises 'great education'

By Ruth McKee
ruth.mckee@archant.co.uk

"RAISING aspirations for all children," is the mantra of Jerry Collins, headteacher of the John Keats Academy – the borough's first all-through school.

The man at the top of the first Ark chain academy school in Enfield, which opened this month on the site of the former Albany School, in Bell Lane, Enfield Wash, says that the curriculum, with an emphasis on numeracy and literacy and a longer school day for primary school children (8.30am to 4pm), will put pupils on a par with their peers in high-ranking private and prep schools.

The school has opened its doors to two forms of reception-age pupils and next September will be opening the secondary section, meaning that the primary school children starting this year will, conceivably, spend the next 14 years of their schooldays under Mr Collins' watchful eye.

Speaking to the *Advertiser* last week, the head said that 14 years of education in the Ark John Keats Academy will not limit the children in terms of the breadth of their experience – and stressed that all the pupils would learn to "develop their aspirations from a very young age".

And with the newly refurbished building and small intake this year, there is little doubt that the school will be in high demand among parents.

Controversy has dogged academies and free schools, both of which are independent of local authority control, as unions have argued they introduce the concept of market forces into education with the risk that some schools will thrive as others fail.

But Mr Collins says that parents have the right to choose the best school possible for their children – just as they would choose the best of any service for them.

"Parents should have a choice from a range of excellent local schools," revealed the headteacher, whose unsmiling response hinted that any young troublemakers might be in for a rough ride.

"My interest is in trying to create a great education for local children. Ark Schools' interest is in giving local children a really great education."

He hopes that the academy will "raise the aspirations of children from less advantaged backgrounds" and his ambition is for all the pupils who leave the Ark after completing their A-levels to go on to win places at the most prestigious universities.

Leading the way: Jerry Collins, the head of the first all-through school to open in the borough

But is university the best option for every child? Mr Collins glowers slightly. "Every child should have a chance at a university education – not just children from specific backgrounds," he retorted.

Although Ark John Keats Academy is currently the only all-through academy school in the borough, Enfield Council has confirmed that Edmonton County secondary school, in Great Cambridge Road, will open to two forms of reception-age children from January.

Enfield Advertiser 10/09/2013

ary 8, 2013 CCR-E01-S2 www.thisiscroydontoday.co.uk

Ark's first inspection finds a 'Good' primary

ARK Oval Primary has been rated "good" in its first Ofsted report.

Inspectors who visited the East Croydon academy in December praised staff for their quality of teaching and for encouraging pupils to strive for excellence.

Their report praised the attitude of children, saying: "Pupils behave well in lessons and move around the school in a calm and orderly fashion. They are respectful to adults and each other. Pupils are proud of their new school. They enjoy their lessons and attend regularly."

They did, however, say some improvements in subjects such as maths had not yet been fully achieved.

Head teacher Sonia Rutherford said: "I'm very pleased that Ofsted recognises the progress we've made so far and the achievements of our staff and pupils. We are determined to continue to build on our achievements so that we can ensure that every child at Ark Oval achieves at the highest level possible and can make a really successful transition to secondary school."

The current school reopened as an academy on the site of the former failing Oval Primary School in September 2011.

THUMBS UP: Head teacher Sonia Rutherford with pupils

Ilford Recorder

New Ilford academy celebrates ‘outstanding’ rating in first Ofsted report

An Ilford secondary school that opened less than two years ago has been rated “outstanding” in its first Ofsted inspection. The report published this week praised Isaac Newton Academy’s principal for establishing “very high quality teaching where every student succeeds”.

Principal Rachel Macfarlane and pupils outside Isaac Newton Academy, Ilford, which opened in September 2012

Students, currently only Years 7s and 8s, produce work demonstrating “very high levels of achievement, commitment and determination”, Ofsted said.

Principal Rachel Macfarlane said: “This result is a tribute to the hard work, commitment and skills of the entire school community and I was delighted that the inspectors recognised that ‘all teaching and support staff make a significant contribution to the running of the academy’.

“It’s great to be able to share this praise with all our staff, students, parents and the community who are supporting us.”

The Cricklefield Place school, one of 19 schools across the capital run by academies sponsor ARK Schools, specialises in maths and music, and gives all pupils the opportunity to learn an instrument.

Inspectors praised its “unique” approach and said students appeared to “really enjoy” music making. On July 7, pupils from the school will play at a special gala event at London’s Barbican Centre. Eventually, Isaac Newton Academy will be an all-through school taking in pupils between the ages of four and 18.

Ms Macfarlane added: “We won’t rest on our laurels - we are determined to continue to make improvements as we take in another secondary year group and our first primary pupils in September.”

Academies are schools funded by the state but free of local authority control. They have the ability to set pay and conditions for staff, deliver the national curriculum in different ways, and modify the school day. Four out of five days a week, the academy keeps pupils in school from 8.30am-4.10pm, which is slightly longer than the average school day.

Sebastian Mann Sunday, June 29, 2014 9:00 AM

theguardian

Professional Teacher Network

Not enough hours in the day: more time means more support for students

Pupils groaned at the thought of extra lessons, but academy principal Roger Punton explains how a longer day has paid off for students and teachers in his school

Extending the school day has allowed ARK Kings academy to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of its students. Photograph: Steve Marsel/Getty Images

Consulting on our move to a longer school day back in 2012, we found a quite comical difference between the reactions of two of the main interest groups. In the plentiful meetings we held to gather views on the proposal, there was unanimous agreement from parents that a longer day would be welcomed and eye rolling from their children who were saying no.

Almost two years later, however, it's clear that – despite my concerns that the change would be challenging for all those involved – in fact it was embedded very quickly. It was surprising and pleasing that students and staff adapted so well, and now it seems strange we ever ran things differently. Indeed, in a recent conversation with some staff they asked about a further increase in the school day.

We switched from a typically 25 hour to a 30.5 hour week when we moved from local authority control and became an ARK academy. More time for learning is one of the six principles of ARK schools, and we opted to start every

day earlier – at 8.25am instead of about 8.45am – and finish later – at 4pm instead of 3pm – on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. We have one 15-minute morning break and half an hour lunch, so ours is quite a focused day.

We've found that, for us, the longer day produces clear benefits. There is more time for learning and we can adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of our students. In our academy, pupils often come in at year 7 with low prior attainment and low levels of literacy. The extra time in the day allows us to have a daily literacy lesson in key stage 3, along with at least one hour of maths each day. Changes like these take time to show results, but we've already seen an increase in reading ages and a rise in pupil confidence in literacy. The extra hours mean we can also avoid squeezing other subjects, so, for example, we still also provide two hours each of geography and history a week.

When the idea of a longer school day was introduced to staff, there were a few raised eyebrows, but once the opportunities for more time for learning and planning were explained, there was universal support for the change. The number of slots taught by each teacher has not increased, so there's more time for individual and team planning, with a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning. We've kept our weekly two hours of staff training time, too.

The extra flexibility of a longer school day also means we have been able to introduce a system of weekly observation and feedback, where each teacher is paired with a teaching coach who carries out a 10-minute lesson observation. Following the lesson, the coach and teacher meet, discuss what went well and then identify an "action step" to improve in the following week's lesson. The teacher and coach then practise this step prior to its implementation.

While our core lessons at ARK Kings end at 3pm or 4pm, the school day does not finish there as we offer students a comprehensive programme of enrichment activities till 5.30pm. Whether it is taking part in choir practice, Thai boxing or newspaper club, having a longer school day means we can offer our students additional opportunities to develop communication, team work, creativity, problem solving and sporting skills beyond the classroom.

The extra learning time also allows us to offer time-tabled enrichment days, where students might visit a university or take part in careers fairs or employer visits. Alongside this, our longer hours help develop the resilience and adaptability pupils will need when they enter the world of work.

The longer school day has also had an impact on the safeguarding and welfare of some of our more vulnerable pupils. For these pupils, school is the constant – the area of their life where there are boundaries, high expectations and consistency. These pupils are often the first to arrive at

the school gate in the morning, waiting for it to be unlocked, and then the last to leave in the evening when we close at 6pm, after taking part in extracurricular activities. As a school leader I am very mindful when I see these pupils of the benefit of a longer school day not only on learning but as part of our wider responsibility to the community we serve.

'The lesson from the East is that every child can be good at maths'

Dr Helen Drury, director of Mathematics Mastery at Ark Schools and a former head of mathematics, writes:

As the education minister Liz Truss prepares to visit Shanghai next week, the debate about how our school children can catch up with their counterparts in the Far East is taking hold. It is a stark reminder of that gap – and our own educational inequalities – that the **children of cleaners in Shanghai outperform some of our most-able pupils.**

The most pervasive myth in these discussions is that the success of countries like China, Singapore and South Korea is down to ambitious 'tiger mothers' pushing their children to spend endless hours on rote learning. Even if we wanted to, the argument goes, that kind of culture is impossible to replicate in our own country.

In fact, since the 1990s, many Asian systems have amended their approach to learning and revised their curricula, with the introduction of more student-centred learning, problem-solving and interdisciplinary teaching in order to address a perceived deficit in creativity and lateral thinking.

And we can indeed replicate the lessons of the East in our own classrooms. The ARK Schools network, which runs 27 high-performing academies in England, has developed an approach to teaching called Mathematics Mastery, which combines teaching ideas and bespoke training based on international best practice, including Shanghai and Singapore.

The first principle is that every child can succeed at maths – it is not just for geeks. That might seem like a truism, but how many parents would happily say to their children, “I’m no good at maths” in a way they would not dream of admitting to being illiterate? As Ms Truss argues, it is the “positive philosophy” that exists in Shanghai around maths, in contrast to our own “long-term anti-maths culture”.

Like building a pyramid, the Maths Mastery approach is to ensure children at primary school have the firm foundations in maths so they don’t struggle later on or have to repeat topics. That means studying fewer topics in more depth, particularly in the early years. It also means using a more hands on approach to maths – the use of number blocks, bead strings and dice. This enables pupils to better grasp the fundamental concepts of maths so they have a deep understanding, rather than a shallow memorisation.

Too many pupils learn something one week then forget it the next. Of course, our pupils still learn times tables, but learning maths is like learning a language – without the fundamental verbs you cannot succeed, and until you learn to apply the grammatical rules of maths, you will never be able to take on more advanced tasks such as trigonometry or algebra.

We’ve learnt to use language more effectively. That means teachers asking more probing and open questions, and pupils being expected to use full sentence answers. So instead of saying “42” in response to a teacher’s question, the pupil will say, “seven multiplied by six is equal to forty-two.”

Maths needs to be fun, too, especially for younger children. So in between more formal tasks, children will learn songs like “one, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive.” This ensures no time is wasted in any lesson.

The approach is paying dividends. The Maths Mastery partnership extends to 100 schools now, the majority outside of the Ark network, and 97% of schools have continued into the second year of the programme as they have seen it is working for their students.

Ark’s St Alban’s Academy in Birmingham, which sent two of its teachers on a study tour to Singapore, was recently rated as the top school in the whole country for value added maths – a measure of how pupils who start behind succeed in their GCSE exams. Over 80 per cent of students achieved a grade A*-C in maths, up from 53 per cent when the school joined the Ark network.

Our negative perceptions about maths are tied up in our continued belief that success is a product of talent or luck, something that Malcolm Gladwell and Matthew Syed have demonstrated is based not on scientific evidence but cultural myths.

We expect our pupils to be able to think mathematically – to be able to spot the patterns and understand the rules, not just know the answer. We should demand that our politicians and policymakers think scientifically, learning the right lessons from abroad.

Just as there isn't a talent gene, there isn't a maths gene – as the Far East shows us, all children are born with the potential to be good at maths.

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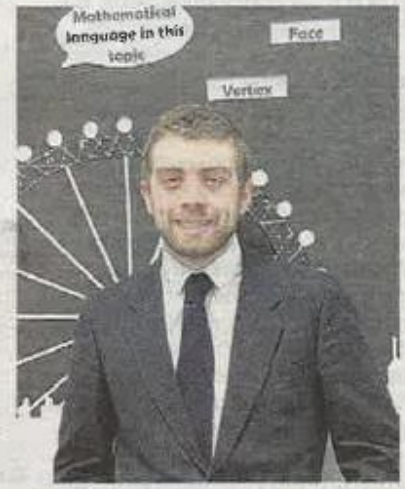
i WEDNESDAY 19 FEBRUARY 2014

Student voices

'I have not regretted it for a minute'

Tom Ding, 26, gave up a well-paid job in the City to train as a maths teacher with ARK Schools. "I have not regretted it for a minute," says Tom, who has a 2:1 maths degree from the University of Cambridge.

"Initially, I found it hard to navigate and distinguish between the different paths into teaching. As a career changer I was keen to spend as much time as possible in the classroom, but I was nervous about being dropped into a school with very little support. That's why I chose ARK Teacher Training – a good balance between practical classroom experience and clear support and training alongside.



It gives you techniques you can use straight away in the classroom."

Most of his time is spent at the ARK Academy in Wembley, though he also attends training days and visits to schools in and out of the network.

"I suspect that people's experiences of School Direct or a PGCE or Teach First are dependent on the particular organisations and individuals delivering the training. However, I do think that School Direct has the structural advantage in that the schools that employ teachers are responsible for their development."

ARK Schools pays its salaried School Direct trainees between £20,000 and £24,000 in London.

Burlington Danes Academy marks remarkable transformation with outstanding Ofsted report

The previously failing Shepherd's Bush school has been hailed a success

An academy once labelled one of London's worst comprehensives has been judged outstanding in all four categories by Ofsted.

Burlington Danes Academy is rated outstanding by Ofsted

Burlington Danes Academy, in Shepherd's Bush, was this week celebrating its exceptional journey to success since being placed in special measures in 2004.

Ofsted inspector Linda Austin visited the school last month and reported: "The mission to provide the very best education for every pupil within a caring and safe environment has become a reality in this outstanding academy."

Principal Dame Sally Coates and senior vice principal Michael Ribton joined five years ago after the struggling state school joined academy group ARK Schools - and has since seen a remarkable transformation.

In a major education speech in 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron praised the academy for setting an example for other failing schools across the country. The school has seen soaring GCSE and A-level results, and Dame Sally was knighted in the New Year's Honours List in January for her great leadership.

She said: "It is a stunning achievement for the school and the ARK School's network. I am so proud of my staff."

Ken Bromfield, governor and former pupil, said ARK Schools was central in turning it around.

"Burlington Danes is now established as an outstanding school, serving the community in which I was born and raised," he said. "So my gratitude to all staff regarding their role in what has been achieved is heartfelt.

“There is no question in my mind that the decision to bring Burlington Danes under ARK’s wing was the vital step on the hard road to success via Sally and her fantastic team.”

In the report, published this week, inspectors commented: “Given their starting points, students make outstanding progress resulting in above average attainment, especially in English and mathematics.”

The report noted that the number of students eligible for free schools meals and who speak English as a second language are both well above average, children come from a range of ethnic backgrounds and the school has an on-site unit to support students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

Under new rules set out by Michael Gove, tougher inspections mean that just around five per cent of schools will now be awarded the highest outstanding grade.

Burlington Danes’ journey continues when it opens a new primary school on its Wood Lane site in September next year.

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Ark

London Evening Standard

London primary is first free school to get 'outstanding' Ofsted grade

A London primary was today named as the first free school to be ranked ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted. Ark Conway Primary School opened two years ago in Shepherd’s Bush and was praised by inspectors for its “high quality teaching that inspires and motivates all pupils to try their very best.”

One parent quoted in the report said: “We felt like we’d won the lottery when our child gained a place here.” The school is part of the Ark chain of schools run by the education charity set up by hedge-fund financier Arpad Busson.

Head teacher Damian McBeath said; “We are delighted that the hard work and dedication of staff, parents and pupils have been recognised by Ofsted. The academy has only been open since September 2011 and from the outset, we have focused on delivering the highest-quality education for our pupils. They are happy, inspired to learn and making incredible progress.”

Education Secretary Michael Gove said: “Ark Conway has demonstrated how a brilliant school, with a culture of high expectations, great leadership and inspiring teachers can be truly excellent across the board within two years.

“Free Schools, set up by dedicated groups of individuals and organisations, are raising standards and giving parents a real choice of good local schools. More and more Free Schools are opening and I look forward to many more being rated Outstanding over the coming years.”

Free schools are a central part of Michael Gove’s education policy and can be set up by groups including parents, charities and teachers. They are new schools that are independent of local authority control but are state funded. Academies have the same freedoms but are schools that already existed and converted to academy status. Free schools are newly created schools. The first 24 free schools opened in 2011 and a further 55 opened in September 2012.