

CONFESSIONS OF A HEADMASTER

Chris Townsend, head of Felsted, spills the beans on being in the top job

I still remember my first proper day in the post, when a member of staff came up with a really tricky HR question, thinking that, over the summer break, I would have been given the head's manual on how to deal with everything. Of course, I smiled, I said that I would get back to them, and realised that the title on the door didn't give me any greater understanding of what would be required in the coming months.

I also remember feeling that, everywhere I went, I had to give a speech, whether to pupils, parents or staff – that first fortnight seemed a never-ending talk on vision, hopes and future. Rapidly, I learned not to worry about repeating myself with different audiences. If I tried to change the message it was too confusing to remember who had heard what and when (and why).

I have been head now for over five years, but as 2020 proved, I never stop meeting new challenges. Remote learning, lockdown, quarantine, isolation, CAGs, and all the pressures that those bring were regular visitors to my office. Fortunately, there is a strong network among heads and I soon realised that they are not competitors but colleagues, and the sharing of ideas and challenges has been a really important support tool over the last few months.

I became a teacher because I wanted to make a difference, and it's the same as being head. My reward is when I hear from a former pupil that they are keen to mentor students, or when an employer praises their ex-Felsted employee, or when recent leavers run out for England and Scotland at rugby. But, the most enjoyable part of the job is the moment in the day, when one of the students exceeds expectations, or does something unnecessarily kind.

A head should know their pupils and be seen in and around the school, so I am not a huge fan of the various conferences that take me away, useful as they can be. Admissions is a large part of the role (we all need full schools), and interviews with prospective students are often really inspiring, although there are always one or two who

just won't, or can't, engage. I remember one, where both parents were so determined to make a good impression, that they rushed to answer every question, with the result that the child said nothing at all.

The balance between educational aspirations and financial responsibilities is a challenge at times for most heads, and a good bursar, strong enough to say no, is critical. In the run up to the last election the independent school sector was challenged financially and it's not going to get easier as we emerge from Covid and head into the post-Brexit reality.

Schools face many challenges and an increasing number of regulations up the ante. Much is good – a safe school that looks after the wellbeing of children can be nothing else – but as regulations increase year on year I have found myself spending perhaps more time than I would like talking to our legal advisors.

Most challenges, whether financial, policy, pupil or parent, come down to decisions about people. I am very fortunate to have a team around me whom I can trust, and a chair of governors who works with me (again a big tick). A really well-run school should be able to operate effectively without the head, with trust in others resulting in effective delegation. I am still working on this as I probably want to solve too many problems, which reduces responsibility for others and can hamper overall performance.

At the moment, I look out of the windows and usually see the cleaners touring the site checking they are using gloves and face masks, that Mr Trump's disinfectant is locked and loaded, and it can feel as though we are in some science fiction alternative reality. But this will pass,

and for our pupils, I remind myself, life cannot be put on hold. This year they are a year older, and whether the vaccine brings back normality or not, another cohort will struggle with A-levels being cancelled and uncertainty around university, so we really cannot just stop and wait, but owe it to them to give them the best educational experience possible. ■



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