A novel approach

In November last year New Hall school was recognised for their development and growth in challenging times – particularly the 'holistic approach' taken by school leaders – as it scooped the coveted *TES* Independent School of the Year award AND the *TES* award for Financial/Commercial Initiative of the year. How did they do it? The senior leadership and management team (SLMT) share how the school stayed true to its vision on the arduous road to success

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What marks New Hall School as different – a cut above the rest?

Teamwork, hard work, determination and the principal's vision and leadership to provide the best education environment. We have a truly aspirational attitude amongst staff that filters down to students, meaning that we're always looking for ways to enhance the educational provision at New Hall.

The school roll has grown by 150% and further expansion is on the cards. How did you achieve this?

In 2005 the governing body and SLMT of New Hall School set up a new charitable trust to purchase the school campus together with the former convent building and neighbouring property because a major expansion plan was required to halt a prolonged period of a falling roll and break-even/deficit budgets.

The bold growth strategy was based on effective financial modelling and risk analysis, coupled with a major marketing and student recruitment drive. 2014-15 saw the completion of a successful 10-year expansion project to double the size of the senior school – with the pioneering move to open the school to senior boys and to create a 'diamond model' educational structure. In addition, following market research, the decision was taken to expand early years' provision with the introduction of pre-reception for children from age three. The whole school roll grew by 150% to 1,200 students today.

In 2015 we launched the final phase of the expansion development; the preparatory school roll will grow by 50% over the next three years as the school moves from two-form to three-form entry. This will bring the whole school roll to 1,500 by 2018.

Particular initiatives resulted in New Hall bucking the national trend of decline in boarding. Despite the challenges of the market we grew our boarding provision by 150%, from 100 to 250 full and weekly boarders in 2015. This was achieved by systematic investment in boarding, based on a clear strategy and development plan which involved the creative restructuring of the boarding houses into junior, middle and senior age groups, the opening of three new boys' boarding houses, the introduction of flexi-boarding in Years 3-10 and financial investment in refurbishing the boarders' areas in a homely way – together with significant investment in staff housing.

Since 2001 the school has seen great change. How have you maintained your core ethos?

Commitment to the care of all students is our priority. The education at New Hall is still rooted in our tradition and values and our values and ethos have remained faithful to the vision of the founding religious community. Whilst, on the one hand, it is a great personal sadness that New Hall no longer has the religious community on campus involved in teaching and pastoral roles, on the other hand we are blessed at New Hall with an exceptionally committed, caring and dedicated staff who, inspired by the founding vision, work with great skill and creativity to give the students the very best start in life.

You were the first independent school to set up a multi-academy trust (MAT). What took you down this path?

New Hall was invited to become the first independent school in the country to sponsor a state primary school – Messing Primary – and responded positively to this request for assistance from the Department for Education. We welcomed the opportunity to create a new type of educational partnership in order to share our educational expertise and experience even more widely in the local community, for the benefit of children's learning.

As a school within the New Hall MAT, a collaborative approach has enabled both schools to share expertise to ensure the highest educational standards. In particular, it has enabled Messing Primary staff to benefit from professional development opportunities; they are also invited to social events at New Hall to establish a deeper working relationship between the two teams.

Through the partnership Messing Primary is able to draw upon New Hall School's excellent educational record and share sporting, music and community ventures – specialist New Hall staff assist with sporting opportunities each week. It also enables the school to provide a quality education to enhance pupils' personal development and prepare them for secondary education and the wider world.

Messing Primary headteacher, Jackie Halliday, provides dynamic and inspirational leadership and, with support from the partnership, pupils at the school have seen a significant improvement in their education. The partnership has delivered significant results; since it began pupil numbers have more than doubled, educational standards have risen and, in its June 2015 Ofsted inspection, the school was rated 'good', overall and the leadership and management 'outstanding'. At the time Messing Primary was launched as an academy – September 2013 – pupil numbers stood at just 31;

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as of the beginning of the Michaelmas Term 2016 the school roll stood at 78 – an increase of over 150%.

Your Green Travel and Transport Strategy seems to be about doing things differently. What was the inspiration behind the project and how did you secure funding?

Following careful market research into the importance of travel in choosing a school, together with a value-led commitment to green travel options, New Hall created a plan to improve journey times and promote alternatives to car use for the school journey, together with a commitment to seek external funding for this.

A three-year period of negotiations between local property developers, Chelmsford City Council (CCC) and New Hall governors and senior leadership brought a series of successes. Property developers were persuaded to donate £250,000 to New Hall School, enabling the creation of a new access road to the school in 2015, linking a major roundabout intersection with the historic grade II listed park and garden that forms New Hall's entrance drive. CCC agreed favourable terms for leasing land to the school at a low rent to enable this road to be built.

As a result of arguing the case for the benefits to the community, and the principles of green travel, property developers have also been persuaded to create a new northern access road to the school from 2018, to link with their new housing developments and, additionally, to finance a smart new bridleway, footpath and cycle-route between a nearby housing development and the school.

For its part, the school funded a new separate cycle route and footpath along its mile-long avenue, improving safety for those walking or cycling. Several new sheltered cycle racks were added around the campus and the school established cycle safety training courses. A review of coach routes and some further market research among the parent body led to the creation of new coach routes and a deal with CCC for shared use of the local 'Park & Ride' facilities to allow pick-up by New Hall buses for the final stretch of the school journey.

These initiatives have brought several hundred thousand pounds of external investment into travel and access provision for the school. Journey times have been cut and many more students now travel to school by means other than by car. The travel strategy has been popular with a wide range of stakeholders.

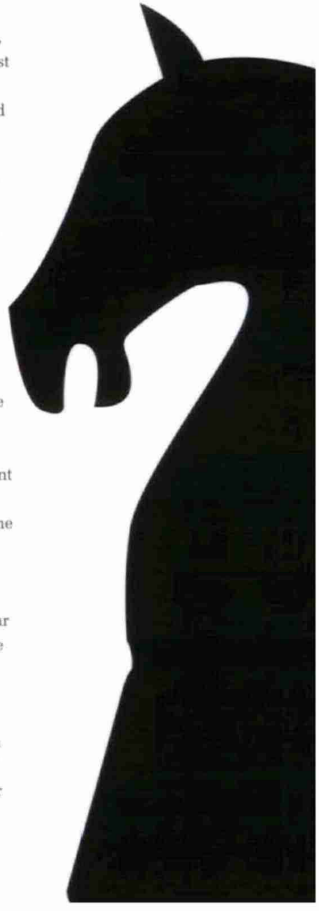
TES judges were impressed by your 'holistic approach to leadership'. What does this mean in practice?

New Hall has developed an original, inclusive and collegial style of leadership with a 21-member strong SLMT, which includes key support staff as well as teachers. The team has overseen outstanding growth and development of the school, to become one of the largest IAPS and HMC schools in the country. The quality of leadership and management at New Hall has consistently been assessed as 'excellent' by ISI, Ofsted and the Diocese of Brentwood.

A re-structure in the past year saw the establishment of three sub-groups – with the chair rotating around all members to reflect the non-hierarchical structure and to enable best practice to be shared. Every member of the team has experience of working with governors; unusually, many SLMT members (11) regularly attend at least one of the governors' sub-committee or strategy meetings. Strategic improvements can be initiated by anyone in the organisation; all good ideas are listened to and acted on. Support staff are highly valued as equal members of the SLMT and a new role of executive assistant has been created; she is the senior administrative staff member and the assistant clerk to the governors, who contributes as a full team member. The director of HR, head of finance, communications manager and estate manager are all actively involved in SLMT discussions and decision-making.

In 2014-15 New Hall devised an original and effective structure for leading improvements to the quality of education, which is the focus of SLMT discussions. To enhance communication with middle managers three serving heads of department are full members of the SLMT; they have roles as directors of learning and teaching, together with the preparatory school assistant headteachers.

Working closely with governors, the SLMT have proved themselves effective in strategic school development. They meet three times a year specifically to consider strategy and to review the school development plan. All reports and plans link back to our 'seven strategic aims', devised with governors.

New Hall SLMT members have gained a high degree of expertise and experience in the field of multi-academy trusts and are generous with their time and knowledge in advising many schools in the maintained and independent sector on academy trust matters. ■

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