

ALL'S WELL THAT STARTS WELL

BY TOM BURDEN, HEADMASTER, THE PILGRIMS' SCHOOL

A useful phrase in the fight against simple solutions is to say something is 'necessary but not sufficient'. For example, I keep reminding myself that vegetables and fruit are necessary, but not sufficient for good health.

We all know that good academic provision is a necessary part of a good education, but it is certainly not sufficient - it is not all that is needed, though sometimes parents, and even schools, act as though it is. Anyone who interviews job candidates knows that intellectual prowess alone is not enough for success - a first class degree or doctorate does not guarantee appointment. For this, and for other, even greater reasons (more on this later), it is incumbent upon schools to produce 'rounded' individuals.

What do employers look for beyond a strong academic record, role-related knowledge, and cognitive ability? Laszlo Bock, the HR legend who took Google from 3,000 to 53,000 employees, cites 'enjoying fun... intellectual humility... conscientiousness... comfort with ambiguity... and evidence that you've taken some courageous or interesting paths in your life'. These strengths are likely to produce better analytical and lateral thinking. 'Grit' is another vital ingredient.

These character-based qualities -

and associated ones such as resilience, resourcefulness, and ease with one's place in the world - all come under the heading of Well-Being. We think of well-being as a recent invention, and when The Pilgrims' School recently appointed a Director of Well-Being a number of people said I was being (uncharacteristically) trendy. But these qualities are as old as education; indeed, probably older than education. The caveman who stuck to his task and was prepared to engage with new hunting strategies and work in a team was surely one who caught the woolly mammoth.

However, I believe that well-being is now in supply because there is greater demand. Boys and girls are not as free to learn by trial and error, not least because so much of life is recorded (this not only affects the young: as a Headmaster, I rarely speak publicly these days without facing a mobile phone camera). Perfection - and no less - is the aim, and gradations of disappointment have been lost: perceived failures, such as not getting into the 'A' team, are felt as disasters rather than fundamentally reasonable frustrations. When failure does eventually happen, with parents unable to help, there can be a dreadful crash.

A focus on well-being counters

these factors and equips boys and girls for the rocky road ahead (as well as the rocky road at present). An example from The Pilgrims' School is a pupil discussion forum for pastoral and emotional matters: our Year 7 boys have enjoyed being free to consider and articulate profound and personal concerns with their peers. Forest School enables risk-taking, bonding, co-operation, and the testing of limits. Our Director of Well-Being will take the lead developing these important principles across the whole school through counselling, lessons, and activities.

Of course, the qualities associated with well-being make academic success more likely, and the same strengths make a young person more "marketable", but well-being is much more important than increasing the odds of winning the best job. As has often been said, the most valuable thing we have is our health - and this applies to mental as much as physical health. A Director of Well-Being is not a role simply bolted onto school as a fad; it is integral to what we do. It is a fresh way of helping pupils to be their best, and happiest, as human beings.

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