

National

Academy leads the way in addressing class divide

Amid row over achievement of poorer pupils, formerly failing school thrives on zero tolerance approach

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Ten years ago the classrooms at Ducie high school in Manchester looked like bus shelters and visitors were scared to walk the corridors alone. Its academic high point was when 13% of pupils got five GCSEs above a C grade. At 16, the vast majority dropped out with few expectations - except of joining their older siblings on the dole in Moss Side.

"This school was like a badly run youth club of the late 60s, early 70s. Only 50% of year 11 were attending. The Ofsted inspector said he could find nothing good to say about it," said Kathy August, who took over as headteacher in 2003 when the school became Manchester Academy.

A decade later, despite having children from some of the most troubled and deprived postcodes in the country, 39% of pupils got five good GCSEs - including the all-important English and maths - and 60% got five GCSEs. Ofsted rated the school outstanding.

August says she brought in a zero tolerance attitude to poor behaviour and the expectation that every pupil would succeed. "We said to every single pupil: here is a lovely building, the best teachers, we are committed to your futures. Now you have to give something back."

The trajectory of exam results across the country over the past 10 years has been slow but steady in comparison with Manchester Academy. In 2000 only 40.7% of pupils finished compulsory schooling at 16 with five good GCSEs including English and maths. The year



'We're not just about academic results, but the whole educational experience'

Kathy August, above

that was 50.9%. But that progress has made the gulf in exam results between pupils from rich and poor homes even more apparent. This year only 27% of pupils who qualify for free school meals got five good GCSEs, compared with 54.4% of their classmates.

Today, Richard Lambert, director general of the CBI, enters the debate saying

the country "ought to be ashamed" of its exam record, particularly for pupils from low-income homes, and that too many pupils cannot read or write or do not have the self discipline to simply turn up to work on time every day.

John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, attacked Lambert's comments, claiming he was out of touch with modern schools. "The improvements in the education system over the last 20 years are remarkable. They dwarf the achievements of any major company," he said.

"Over the years the CBI has had every chance to make a constructive contribution to the education debate and they have failed on every occasion to do so, preferring to decry the achievements of schools and hark back to an allegedly golden era in which only 20% of pupils got five high grade GCSEs or O-levels.

All they do is stand on the sidelines and criticise."

Alan Smithers, professor of education at Buckingham University, agreed that the CBI should "stop whingeing" and start to help to design courses that give pupils the skills they need for their workforce. He said that the Blair government approach of using league tables to track school standards had forced up exam results, but with some unintended consequences such as a shift to vocational qualifications, which are not always properly valued.

"Although we've got better results, it doesn't feel much like that because the qualifications are wrong. The government has emphasised progression to university and hasn't put the same energy into getting good ladders from school to work," he said.

"Because vocational qualifications

don't open the doors to employment in ways academic ones open doors to university, they are not as valuable to people. Employers should stop complaining, devise the qualifications, recruit on them and pay people for having them."

In 2004 Mike Tomlinson, a former Ofsted chief, conducted a landmark review of qualifications which suggested that a new diploma, taking in A-levels and GCSEs, should be introduced to span the vocational-academic divide. The government watered those proposals down, to the unified dissatisfaction of schools, teachers and heads.

Tomlinson says that he does not think the situation is as bad as some suggest. "No doubt there are weaknesses, most notably in basic skills, but there is a great deal of improvement at GCSE. I meet hugely motivated children working hard with clear aspirations. I don't go for doom and gloom scenario.

"The main weakness in our system is that we do not offer an appropriate curriculum to every child. The weakness is within the offer of vocational education. That's why we see a long tale of underachievement, too many people doing a curriculum that is not meeting their needs."

He said that although standards had improved in the last decade, the world had changed. "The jobs that existed 25 years ago with no skill have disappeared. What we're seeing is more and more young people not suitable for the jobs available."

Manchester Academy believes it should provide a mainly academic curriculum with around one in five qualifications being a BTec, but that it has to teach pupils the aptitudes to succeed. Pupils attend social occasions with local businesses to help develop networking and a professional approach, to learn to shake hands and look adults in the eye. "We're not just talking about academic results, we're talking about the whole educational experience," August said.