

Rugby star who learnt a different ball game

By Huw Richards, FT.com site Published: Jan 18, 2005

"Of course, we'll be playing by the 1979 rules," says Mark Bailey as he heads off to referee a school rugby match. This is an exception. In all other ways, the headmaster of Leeds Grammar School plays by up-to-date rules in a distinctly modern context.

It was his rugby career, with seven England caps - "the last as a replacement against Scotland in 1990; I came on and England's Grand Slam chances went off" - that got most attention when he was appointed just over five years ago. But the really striking development was that a leading independent school should have appointed a non-teacher as its head.

Mr Bailey was an academic with a doctorate in the history of medieval Suffolk, his teaching experience confined to extramural classes at Cambridge university and a year part-time at the Lees School undertaken while completing his thesis.

Initially a fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, he moved to Corpus Christi in 1996. "The job at Corpus incorporated a significant amount of bursarial duties, which gave me the chance to acquire skills and expertise in education management," he says.

It was those skills that made him a credible candidate in the eyes of a school governing body prepared to think laterally.

Mr Bailey took over in 1999, shortly after the school had moved to a new site on the edge of Leeds. "The move was conceived and carried through by my predecessor, who exchanged a cramped city site with no serious prospect of expansion for a purpose-built campus on 100 acres here. We have 1,100 boys, 120 teachers and 80 other staff, making us a small-to-medium-sized business and a significant employer in north Leeds."

A bank loan of about £20m (\$37m) to pay for the new campus has left the school with annual interest payments equivalent to some 10 per cent of annual income. "We are locked in for a couple of decades," says Mr Bailey. "We have a sophisticated long-term financial model which makes us well aware of what we have to achieve. The advantage we have is that the bulk is fee income, which is comparatively predictable."

A school's objectives are not, of course, primarily financial. The school, which charges fees of £8,000 a year, is a "not-for-profit organisation", says Mr Bailey. "If we make money, we aim to plough it back into the school."

Nor does Mr Bailey measure success purely in terms of academic outcomes. "Exam results are an important measure, but not a sufficient one," he says. "Our aim is to produce rounded and confident people who combine self-esteem with a sense of social responsibility." One of his objectives is to increase the number of pupils supported by bursaries - now between 15 and 20 per cent of the roll.

Some schools separate the financial from the academic by appointing a bursar

to work alongside the head. Mr Bailey, chief executive as well as head, oversees both functions. "The danger of splitting the functions is that you can end up with two separate organisations. Uniting them helps create a coherent whole, an integrated culture with no gap between the two sides," he says.

Having that comprehensive overview helps in thinking strategically: "Part of my job is to provide the link between strategy and the day-to-day. It is incredibly easy in education to become submerged by the weight of daily events. Schools are eclectic, with an immense range of interaction and numerous groups to whom one has a responsibility - governors, teachers, non-teaching staff, pupils, parents. I have to ensure that I'm in touch with what is going on in the school, but at the same time retain a degree of detachment and see the big picture."

An eight-strong management team offers the detailed expertise the school needs. "We have two qualified accountants," says Mr Bailey. "My job is not to know as much about the intricacies of education finance as they do, but to ask them the right questions at the right time."

Far from just managing the day-to-day, he and Sue Fishburn, his counterpart at Leeds Girls High School, are changing the big picture, with a merger between the two schools scheduled for 2007. Mr Bailey describes how they "cooked it up over a bottle of wine one evening, realising that . . . it was the right way forward for both schools". Both took a personal risk. The merged school could have only one head - both applied and Mr Bailey got the job.

The revolutionary element is that the new school will offer a co-educational environment but, for 11-to-16-year-olds, single-sex classes. "Single-sex education is what both schools are good at," says Mr Bailey. "There is an immense amount of accumulated experience. What research there is, admittedly not much, suggests that there are clear differences between the learning styles and attitudes of adolescent boys and girls and that they do better in single-sex classes between 11 and 16. And you have to offer something different to make it worthwhile for parents to pay £8,000 a year for their child's education. One way we can do it is to offer both the academic benefits of single-sex education and the advantages for personal development of a co-educational environment." The competition chiefly comprises good local state schools as well as other fee-paying establishments.

It was one thing for the two heads to dream up their bright idea, another to sell it. "Staff and parents had to feel right about the change," says Mr Bailey. "We've worked at that by being open and clear about what is being planned and its implications, providing regular bulletins to staff and information to parents, and involving staff as much as possible in the planning. There are around a dozen joint working parties on different aspects of the new school. It means that a significant proportion of staff will have taken part in the consultation process and, I hope, feel ownership of what emerges from it."

Definitely not playing by the 1979 rules.